

*Matija Malešević**

Independent researcher, Banja Luka

THE MACEDONIAN QUESTION: BETWEEN WESTERN AND EASTERN CULTURAL MEMORY OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Abstract

This paper explores the “Macedonian Question” through the lens of the cultural memory of Alexander the Great. Rather than viewing it solely in political, legal, or geopolitical terms, the study examines the ideological and cultural constructions that shape contemporary understandings of the ancient legacy. Particular attention is given to the difference between Western and Eastern cultural memory: the Western tradition primarily presents Alexander as a conqueror and bearer of imperial order, while the Eastern tradition portrays him as a cultural mediator. The paper demonstrates that these divergent interpretations are not merely academic but carry strong political implications in the present regional and international context. Contemporary Macedonia emerges as a space where these narratives collide, most visibly in the dispute over its name and the Prespa Agreement, but also in broader processes of positioning the Balkans between West and East. Thus, the Macedonian Question today is not only a matter of national identity, but also a field in which global processes of cultural hegemony, ideological construction, and strategic competition are reflected.

Keywords: Macedonian question, North Macedonia, Alexander the Great, Greece, Hellenism, Classicism, cultural memory, Prespa Agreement, strategic culture

* E-mail: matija.malesevic@yahoo.com; ORCID: 0009-0007-5863-5892

INTRODUCTION

The Macedonian Question, one of the key contentious issues in the Balkans for more than a century, is most often presented in contemporary international discourse as a Greek-Macedonian dispute over the ethnic origins of the ancient Macedonians. Such a framing reduces the problem to a matter of biological descent and implies the conclusion that modern Macedonians, as Slavic people who settled in the Balkans in the 6th century, cannot claim any historical link to the ancient past. This reduction, however, obscures the core of the issue: the dispute is not about biology, but about the “cultural memory” – that is, the ways in which the ancient legacy is interpreted and symbolically appropriated.

In this context, Greek accusations of “stealing history” rest on the claim of an exclusive right to historical memory. Yet, in a broader sense, the Macedonian Question is not merely a conflict between two national cultures of memory, but a clash of two opposing narrative frameworks. While the Greek narrative is rooted in the Western cultural model, the Macedonian relies on the Eastern one. This elevates the bilateral dispute to a global level, reflecting broader ideological and geopolitical processes.

Starting from the theoretical premise that cultural memory is the ensemble of socially constructed and transmitted forms of remembrance through which a community preserves, interprets, and conveys its experience of the past (Assmann 2011), the aim of this paper is to examine how the memory of Alexander the Great is organized, that is, the structure of Western and Eastern narrative frameworks which are subsequently reflected in the development of modern Macedonian statehood. In this context, the Macedonian Question is not approached as a dispute over historical facts, but as a space in which visions of the future are shaped and cultural hegemony is legitimized.

WHY MUST THE ANCIENT MACEDONIANS BE CONSIDERED ETHNIC GREEKS?

Long before formal independence, and especially during the uprising against the Ottoman Empire, Greece drew great attention from the main political centers of Western Europe. At that time, every national movement was seen through the prism of the struggle against the reactionary forces of the Holy Alliance, but the Greek uprising of 1821

was in many ways unique. It was not a revolution of one more “small European nation,” but of a people considered direct descendants of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, a nation whose “genetic code” was believed to preserve the democratic traditions of antiquity (Spasojević 2021). Called the “cradle of civilization,” Greek independence symbolized the rebirth of the entire European continent. This strong symbolic and propagandistic potential was recognized by leading European artists. Eugène Delacroix, Lord Byron, and Jacques-Louis David linked ancient and modern Greece, spreading philhellenism and decisively influencing the fact that Greeks gained independence almost half a century before other Balkan peoples. The first Greek king, Otto Ludwig, heir of the most progressive kingdom of the Holy Roman Empire, opened the way for a redefinition of Greek identity, in which “the place of Orthodox saints was taken by ancient philosophers.” During the 19th century, universities studied only classical art, while Byzantium was treated as a relic of the “dark past” (Spasojević 2021). All this contributed to the overnight reorientation of a people who had long been seen as the last bastion of the Eastern Roman Empire, but who now turned to the West. British intelligence reports at the beginning of the 20th century confirm this: “While visiting villages and towns of Macedonia, I noticed that Serbs and Bulgarians were obsessed with the Russian Tsar. Only the Greek people showed feelings of sympathy for the English” (Rastović 2011, 32).

The process of “antiquization” was not only a Greek phenomenon, but a broader European phenomenon. Its roots go back to the 15th century, when the cities of northern Italy saw the Renaissance – a cultural revolution based on the free and rational thought of ancient philosophy, emerging as a reaction to church dogmatism. It reached full momentum in the 19th century with the concept of the “New Age,” through which Europe officially renounced the “dark Middle Ages.” The main feature of antiquization was the aesthetics of classicism, which permeated almost all spheres of social and artistic life. Triumphal arches, museums, parliaments, and administrative palaces symbolized a universal standard of beauty, harmony, and rationality. After victory over church dogmatism and its Gothic and Baroque aesthetics, classicism began to lose its progressive role. Instead of affirming freedom of rational thought, it increasingly became a guardian of order and discipline, emphasizing the superiority of the European bourgeoisie while suppressing local cultural traditions and the new avant-garde artistic movements of the left.

The most significant aspect of “late classicism” and its extension to modern Greece manifested itself in the sphere of foreign policy and the legitimization of European colonialism. “Classical studies did not represent a mere abstract apparatus detached from state policy, but rather incorporated social and cultural patterns within society as a whole, which were then reflected so as to provide strong support for the idea of Europe’s absolute superiority over all other continents, thereby justifying imperialism and neocolonialism as mission civilisatrice” (Bernal 2021, 7). The cited British historian, in his controversial study *Black Athena*, not only analyzes the cultural background of classicism but also its racial component. He observes that European scholarship insists on the theory of an Aryan origin of ancient Greek civilization, excluding its connections with the cultures of ancient Egypt and the Levant. This implied that the ancient Greeks and modern European peoples formed a single “family of nations” of Aryan descent. The background of such historical constructions was social Darwinism and the “eternal principle of racial inequality” (Bernal 2021).

The cultural-racial identification of modern Europeans with the ancient Greeks was especially evident in interpretations of Alexander the Great’s campaign to the East, symbolically marked as the “age of Greek domination.” In the chapter of the same name in Karl Julius Beloch’s book, it is argued that the main motive of Alexander’s conquests was the establishment of Greek hegemony over the entire known world (Vujačić 2017). In the new empire, the Greek elite governed administration, science, and art, while the Greek language became the universal language of culture. These were direct analogies to the *lingua franca* and Europe’s political-economic dominance at the start of the 20th century: “the history of Alexander the Great remains simply the most important page in the history of mankind (...) they conquer the world because they are morally and intellectually superior” (Beloch 1904, 33). A similar view was expressed by Jacob Burckhardt, the founder of cultural history, who argued that Alexander’s campaign marked “the extraction of Eastern peoples from a state of barbarism (...) the higher these peoples were culturally, the more successful Hellenization proved” (Vujačić 2017, 68). For European classicists of the late 19th century, the period after Alexander represented “the next stage” in the expansion of classical Greek civilization. Since they were relatively few, the Greeks could not hold such vast territories and gradually became “incurably decadent, inviting their own downfall at the hand of Rome” (Mommsen 2011).

Where Alexander and his companions stopped, the Romans continued, securing the long-term dominance of the West (civilization) over the East (barbarism). In this classical cultural memory, Alexander had a primarily transitional role, linking ancient Greece and Rome into a single historical continuum.

The phenomenon of Alexander and its racial component also inspired historians of fascist orientation. Thus, Karl Schneider wrote that the success of Greek imperialism lay in the “absence of any contamination, including racial” from Eastern influences (Vujačić 2017). The strength and quality of Greek culture stemmed from Greek distinctiveness, its power of attraction and prestige, but also from resistance to foreign elements. Once the Greeks became tolerant, the vitality of their national culture quickly declined, since, according to fascist doctrine, every mixture or interweaving of cultures led to degeneration and downfall. His colleague, Helmut Berve, claimed that Alexander the Great “deliberately contaminated Greek culture,” but only with the Bactrians and Sogdians, peoples of Aryan origin. He recognized in them “racial relatives” (*Herrenvölker*) who, together with the Greeks, were meant to rule over other peoples of the empire, above all the Semites (Berve 1938). Like the classical, the fascist cultural memory also had a direct reflection in international politics, through Hitler’s attempts to forge a closer alliance with Persia – renamed Iran in 1935, the land of the Aryans.

These narratives about the ancient conqueror reveal more about the historical periods in which they were produced than about Alexander himself. Contemporary cultural memory has not distanced itself from these representations; rather, it has adopted them as the basis for new constructions. One of the leading living authorities on ancient Macedonia is Robin Lane Fox, both for his distinguished position at Oxford University and because his book on Alexander the Great inspired Oliver Stone’s 2004 Hollywood film. At the core of Fox’s interpretation lies the conviction that in antiquity, progress was possible only under the influence of the Greek “civilizing mission.” This narrative appears from the opening pages of his work, in the description of Macedonia: “life was harsh and unregulated, without any signs of culture.” Only after the capital was moved to Pella, close to the Greek poleis, did Macedonians gain the chance to “learn a Greek poem, listen to Greek orators, move among Greek paintings and sculptures, discuss modern strategy and know of its history and theory” (Fox 2004, 48).

According to Fox, the rise of the Macedonian state depended entirely on Greek influence: “Like the warlords of Heian Japan who absorbed all their skills from China, the Macedonian barons owed their broader horizons to Greece” (Fox 2004, 48). In the same way, Fox presents other Oriental peoples as passive recipients of Greek achievements. Even when acknowledging local traditions – mining, irrigation, astronomy – their value is recognized only once “shaped” by the Greek mind. Fox further compares Macedonian-Greek conquests to the “modernization processes of Third World states,” and attributes Alexander’s failures to the entrenched conservatism of Oriental despots: “The family was the only constant, marked by genealogies and rigid rules of precedence; a culture which spread through cities and administrators could not work down through their looser forms of rural government” (Fox 2004, 530). To align Alexander with late 20th-century liberal sensibilities, Fox also emphasizes the king’s homosexual tendencies, portraying him as a “gay icon” (Fox 2004, 530).

In Western cultural memory, alongside the liberal approach, there is also a realist perspective that seeks to demystify Alexander’s image, presenting him as an archetypal realpolitician, a Machiavellian figure stripped of idealism and prone to the abuse of power. A typical example of this approach is Peter Green, who dismisses any possibility of “philanthropic idealism,” comparing Alexander with historical figures such as Stalin or Pol Pot, and linking his ideology to the racist teachings of de Gobineau and Hitler; “superstitious narcissism easily slid, as unparalleled successes accumulated, into megalomania and delusions of godhead (...) his paranoia about conspiracy increasingly illustrated the old saying that paranoids often have good reason to be paranoid” (Green 2013, 16). In shaping Alexander’s mental framework, Greek culture and its greatest thinker, Aristotle, played a decisive role. Aristotle advised the young king: “A hegemon to the Greeks, but a despot to the barbarians – treat the former as friends and relatives, and the latter as animals or plants” (Green 2013, 58). Educated within this Greco-centric culture, Alexander and his closest companions developed an “innate” and entirely “natural sense of superiority.” Accordingly, Green concludes that all of Alexander’s steps toward racial integration were strictly limited, with immediate and purely practical goals.

The view that Alexander the Great was primarily “pragmatist with a streak of ruthlessness” and only secondarily “enthusiast with a streak of passionate romanticism” was defended by the distinguished Cambridge

scholar (Cartledge 2004, 198). Greek culture and civilization were then at their peak, yet for Alexander they served mainly as “instruments of imperial administration.” Paul Cartledge stands apart from other scholars in interpreting Alexander’s policies through the lens of the orientalization of classical Greek customs. “What begins as a Panhellenic crusade against Persia ends in the spirit of Orientalism.” According to the British historian, this was a reflection of Alexander’s realpolitik, not of deeper ideological motives (Cartledge 2004). Thus, the introduction of *proskynesis* – the Iranian custom of bowing before the ruler – was aimed at consolidating authority among his generals. Likewise, by honoring Eastern deities, Alexander sought to win the loyalty of foreign peoples and reduce their resistance. “There is nothing sentimental in these gestures. His overriding aim, as we have seen, was to create an Irano-Macedonian ruling class and to perpetuate his army of empire by tapping the fertility of oriental women” (Cartledge 2004, 177). This compromise view of Orientalism, rare in Western cultural memory, mirrors the “social-democratic” orientation of Tony Blair’s New Labour. This “Third Way” ideology, designed at Cambridge University, aimed to overcome the old divide between left and right by creating a “new capitalism” and promoting multiculturalism (Giddens 1998). Despite such nuances, social-democratic cultural memory remains firmly embedded in the Western narrative pattern, since “the Hellenized Near East, created during Alexander’s campaigns,” was ultimately “the forerunner of what, through conquest, became the eastern part of the mighty Roman Empire” (Cartledge 2004, 224).

Prominent American neoconservatives also developed their own version of the cultural memory of Alexander the Great. It went so far as to equate the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan with Alexander’s campaign in Central Asia. Frank Holt employed this analogy in his book *Into the Land of Bones*, arguing that “what George W. Bush called the first war of the 21st century in fact began more than two thousand three hundred years ago, when Alexander the Great launched the initial invasion by a Western superpower to subdue Afghanistan and its warlords” (Holt 2012, 10). According to Holt, Alexander – like the United States – had no initial intention of intervening militarily in Central Asia. Yet instability in the region and the threat posed by fugitive Persian generals, such as Bessus, forced him into action. This pursuit of a “bandit” resembles the American hunt for Bin Laden, the fight against terrorism, and Taliban guerrilla warfare. Holt describes the Central Asian tribes as deeply archaic,

noting that efforts at cultural transformation through the construction of cities, theaters, and gymnasia had little effect on the local population. The Greeks lived in isolation within separate communities, in what might be described as an “early apartheid” (Holt 2012, 158). While not rejecting the legitimacy of the American intervention, Holt – true to neoconservative thinking – warns that it would be more rational to limit its objectives, since cultural backwardness makes the democratization of Afghanistan an almost impossible mission.

Frank Holt’s role extended beyond academia. As a leading member of the historian group *Macedonia Evidence*, in 2009, he co-signed a letter to the U.S. President claiming that the link between the modern Macedonian state and ancient Macedonia was “anachronistic and falsified.” The letter argued that the term “Macedonian,” in its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural sense as used by the “former Yugoslav republic,” was a misuse of historical truth. Signed by more than 300 prominent historians from Western universities, the authors can be seen as carriers of a Western narrative framework. Apart from restricting the Macedonians’ right to self-determination, this narrative is marked by denying subjectivity to Oriental peoples and cultures, reducing Alexander the Great to nothing more than the culmination of classical Greek culture, its ultimate apologist. Yet the most important dimension of this cultural memory lies in its contemporary function: antiquity is not treated as a closed historical chapter but as the living foundation of European culture and ideology. Through cultural and racial identification with classical Greece, and later with Rome, the collective West constructs an image of the East’s eternal subordination, thereby securing symbolic legitimacy for its interventionist ventures.

THE EASTERN CULTURAL MEMORY OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

A key argument of Western cultural memory is the very name of the historical era that stretches from Alexander the Great’s death to Rome’s conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE. Derived from the Greek root *Hellen* – Greek, “Hellenism” was taken to mean the spread of Greek culture. Yet when first used, the term had a different meaning: “the dialect of the Greek language spoken by the Jewish community in Egypt, marked by many phrases borrowed from Oriental languages and ideas taken from Asian teachings” (Matter 1820, 203). In this light, when the

famous Prussian historian chose to designate the period after Alexander's death as "Hellenism," he did so to stress its syncretic character – or more precisely, to mark "the end of one period and the beginning of a new era" (Дройзен 2011, 19).

According to Droysen, Hellenism was preceded by a period of weakness and vulnerability in Greek civilization, already evident during the Persian Wars (500–449 BCE), when the cultural center of Miletus was destroyed, followed by the Acropolis in Athens. These shocks, accompanied by deep moral and spiritual decline, the rise of dictatorial regimes, and then decades of the Peloponnesian War, destroyed the last hope that Greek civilization might be renewed. Although Sparta emerged victorious, it was far from the glory of its golden age and its famous ruler Lycurgus: "It was no longer the Sparta where every citizen was at once a soldier, without private property, bound by strict discipline, but rather a society dominated by greed, indulgence, cowardice, and hypocrisy" (Дройзен 2011, 29). The social and political circumstances in Athens were even worse: noble families were plundered and murdered, the educated elite exiled, while political opportunism and mercenary soldiers established the "Thirty Tyrants."

The democratic order of the classical Greek poleis was in deep crisis by the early 4th century BCE. New models of social organization had to be found, and according to Droysen (Дройзен 2011), "Divine Providence" assigned this task to the Macedonians, nomadic tribes from the Rhodope–Dinaric mountains of the Balkans. Their language differed from Greek, and their participation in the Olympic Games was strictly limited because of their "barbarian" origin. Seeking the reasons for their sudden rise, Droysen finds them in their reliance on traditional values, avoidance of Greek innovations, and close ties with Illyrian tribes. Living under constant threat of war, the Macedonians were forced into continual adaptation and military training, maintaining a delicate balance between the progressive South and the conservative North. Harsh social conditions left no room for hedonism but forged an unbreakable character, giving Macedonian soldiers worldwide prestige. Especially famed were the king's "eternal companions" – the celebrated *hetairoi*, whose origins reached back to the epic world of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In symbiosis with the renowned phalanxes, they formed an irresistible force before which no boundary could stand.

With a disciplined army, the ambitious Philip II found it easy to impose Macedonian hegemony over the divided Greek poleis.

Droysen describes him as a calculating realpolitiker who used the idea of Panhellenism to legitimize his rule. With the support of Aristotle, one of Greece's leading ideologues Philip convinced the Greeks that the Macedonian army would lead the wars of revenge against Persia. After Philip's sudden assassination, power passed to his son Alexander, who formally continued his father's policy. Yet unlike Philip, Alexander was driven not by pragmatism but by idealism. He did not merely seek to revive the glory of the old poleis or surrender to the cult of wine and pleasure, but pursued the ultimate goal – a radical transformation of the known world. Alexander himself had experienced both “Greek arrogance” and “Oriental submission,” and he reserved the label “barbarian” only for those who, even after defeat, refused to recognize him as supreme ruler. All others enjoyed equal status: they kept their customs and beliefs, while their leading commanders entered the young king's closest circle of advisers. This magnanimity, in Droysen's view, reflected his “visionary political aims” – the spiritual union of East and West (Дройзен 2011, 170). That the Greek poleis only formally recognized Macedonian authority, while in practice sending mercenaries to fight against Alexander, shows that Athens and Sparta had been pushed to the margins, while the new cultural and economic centers emerged in Alexandria, Babylon, and Al-Haima.

Droysen's view of Hellenism as a synthesis of the Enlightened West and the mystical East strongly reflects the spirit of the age in which it was conceived. As the son of a Prussian clergyman, raised in a conservative monarchist spirit and shaped by the revolutionary upheavals of the early 19th century, he became politically reactionary. In his *History of Hellenism*, his aim was to refute the Enlightenment narrative that portrayed Napoleon as a modern Alexander. Instead, he identified Prussia – the “semi-barbarian” state with Macedonia, and presented the Holy Alliance as a universal empire akin to the Hellenistic one. In this construction, the Romanov dynasty assumed the role of the Achaemenids, while the socio-political crisis of the Greek poleis served as an analogue for the condition of Western Europe. Thanks to such analogies, Droysen became one of the most widely read historians of his time. Yet, as the idea of a “universal empire” and the Holy Alliance gradually gave way to the ideology of German national unification, his historical constructions were increasingly dismissed as romantic.

Although completely abandoned in Europe by the early 20th century, Droysen's *History of Hellenism* found fertile ground in the

“realist” Soviet Union. Drawing on Droysen’s authority, Soviet and later contemporary Russian historiography treated Hellenism as an independent historical epoch, separate from both classical Greece and Rome (Климов 2013). Like Droysen, they traced its origins not to the superiority of the Greek poleis, but to their profound socio-political crisis, which could not be overcome either by “the city tyrants with their energetic wars and initiatives, or by the traditional centers of power such as Sparta and Athens.” Only Macedonia – “that eternal outsider of the ancient world” – was capable of assuming this role and laying the foundation of a new order (Фролов 2001).

When considering Hellenism, Russian historians focus primarily on art and culture, rather than exclusively on military or administrative categories. In early Hellenistic architecture, sculpture, and statuary, they discern a new aesthetic marked by an interest in detail, in the unusual, in whatever diverges from the norm. “The normativity of the classical style, at that time, provoked if not outright condemnation, then indifference or contempt” (Sokolov 1992, 346). In other words, the central thesis of Droysen is supported by Russian historians above all in the field of art. Instead of the idealized gods and their unattainable virtues that characterized classical Greek culture, Hellenistic culture strove to depict imperfection, the human personality, and individual experience. Rationality gives way to Oriental motifs – religion, mysticism, and exoticism – so that art becomes an expression of a new pluralistic age.

Hellenistic art reveals that Alexander’s Orientalism was not the product of realpolitik but part of a broader strategic-cultural vision. When he proclaimed himself pharaoh in Egypt, heir to the Achaemenids in Persia, and appointed Persians rather than Greeks to positions of authority, Alexander established a cultural framework that would shape not only future rulers but also the artists – the carriers of a new epoch. Yet these cultural innovations did not enjoy broad support, especially not among the military veterans. Raised in the spirit of Panhellenism and the dogmatic division between “civilized” and “barbarian,” they regarded Alexander’s policies as a betrayal. The rebellions within the army, led by the experienced commanders Antipater and Parmenion, can be interpreted as a generational conflict – the struggle between those who sought to preserve the “old order” and the “new generations” who dreamed of social transformation. The unrest within the highest military circles testifies to the fact that the Macedonian king’s policy was, to a great extent, revolutionary. Its foundation lay not in the old aristocracy

but in the “Successors” – the children of numerous collective marriages between Alexander’s soldiers and women from the East. Therefore, when the phenomenon of Alexander the Great is discussed in Russia, what comes to the fore is his “Oriental ideology” and a “positive model of globalization” that was not based on hegemony.

Reexamining Eastern cultures of memory brings us to India – a civilization that directly experienced the encounter with the Macedonian conquerors. The most significant authority in this field is A.K. Narain, one of the first Indian historians educated in Britain, who specialized in Hellenism and the legacy of the Indo-Greek kingdom. Although studied in the Western academic tradition, he refused to view Alexander through the pragmatic lens of a “Panhellenic war of revenge” instead placing emphasis on the irrational and visionary aspects of his character: “Alexander had neither small nor petty ambitions, nor would he ever have been satisfied with the possessions already won, even had he joined Europe to Asia; he would always have sought the unknown, remaining his own greatest rival” (Narain 1965, 155). Stressing that Alexander’s Indian campaign was a military failure, Narain focused on the indirect consequences of the conquest – the creation of the Indo-Greek kingdom in the territories of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, a center of interaction between East and West, a place where settlers from the West gradually merged into local cultures. “They had kept their identity as long as they could before they were absorbed in the melting pot of South Asia. They were socially integrated into the caste system of India, they became Buddhists and Hindus, master craftsmen and architects, adopted Indian names and titles, and wrote in Indian script and languages” (Narain 1989, 418). The word “Greek” in “Indo-Greek kingdom” did not refer solely to ethnic Greeks, but also to “Macedonians from Yugoslavia, as well as Libyans, together with Greeks from various cities of Asia Minor who came to the East before, during, and after Alexander’s time” (388).

The kingdom reached its peak between 165 and 130 BCE, under the rule of Menander I, who embraced Buddhism. This religious syncretism within the Indo-Greek realm was accompanied by cultural and artistic interweaving in its capital, Al Haimi, which abounded with Indian temples and architectural solutions of Eastern origin (Narain 1987). Since these insights differed radically from Western ones, Narain sought to separate the Indo-Greek kingdom from the “general” history of Hellenism and present it as an independent historical phenomenon. He justified this thesis with the claim: “The Indo-Greeks were more deeply

influenced by Indian religion and thought than any other Hellenistic king was influenced by the faith and ideas of the country he ruled" (Narain 1957, 11). From this assertion arose Narain's famous leitmotif: "The Greeks came, they saw, but the Indians conquered" (11). It is important to note that Narain's position was supported by the future Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who, in his *Discovery of India*, observed "how the Greeks who reached the frontier adopted Indian characteristics and absorbed Indian culture" (Nehru 1957, 135).

When we place Indian cultural memory alongside the Egyptian, it becomes clear that the Indo-Greek kingdom was not an exception but rather the rule. Egyptian historians strongly emphasize that the Ptolemies, successors of Alexander the Great on the pharaonic throne, were true representatives of Egyptian traditions and, at the same time, "the last dynasty of ancient Egypt". Before Alexander, Egypt had been under Persian rule, during which temples were desecrated, religious rituals abolished, and Egyptian religion mocked (Ismā'īl 2020). After Alexander, however, came the restoration of political and religious independence, which is why he was celebrated as a "hero and liberator." Since Alexander placed his close childhood friend and loyal general on the throne, the Egyptian people proclaimed Ptolemy I a "protector." For nearly three centuries, the dynasty pursued a policy of cultural fusion: they dressed in pharaonic attire, carried relics, promoted Egyptian deities, and used the ancient Egyptian language in parallel with Greek (Ismā'īl 2020). Yet reverence for the old Egyptian gods was not the dynasty's only hallmark. Under their rule, Alexandria became the center of Hellenistic trade and learning, proving that during the Hellenistic era, cultural intermingling was the only path to progress. Much like their Indian counterparts, Egyptian historians also have their leitmotif: "The Ptolemies became Egyptians, but we never became Ptolemies" (Hawass 2003).

The emphasis on Alexander the Great's "Oriental ideology," later projected onto Hellenism, is the main reason why his successors (the Diadochi) are not portrayed as foreign colonizers but as an inseparable part of national history. The exception is Iran, where the Seleucid dynasty is viewed as an extension of Greek cultural domination. "Iranians have never considered the Seleucids an Iranian dynasty" – their rule is described as "the Greek occupation of Iran and an era of foreign oppression" (Qadyāni 2017). Rebellions against the Seleucids are interpreted as resistance to discrimination, while the one led by Ashk

became a national myth, with the Parthians celebrated as liberators. Despite this reserved attitude toward the Seleucids, the image of the Macedonian king retained a positive character. Thus, in the *Shahnameh*, one of the most important works of Iranian tradition, Alexander appears as Iskandar, the son of a Persian king and a Roman princess, fully integrated into the Iranian dynastic line. A wise ruler, philosopher, and traveler in search of truth, who respects Iranian customs, law, and culture, he becomes a symbol of cultural synthesis (Firdousi 1984). Another well-known 12th-century Iranian poet went even further, linking Iskandar with the ultimate aspirations of humanity. After many wanderings and conquered lands, the young king would find satisfaction only upon discovering a people among whom equality and general prosperity reigned: “We are equal in wealth, the treasure is shared evenly among us. In this life, we are all equally important, and no one should laugh at another’s tears” (Низами 1986).

As a predominantly Muslim state, Iran also transmits Islamic cultural memory, according to which Alexander the Great is identified with a Qur’anic figure under the name Dhul-Qarnayn – “the one with two horns.” In this context, the holy book of Islam depicts Alexander’s conquest of the East with images of the “sun setting in a murky spring in the West” and “rising over a people without shelter in the East,” interpreted as a metaphor for reaching the ends of the world and establishing a universal empire. Along this path, Alexander raises a wall against Gog and Magog, symbols of chaos and destructive forces, thereby becoming the guardian of a new order. Without doubt, Islamic culture profoundly influenced other Muslim communities, above all Ottoman Turkey and the Arab world, further bringing Eastern cultural memories of Alexander closer together.

When it comes to Yugoslav cultural memory, although geographically located in the West, by its content, it belongs to the East. For this reason, certain Serbian historians of antiquity raise their voices, claiming that Serbian conceptions of Hellenism deviate from the “results of modern scholarship” (Vujačić 2017). This professor at the Faculty of Philosophy finds unacceptable domestic textbooks in which Hellenism is defined as “a fusion of Greek and Ancient Eastern cultural traditions,” advocating instead for alignment with Western cultural memory, where Hellenism is merely “the next stage in the history of Greek culture, expanding into regions where it had been little or not at all present” (Vujačić 2017, 70). One of the main culprits of this “outdated approach”

is considered to be academician Miloš Djurić, for whom Alexander the Great was a “cosmocrator and ecumenist.” Similar to Droysen, the renowned Yugoslav Hellenist situates the young king at the transition from “the epoch of political and cultural primacy of old Hellas to the epoch of a new historical life, the epoch of Hellenism” (Đurić 1952, 1).

The fundamental precondition for such a historical breakthrough was “abandoning the dogma of the opposition of Hellenes to barbarians and the recognition of every nationality, custom, and religion” (Đurić 1952, 20). In this new era, the East was not merely a passive recipient of Western cultural models: “Hellenic science, the Egyptian eternal obsession with the Sun and Death, Chaldean astrology, Babylonian demonology, Semitic apocalypticism, Persian belief in the struggle between good and evil, various mystery cults (...) all of these mutually intermingled and became the common property of all peoples” (43). Hellenism, in this vision, gathers humanity into an organic whole, led by the great Alexander, “the conductor of a multi-ethnic ecumenical orchestra.” As the main bearer of Yugoslav cultural memory, Đurić also decisively influenced the formation of Macedonian cultural memory, in which “the figure of Alexander is extraordinary, his youth vibrant and gifted, and his victories brilliant and legendary. (...) His aim was the creation of a world state in which the elements and influences of Hellenism are united with the Oriental political and socio-economic order” (Antoljak 1979, 44).

THE PRESPA AGREEMENT AS A CONCLUSION

In seeking to provide an objective assessment of the opposing narrative patterns, we have attempted to consider a broader view of Alexander’s legacy. Yet even at this level, we encounter profound contradictions: for some, the era preceding the Macedonian rise represents the pinnacle of Greek civilization; for others, its final collapse. The gap in interpretations becomes even more pronounced when characterizing what followed: should Hellenism be understood as a mere continuation of Greek culture, or as the beginning of a new historical epoch? All of this leads us to conclude that Western and Eastern cultures of memory are not grounded in historical facts, but in ontological representations.

From the standpoint of academia, this pluralism ought to be regarded as something positive, as it contributes to the expansion of academic debates and interest in the specific period. Yet in practice,

confrontation is almost absent: Western cultural memory insists on exclusivity, which in turn manifests itself as a justification for the flagrant violation of international law. The best example of this is Macedonia, which, under the Prespa Agreement, was obliged not only to change its state name but also to align itself with Western cultural memory. Therefore, in addition to the political and legal aspects of the Prespa Agreement previously addressed by the Serbian author (Janev 2019), we will here focus on its cultural-identity provisions, specifically Article 7 (2), which states that “the entire Hellenic civilization, history, culture and heritage of that region from antiquity to the present day” belong exclusively to Greece (Prespa Agreement 2018). From this article, it follows that every historical figure and every work of art from the Hellenistic period must be designated as part of “Greek heritage,” which is why Alexander’s monument in Skopje had to be renamed.

Yet what makes the legal labyrinth of the Prespa Agreement particularly striking is the fact that the disputed article, through Article 1 (3) (d), may acquire an *erga omnes* effect. In other words, the agreement itself seeks to elevate the Greek monopoly over the Hellenistic heritage to an international legal level that would also be binding on third parties. A consistent application of this mechanism would enable Greece to object if, for instance, Egypt were to erect a monument in Alexandria to Ptolemy as the founder of the last pharaonic dynasty without emphasizing his “Greek” origin. The same applies to India, Iran, or any other state in the Middle East and Central Asia. All of them are implicitly obliged to treat Hellenism as a kind of “intellectual property” over which, through Greece, Western historical scholarship claims exclusive rights.

Bearing in mind that the monopoly, in itself, is never the ultimate goal, the background of the Prespa Agreement and the enormous pressure placed on the Macedonian nation should not be sought in its concrete provisions, but primarily in the function of cultural memory. Beyond “preserving the past,” its essential role lies in constructing the future through meaningful interpretation of prior experiences. By setting desirable models of behavior, role models, and ideals to emulate, cultural memory shapes identity and indicates the path along which a community proceeds (Assmann 2011). In this light, it is far from irrelevant how we remember the greatest figure of the ancient world: as a “racial Greek” who subjugates the “backward peoples of the Orient,” or as the bearer of the idea of *homonoia* – the ideal of harmony and unity. Viewed within the framework of a “universal cultural memory,” the choice between these

two narrative patterns is directly correlated with the choice of the future international order: either perpetual status quo and struggle for power, or cultural interaction and equality among all nations.

Returning to the Macedonian Question and the criteria for choosing between Greek and Macedonian cultures of memory, it becomes evident that “historical truth” remains buried deep in the past. The only reliable foundation for addressing this issue lies in cultural-strategic visions of the future. In this regard, the great powers, the so-called challengers of Western hegemony, as well as nations that cultivate the Eastern model of cultural memory, should readily find their interest in supporting the cultural self-determination of contemporary Macedonia. Beyond embodying the cradle of Alexander’s ecumenical vision of “one state and one people living in equality,” the Macedonian identity is crucial because it fundamentally undermines the linear construction of ancient history: it does not see Hellenism as a mere interlude in Greco-Roman domination, but as an independent epoch that could be seen as the precursor of a Greater Eurasian Partnership – a vision of Europe and Asia coexisting in peace and prosperity as a harmonious whole, opening a new chapter in the universal era of world history.

REFERENCES

Antoljak, Stjepan. 1979. *Istorija makedonskog naroda, knjiga I: Od pristorije do kraja XVIII veka*. Beograd: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika SRS.

Assmann, Jan. 2011. *Kultura pamćenja*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik.

Beloch, Karl Julius. 1904. *Griechische Geschichte, Bd. III, Abt. 1: Die griechische Weltherrschaft*. Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner.

Bernal, Martin. 2021. *Slika antičke Grčke kao sredstvo kolonijalizma i evropske hegemonije*. Lozniča: Karpas.

Berve, Helmut. 1938. “Die Verschmelzungspolitik Alexanders des Großen.” *Klio* 31 (1): 135–168. DOI: 10.1524/klio.1938.31.jg.135

Cartledge, Paul. 2004. *Alexander the Great*. New York: Overlook Press.

Đurić, Miloš. 1952. *Aleksandar Makedonski kao ekumenski kosmotvorac*. Skoplje: Pečatnica pri Filozofskiot fakultet.

Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the

Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties [Prespa Agreement], 17. June 2018, UNTS 3293, I-55707.

Firdousi, Abul’Qāsim. 1984. *Šahname, t. 5: Od početka vladavine Iskendera do početka vladavine Jezdeğerda sina Bahram-Gura*. Moskva: Nauka.

Fox, Robin Lane. 2004. *Alexander the Great*. London: Penguin Books.

Giddens, Anthony. 1998. *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Green, Peter. 2013. *Alexander of Macedon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hawass, Zahi A. 2003. *Secrets from the Sand: My Search for Egypt’s Past*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Holt, Frank. 2012. *Into the Land of Bones*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ismā‘īl, Manār Muṣṭafá Muḥammad. 2020. “Ta’līḥ al-Ḥukkām al-Butālmiyya wa-‘Awāmil Ta’thīrihā ‘alā al-Ḥukm Dīnīyan wa-Siyāsīyan.” *Majallat Buḥūth Kulliyat al-Ādāb* 31 (122): 261–280.

Janev, Igor. 2019. “Legality of the Prespa Agreement Between Macedonia and Greece.” *Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2 (2): 50–59. DOI: 10.11648/j.jpsir.20190202.13

Matter, Jacques. 1820. *Essai historique sur l’école d’Alexandrie et coup d’œil comparatif sur la littérature grecque depuis le temps d’Alexandre le Grand jusqu’à celui d’Alexandre Sévère*. Paris: F. G. Levrault.

Mommsen, Theodor. 2011. *The History of Rome*. Oxford: Benediction Classics.

Narain, Awadh Kishore. 1957. *Indo-Greeks*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Narain, Awadh Kishore. 1965. “Alexander and India.” *Greece & Rome* 12 (4): 55–165. DOI: 10.1017/S0017383500015321

Narain, Awadh Kishore. 1987. “Notes on Some Inscriptions from Aī Khanum (Afghanistan).” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 69: 277–282.

Narain, Awadh Kishore. 1989. “The Greeks of Bactria and India.” In *Cambridge Ancient History 8*, eds. A. E. Astin, F. W. Walbank, M. W. Frederiksen and R. M. Ogilvie, 388–421. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1952. *Otkriće Indije*. Beograd: RAD.

Qadyāni, ‘Abbās. 2017. *Tārīkh-e Īrān: Pādshahān va Ḥākimān-e Ḥakhāmanishī, Sulūkī, Ashkānī va Maqdūnī*. Tehran: Ārūn.

Rastović, Aleksandar. 2011. *Velika Britanija i Makedonsko pitanje: 1903–1908. godine*. Beograd: Istorijski institut.

Sokolov, Gleb. 1992. „Iskustvo Elinizma.” U *Ellinizm: vostok i zapad*, ur. Golubcova, E. S., 316–365. Moskva: Nauka.

Spasojević, Dušan. 2021. *Grčka: rat za nezavisnost, stvaranje države i preporod nacije*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa.

Vujačić, Nemanja. 2017. „Droženova karakterizacija helenističke kulture i moderne zablude.” U *Antika kao inspiracija i predmet istraživanja kroz milenije*, ur. Rastko Vasić, Snežana Ferjančić i Ksenija Gađanski, 58–77. Beograd: Društvo za antičke studije Srbije.

Дройзен, Иоганн Густав. 2011. *История эллинизма – История Александра Великого*. Москва: Академический проект.

Климов, Олег. 2013. *История эллинизма: Учебно-методическое пособие*. Санкт-Петербург: Издательский центр «Гуманитарная Академия».

Низами, Гянджеви. 1986. *Искендер – Наме в двух книгах*. Москва: «Художественная литература».

Фролов, Эдуард. 2001. *Греция в эпоху поздней классики (Общество. Личность. Власть)*. Санкт-Петербург: Издательский центр «Гуманитарная Академия».

Матија Малешевић*

Независни истраживач, Бања Лука

МАКЕДОНСКО ПИТАЊЕ: ИЗМЕЂУ ЗАПАДНЕ И ИСТОЧНЕ КУЛТУРЕ ПМЋЕЊА АЛЕКСАНДРА ВЕЛИКОГ

Резиме

Рад истражује „македонско питање” кроз призму културе памћења Александра Великог. Уместо да се посматра искључиво у политичким, правним или геополитичким оквирима, студија се усмерава на анализу идеолошких и културних конструкција уз помоћ којих се инструментализује античко наслеђе. Посебна пажња посвећена је разлици између западне и источне културе памћења: прва Александра представља као освајача и утемељивача западног просветитељског империјализма, док га друга види као светског ујединитеља који спаја источни мистицизам са западним рационализмом. Ови различити наративни обрасци, неговани кроз векове, имају конкретну друштвену функцију – конструкцијом одређене слике прошлости они постављају узоре и моделе понашања који одржавају постојећи друштвени систем, али истовремено обликују и визију будућег. Пример културе памћења Александра Македонског јасно показује да интерпретација историјских догађаја пре свега зависи од геостратегије и политике, док се саме историјске чињенице селективно користе у идеолошке сврхе. Тада механизам је посебно очигледан у случају Александра, имајући у виду да су најстарији сачувани извори о његовом животу настали више од три века након његове смрти. Стога, приликом опредељивања за једну од супротстављених страна у грчко-македонском спору, не бирамо само између два наративна обрасца – грчког, укорењеног у западном културном моделу, и македонског, који се ослања на источни – већ се у суштини опредељујемо за одређену визију будућег светског поретка. Тако схваћено, македонско питање превазилази оквир националног идентитета или територијалног интегритета и постаје кључни симбол кроз који се огледају глобални процеси,

* Имејл: matija.malesevic@yahoo.com; ORCID: 0009-0007-5863-5892

геополитичка надметања и стратешко-културне визије. Македонско питање, и после читавог века, остаје *nervus rerum* Балканског полуострва и један од кључних показатеља односа између Запада и Истока у савременом међународном систему.

Кључне речи: македонско питање, Северна Македонија, Александар Велики, Грчка, хеленизам, класицизам, култура памћења, Преспански споразум, стратешка култура

* This manuscript was submitted on September 23, 2025, and accepted by the Editorial Board for publishing on December 8, 2025.