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# Between History and Politics: Understanding Antiquitas Myths in Macedonian History Textbooks: Conditions and Challenges for History Textbooks in Albania and South–Eastern Europe

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## Between History and Politics: Understanding *Antiquitas* Myths in Macedonian History Textbooks

*Do I believe in ghosts? No, but I'm afraid of them.*  
– Marie Anne de Vichy-Chamrond, Marquise du Deffand

*Precisely by rendering banal the extraordinary and vice versa, political myth may come to operate within the ambit of that which is out of question, because it is either apparently irrelevant or too important to be questioned.*  
– Chiara Bottici

### Introduction

It can be somewhat disconcerting for a scholar of the humanities and social sciences who neither believes nor participates in political and nationalist myth-making to observe the negative results of such a process. It may feel as though one's own academic efforts to bring about a deeper understanding of the complexity of human affairs have been defeated.<sup>1</sup> Political myths most often appear to possess no solid grounding, yet they have real potential for serious destruction. Their study poses quite a challenge. Faced with the workings of political/historical myths, scholars have habitually approached them guided by either the 'enlightenment' or 'functionalist' principle. A great deal of energy has been expended on debating whether a myth should be deconstructed and 'destroyed', or understood within its social context and left in peace. As Kolstø has suggested, however, these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive.<sup>2</sup> We strongly support this position and shall, therefore, use the distinctive methodologies of both approaches in our effort to both understand and deconstruct the myths of *antiquitas* (the myths of ancient origin, continuity, etc.) which are integrated into recent history textbooks in the Republic of Macedonia.

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1 Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations* (2002), p. 7. Geary's work is now one of the leading texts on the place of late ancient and early medieval history in the national imagination of many modern European countries.

2 Pal Kolstø, 'Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society', in *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Kolstø (2005), p. 31.

Some research into ethnocentric nationalist myths in Macedonian historiography and history textbooks has been carried out in the last two decades, although none of it is particularly extensive. Brunnbauer, Pichler, Vouri and Proeva, among others, have contributed by posing the questions under consideration here and instigating a discussion. These researchers have observed different types of myths and examined the ideological issues that are generated by their use. Brunnbauer, for example, has brought myths of origin, continuity, and victimization under the banner of a 'national mission'.<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Hasimbegović and Gavrilović, emphasize the myth that casts Macedonia as a 'promised land'.<sup>4</sup> Proeva has analyzed the Macedonian myth of ancient origin in correlation with similar myths in neighbouring countries (Greece, Albania, and Bulgaria).<sup>5</sup> In a larger study of education, ethnocentrism, and minority policies in Macedonia, Pichler tackles the question of ancient origin in history textbooks.<sup>6</sup> It is quite common for researchers in this field to separate or group myths in different ways, leaving us with a multitude of classifications today. However, it is not our goal to propose new classifications, nor to analyze different myths. In this chapter we shall focus on one particular group of historical/political myths, *antiquitas* myths, following the typology proposed by Kolstø.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, by linking textbooks and society, this chapter seeks to contribute to scholarship in this area by dealing with the relationship between political/his-

3 Ulf Brunnbauer, 'Historiography, Myths and the Nation in the Republic of Macedonia', in *(Re)Writing History*, ed. by Brunnbauer (2004), pp. 165–200.

4 Elma Hasimbegović and Darko Gavrilović, 'Ethnogenesis Myths', in *Political Myths in the Former Yugoslavia and Successor States*, ed. by Gavrilović and Perica (2011), p. 26. Although technically it encompasses all of the former Yugoslav republics, their paper essentially focuses on the old tandem Serbia–Croatia. It offers only a few lines on myths in Macedonia.

5 Nade Proeva, 'Savremeni makedonski mit kao odgovor na nacionalne mitove suseda: albanski panilirizam, bugarski pantrakizam i grčki panhelenizam', *Zgodovinski Časopis*, 64, (1–2) (2010), 176–219. For the interdependence of and mutual conditioning between the myths of ancient origin in Macedonia, see also Matvey Lomonosov, *National Myths in Interdependence*, (unpublished master's thesis, Central European University in Budapest, 2012) <www.etd.ceu.hu/2012/lomonosov\_matvey.pdf> (accessed 29 April 2016). He defines 'national myths of antiquity' as: 'certain visions of the beginnings and of the earliest period of the communal past, which are put in form of narratives and claim that the national history started in Antiquity, i. e. before the Middle Ages or prior to 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD [*sic*]' (p. 30).

6 Robert Pichler, 'Historiography and the Politics of Education in the Republic of Macedonia (1991–2008)', in *'Transition' and the Politics of History Education in Southeast Europe*, ed. by Augusta Dimou, Eckert. Die Schriftenreihe, 124 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 217–49. Of particular value to the current discussion is Pichler's inclusion of interviews with members of commissions for history textbooks and historians, which offers an insight into the process of preparing textbooks, and the ethnicized and mythologized visions of history which they present.

7 Kolstø considers myths to be boundary-defining mechanisms, and divides them into four principal groups: myths of *sui generis*, myths of *ante murale*, myths of *martirium*, and myths of *antiquitas*. See: Kolstø, *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe* (2005), p. 4.

torical myths and history education in the contemporary Republic of Macedonia. More precisely, we will analyze the myths of ancient origin and ethnic continuity presented to ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian students in primary and secondary schools. Ethnic Macedonians are taught about their ancient Macedonian roots, while at the same time, and by the same textbooks, ethnic Albanians are taught about their ancient Illyrian origin. It is worth stressing that since the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which marked the end of the 2001 armed conflict, history textbooks in Macedonia have been written by teams of historians and history teachers from the two largest ethnic communities in the country, Macedonians and Albanians.<sup>8</sup> The textbooks they prepare are translated into various languages and used by all communities in Macedonia.

### In the Myth-Maker's Workshop: The Enlightenment Approach

Bottici argues, after Wittgenstein, that 'to define myth in general, and political myth in particular, in terms of its claim to 'truth' means to bring it to a terrain that is not its own'.<sup>9</sup> As much as we agree with the general idea of this statement, we nonetheless believe that analyzing and deconstructing the historical veracity of a myth is useful and appropriate for subsequent efforts to understand its role in a particular socio-political context. Furthermore, we strongly agree with Kolstø's view of the function of demythologization and enlightenment, according to which 'a society that is able to treat its homespun identity myths with some degree of irony and detachment is less likely to be mobilized by political and ethnic entrepreneurs for aggressive purposes'.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, important in this first part of our endeavour to examine how the myths of *antiquitas* are constructed in Macedonian history textbooks.

In this section we offer an overview of the 'veracity' of the *antiquitas* myths found in the texts we are considering. We will present the results of a comparison between the interpretations proposed by these textbooks and the current established theories and concepts in the field of late ancient/early medieval studies. For almost a decade, Macedonian history textbooks dealing with the late ancient/early medieval period (that is, textbooks for the fifth grade of primary school, for

8 According to the Law on Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Education (*Official Gazette* no. 98 from 4 August 2008) all textbooks have to be approved by a *Recenziona Komisija* (Review Committee) consisting of a total of three members, from which at least one must be a member of a non-majority community if the textbook is intended for students from non-majority backgrounds (Article 16).

9 Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 9.

10 Pal Kolstø, *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe* (2005), pp. 32–3.

eleven-year-olds; and the first grade of secondary school, for fifteen-year-olds) state that there is an ethnic and cultural continuity between ancient and modern Macedonians, as well as between Illyrians and Albanians. The terminology, arguments and didactic strategies of the textbooks have changed to meet a new desire for autochthony. Stojanov has argued that the myth of continuity follows two lines, or has two ways of operating: directly and indirectly.<sup>11</sup> In order to better understand the controversy of the question we will briefly sketch out this argument in the following.

The indirect presentation of mythologized historical knowledge in some history textbooks relies on the vague concept of the 'fatherland'. Through an imprecise, ambiguous, and potentially manipulative terminology, it suggests a sort of ethno-political continuity with the ancient Macedonians.<sup>12</sup> Dealing with this material requires, besides common sense, the employment of discourse and didactic analysis. Authors' own interpretations are sometimes hidden in the seemingly neutral tone of the narration, and are closely related to the current political situation in the country. The opening chapter of a 2005 history textbook for fifth graders, for example, headed 'Macedonia, our Fatherland', states that 'the name of our fatherland is very old. It is mentioned for the first time in the seventh century B.C.', and that 'our fatherland has a long and rich history. In Antiquity it was a strong state'.<sup>13</sup> These statements not only suggest an ancient origin, but also describe a reversal of the contemporary political situation. They have multiple implications. The most important one is the indirect suggestion that ancient Macedonia (and even politically the Kingdom of Macedon) was or is 'our' fatherland. Furthermore, the students are reassured that Macedonia is not something new, that 'our' name belongs to 'us', and that 'our' country has not always been 'small' or 'weak'.

As for the direct presentation of the ideas of ancient origin and continuity, the focus here is on the late ancient history of the region, and the group identities during that time period. One textbook published in 2006 suggests ancient origins and continuity through a process of ethnic mixing between ancient Macedonians and Slavs in the seventh century. While it is quite reasonable to assume that some cultural assimilation took place between the newcomers and the local population in the early medieval Balkans, what is striking in this particular case is the clear distancing from the generally accepted theories in the field of late Roman and

11 Darko Stojanov, 'In Search of Autochthony: A Case Study of the Great Migration Period in History Textbooks in Macedonia', *Der Donauraum*, 50 (3–4) (2010): 225–34.

12 *Ibid.*, 226.

13 Kosta Adževski, Darinka Petreska, Violeta Ačkoska, Naum Dimoski, and Vančo Gjorgiev, *Istorija za petto oddelenie* (Skopje: Tabernakul, 2005), p. 4: 'Името на нашата татковина е многу старо. Првпат се споменува во VII век пред н.е.', and 'Нашата татковина има долга и богата историја. Во антиката таа била силна држава'.

early Byzantine studies. This departure forms the basis for a new national myth. In order to account for ‘Macedonian’ continuity, the textbook maintains that a clear ancient Macedonian identity persisted until the time of the Slavic invasions and migrations in the Balkans, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.<sup>14</sup> In this version, it is ‘ancient Macedonians’ who mixed with the Slavs, as opposed to the more nuanced and academically more acceptable ‘local Romanized population’ found in earlier textbooks. Without taking into consideration more reputable theories of group identity in the late empire, or those dealing with group identities among the so-called ‘barbarian’ tribes in the age of migrations, the textbook presents an image of a Macedonian identity that is frozen in time, at least until the arrival of the Slavs. To support its claim the textbook provides selected quotations from three Byzantine writers who mention the ethnonym ‘Macedonians’: Theodoret of Cyrus, the Miracles of Saint Demetrius, and Simeon the Metaphrast. They omit an explanation of the neoclassicist tendencies of numerous late Roman and Byzantine writers. Besides the adoption of a classical style of writing and some old techniques, one of the major traits of this literary tradition is the use of classical names (toponyms, ethnonyms, etc.) to refer to the post-classical period.<sup>15</sup> It is generally accepted by scholars of the Late Roman and Byzantine periods that the terms ‘Macedonia’ and ‘Macedonians’ had a geographical and administrative meaning at that time, but certainly no ethnic significance. The authors repeat their main argument for the supposed longevity of the ancient Macedonian identity four times in the space of a few pages to ensure that it is absorbed by students. This argument states that the Roman Empire did not and could not assimilate the Macedonian people due to the latter’s strong collective consciousness based on traditions originating in the times of Alexander the Great.<sup>16</sup> The argument is present not only in the core textual parts of the particular lesson (unit), but also provides direction to the questions posed: ‘What was the mutual relationship between the Slavs and the ancient Macedonians and how did their symbiosis develop?’<sup>17</sup> A similar position on the idea of continuity is taken up by other textbooks, where it is repeated as fact, but not

14 Blaže Ristovski, Šukri Rahimi, Simo Mladenovski, Todor Chepreganov, and Mitko B. Panov, *Istorija za prva godina gimnazisko obrazovanie* (Skopje: Albi, 2006), pp. 98–103.

15 Roger Scott, ‘The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography’, in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, ed. by Margaret Mullet and Roger Scott (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies 1979, 1981), pp. 61–74. For a rare article on this topic published in Macedonia see Oliver J. Schmitt, ‘“Mysians, Macedonians, Dardanians”: Some Remarks on Late Medieval Ethnonyms in the Central Balkans’, in *Makedonskiot identitet niz istorijata* (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 2010), pp. 73–8.

16 Ristovski et al, *Istorija za prva godina gimnazisko obrazovanie* (2006), pp. 98–102.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 146.

discussed in detail.<sup>18</sup> A number of other textbooks which touch upon the question of the relationship between the ancient Macedonians and the Slavs contain statements so confused that they reveal a lack not only of academic support, but also of a basic sense of literacy and historical knowledge. This renders them unsuitable for analysis.<sup>19</sup>

Similar to the previous case, a mythical historical narrative is also presented to ethnic Albanian students in Macedonia. In a 2009 textbook, a chapter entitled 'Illyrian-Albanian continuity' proposes that contemporary Albanians are the direct descendants of the Illyrians. The authors claim that 'the archaeological investigations in several Albanian regions confirm the ethno-cultural continuity of the Illyrians'. As in its Macedonian counterparts, the focus of the historical narrative is late Antiquity. The Komani culture identified by archaeologists is interpreted as an ethnic Illyrian (i.e. Albanian) culture, and the principle that archaeological culture does not equal ethnic group, accepted since the 1960s, is ignored. According to Bowden, one of the leading archaeologists working on sites in Albania, the Komani culture is not an expression of ethnic identity but rather an indication of more localized and fluid social structures.<sup>20</sup> He claims that the Komani population 'participated in a European-wide medium of funerary practice, rather than constructing an identity that consciously expressed their difference from their neighbors'.<sup>21</sup> In this case too, the didactic section reflects the same impulse as the main text: 'Was there an ethno-genetic link between the Illyrians and the Arberians, and how did this reflect on culture?'<sup>22</sup>

These mythical historical narratives have much in common, but certain differences can be observed: while the Macedonian narrative is based mostly on written sources, its Albanian counterpart is based on archaeological sources. The former proposes an assimilation of two ethnically and culturally different populations, while the latter proposes an evolution of one autochthonous population. On the other hand, both myths of *antiquitas* presented to students as

18 Milan Boškoski, Nebi Derviši, Safet Nedziri, Dime Madzovski, and Saško Nikolovski, *Istorija za prva godina gimnazisko obrazovanje* (Skopje: Prosvetno Delo, 2009), pp. 164; and Milan Boškoski, Jordan Ilioski, and Nebi Derviši, *Istorija za sesto oddelenie* (Skopje: Prosvetno Delo, 2010), pp. 32. The latter also emphasizes that the local population in the region had an ancient Macedonian ethnic identity, but differs from the other textbooks by claiming that their contemporary descendants are the Vlachs from Macedonia. This proposition is not compatible with the Macedonian nationalist discourse and is equally groundless.

19 Nenad Naneski and Behar Memeti, *Istorija za VI oddelenie* (Skopje: Zvezda, 2006), pp. 32: 'The autochthonous population in Macedonia were the ancient Macedonians, called Pao-nians. They originated from the Roman colonists in Macedonia'.

20 William Bowden, 'The Construction of Identities in Post-Roman Albania', in *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology*, ed. by Luke Lavan and William Bowden (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 57.

21 Ibid.

22 Ristovski et al, *Istorija za prva godina gimnazisko obrazovanje* (2006), p. 141.

historical ‘fact’ share two common features. They seek a solution for the continuity problem in the late ancient/early medieval period, and they both largely ignore basic historical and archaeological concepts and theories. Group identity in the Later Roman Empire manifested itself for the most part in terms of citizenship, religion, and finally region, as well as social status, profession etc. Contemporary research into the history and archaeology of the region does not speak of a transmission of ethnic identity from classical to late ancient times. As Geary, who rightly considers nationalist interpretations and (mis)use of historical phenomena to be the very antithesis of history, states: ‘The flux and complexities of Late Antiquity belong to a different world from the simplistic visions of ideologies’.<sup>23</sup> In fact, contemporary scholarship challenges and re-examines even the group identities and related terminology of classical times that are often taken for granted (Romans, Greeks, Hebrews, Gauls and *genos*, *ethnos*, *phylon*, etc.).<sup>24</sup> This presents additional problems to those attempting to link two different groups of people over a long period of time. Such problems are, however, ignored or forgotten by the myth-makers.

In order to provide some context for the shift of the historical narrative in history textbooks, we shall briefly turn to the aftermath of the fall of socialism and communism in the Balkans. Research into the place of ancient history in Macedonian history textbooks of the 1990s has yielded different results. For example Vouri, who examined textbooks from four Balkan countries (Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey), observed that ancient history has been included in four particular ways: thematic exploration of ancient history in the curriculum, the incorporation of ancient history within the body of national history, ethnocentric narrative of ancient history, and a revision of the Marxist approach to the ancient past.<sup>25</sup> What these countries’ textbooks had in common was that ‘they all lay emphasis on the passing need to rehabilitate the ‘downgraded history’ of ancient Thrace, ancient Macedonia, or Illyria’.<sup>26</sup> Studying the mainstream Macedonian historiography of the 1990s, Brunnbauer also emphasizes the inclusion of ancient Macedonians in the national narrative. He too points to historians’ interpretations of the alleged assimilation of Slavs and

23 Geary, *Myth of Nations* (2002), p. 156.

24 For classical group identity see Erich Gruen, ‘Did Ancient Identity Depend on Ethnicity? A Preliminary Probe’, *Phoenix* 67 (1–2) (2013), 1–22. For a post-modernist analysis of groups in the context of modern nationalism and identity theory, see Roger Brubaker, ‘Ethnicity without Groups’, *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 43, 2 (2002), 163–89. Brubaker challenges the tendency to take groups for granted, i. e. the ‘common sense groupism’.

25 Sofia Vouri, ‘Antiquity as Source of National Documentation in Balkan History Textbooks (1991–1996)’ in *The Image of the ‘Other’/Neighbour in the School Textbooks of the Balkan Countries*, ed. by Xochellis and Toloudi (2001), p. 77.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 78.



Macedonians in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>27</sup> Yet this situation differs from our more recent case study, because the ‘symbiosis’ theory had not yet been formalized, and was not included in history textbooks. Our point can be illustrated by Brunnbauer’s conclusion:

Academic historians usually do not go so far as to claim a shared ethnic identity between the ancient and the Slav Macedonians – although they recognize a contribution of the ancient Macedonians to the ethnogenesis of the Macedonian people – but stress the tradition of statehood that the ancient Macedonians had established in the region and handed down to the Macedonian nation.<sup>28</sup>

The first part of this statement indicates that Macedonian historians do not question the Slavic identity of the modern Macedonian people. Ancient history is part of the national narrative and, while it has been claimed that the ancient Macedonians were not Greeks, the matter is not paid much attention, and there is no explicit claim to ancient origins of the modern Macedonian identity. At the same time, the myth of the Albanians’ ancient origin was already well-established,<sup>29</sup> but in Communist Albania, not in Macedonia. Of course, we must recognize that these processes of myth-construction took place in two different countries, at least somewhat independently. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of these processes influencing one another. In any case, our objective here is not to establish the chronological order of myth construction, but rather to examine the changes in the historical narrative from the 1990s to the post-conflict period. We argue that the myth of *antiquitas* in Macedonia, as seen in history textbooks, is today much more detailed and explicit, and based on limited and hypothetical historical interpretations which provided new (pseudo-) arguments and conclusions. It can be seen as an example of the ideological use of history, which K. G. Karlsson has related ‘to attempts to arrange historical elements into a relevant context of meaning, made mainly by groups of intellectuals and politicians in control of public representations’.<sup>30</sup>

Yet proving the ‘incorrectness’ of the myth in textbooks seems to be not only the easiest, but also perhaps the least useful thing to do. We shall therefore now

27 Brunnbauer, ‘Historiography, Myths and the Nation in the Republic of Macedonia’, in *(Re)Writing History*, ed. by Brunnbauer (2004), p. 180.

28 Brunnbauer, ‘Serving the Nation: Historiography in the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) After Socialism’, *Historein* 4 (2003), p. 168.

29 Sofia Vouri, ‘Antiquity as Source of National Documentation in Balkan History Textbooks (1991–1996)’, in *The Image of the ‘Other’/Neighbour in the School Textbooks of the Balkan Countries*, ed. by Xochellis and Toloudi (2001), p. 78, p. 80.

30 Klas-Göran Karlsson, ‘Public uses of history in contemporary Europe’, in *Contemporary History on Trial*, ed. by Jones, Osberg and Randerad (2007), p. 39. See also his discussion on ‘the longer back, the more legitimate’ idea employed by nationalists.

move to the functionalist approach to the myth of ancient origin, and examine the precise role of the myth in contemporary Macedonian society.

## ‘Significance’ and ‘Work on Myth’: The Functionalist Approach

In the contemporary literature on political myths there are many theories surrounding what defines a myth. Despite certain differences, in general they share the conclusion that political myths mainly serve to legitimize a given political order or community. Ifversen, for example, claims that modern myths are political, that their task is to legitimize foundational political acts, and that they express trans-historical values that provide orientation to a given community.<sup>31</sup> He suggests regarding a mythical narrative as a particular discourse whose purpose is to justify order and authority in a community.<sup>32</sup> For Bosković, Gavrilović and Perica, political myths are in general connected to the state; they classify them as myths of the polis, founding myths of the state, and myths of the nation.<sup>33</sup>

A much more common view than those mentioned above is offered by Bottici, in a study seeking to provide the first refined theoretical framework for the use of political myth, and which centres on the universal need for significance. She defines the political myth as follows:

[T]he work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society) make significance of their political experiences and deeds. Thus, what makes a political myth out of a simple narrative is not its content or claim to truth, but first, the fact that this narrative coagulates and produces significance, second, that it is shared by a group, and third, that it can come to address the specifically political conditions in which the group operates.<sup>34</sup>

At the heart of her theory is the notion of significance or *Bedeutsamkeit*, a concept that she borrows from the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg.<sup>35</sup> It is argued that people need significance, lest they become indifferent to the world in which they live.<sup>36</sup> The second basic concept of her philosophy, also stemming

31 Jan Ifversen, ‘Myth in the Writing of European History’, in *Nationalizing the Past*, ed. by Berger and Lorenz (2010), p. 454.

32 Ibid., p. 454.

33 Aleksandar Bosković, Darko Gavrilović and Vjekoslav Perica, ‘Myths, Political Mythologies and Nationalism’, in *Political Myths in the Former Yugoslavia and Successor States*, ed. by Gavrilović and Perica (2011), pp. 13–14.

34 Bottici, *Philosophy of Political Myth* (2007), p. 14.

35 For significance and the work on myth see Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), especially chapter three entitled ‘Bedeutsamkeit’. For an English translation see Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

36 Bottici, *Philosophy of Political Myth* (2007), p. 131.

from Blumenberg, is that of the ‘work on myth’. This is the main focus of the inter-relational approach to myth, whereby a myth is not only a story, or a narrative. Bottici argues that a myth is not ‘a product that is given once and for all, but is instead a process of the continual reworking of a basic narrative core or mythologem’.<sup>37</sup>

An important aspect of the political myth is its use in the politics of identity, especially in an ethno-national context. The place of the myth in that process is not fixed, but rather dynamic. As Bottici argues, political myths ‘can be seen as both the symptom of an already existing identity, but also as a means for creating an identity yet to come’.<sup>38</sup> Kolstø’s theory of the myth as an ethnic boundary equally stresses the link between historical narratives and traditions as the legitimization and celebration of identity. Specific to myths of this nature is the tendency to move to action. Political myths represent a determination to act on the part of those who generate them, and as such they have the potential to incite people to action, particularly in cases in which their group identity is largely based on such a myth.<sup>39</sup>

A political myth can simultaneously exhibit a cognitive, a practical, and an aesthetic dimension without clear distinctions; these are the dimensions identified by Bottici, who draws on previous ideas from Flood, Sorel and Tudor.<sup>40</sup> The cognitive dimension refers to the role of the myth in providing fundamental cognitive schemata which map the social world by reducing its complexity to the relative simplicity of the mythical narrative plot. The practical dimension reflects the need of social agents to represent their planned activity in the form of a narrative that will ensure their success. The aesthetic dimension meanwhile speaks to the myth’s manifestation in dramatic or even poetic forms of narration.

Finally, it is worth stressing that the concept of political myth is not limited exclusively to those narratives with political content. The myth can transmit a non-political message, but when it is inserted into a political context, or employed to fulfil a political function, it becomes a political myth. It is the latter condition which renders the myth of *antiquitas* in Macedonia a political myth. The story of ancient Macedonia and the longevity of its ethnos, as well as its subsequent mix with Slavic tribes, is not necessarily a political story but probably more of sociocultural interest. Yet in the current political context (especially in relation to the name dispute with Greece), this narrative does take on a political function: that is, to mobilize public emotion, opinion, and action. Our theoretical considerations above render the purpose and operation of the ethno-

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37 Ibid., p. 7.

38 Ibid., p. 230–1.

39 Ibid., p. 243.

40 Ibid., p. 179–80.

centric myths of ancient origin and continuity in Macedonia a great deal more understandable. As we shall see, it is in the context of the current political situation that the narrative of the ancient past becomes 'relevant'.

In the following section we examine the supposed *function* of the *antiquitas* myth in the contemporary Republic of Macedonia. We connect sociopolitical developments with the 'turn' towards antiquity in primary and secondary school history textbooks. We show the double significance of the function of the *antiquitas* myth: firstly, its importance in relation to the self-perceived position of the Macedonian nation (understood in purely ethnic terms) in the overall 'order of nations', and especially in its relations with neighbouring countries, and the name dispute with Greece; and secondly, its use in the inter-ethnic dispute between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians over the character of the state and the political nation. This dispute has marked the contemporary history of Macedonia from the independence of the state to the present day. It is important to emphasize the complex interrelation of theoretically distinguishable aspects of the myth's function. Such interplay provides understandings of reality valid for a particular point in time, and a specific sociopolitical context.

### **The Justification Function: Making Use of the 'Ancient Origin' of the Nation in the Great 'Order of Nations'**

Previously presented citations from the history textbooks that point to an ancient origin of the nation serve to show the greater value of the nation in the 'order of nations'. It must be made clear that in the Macedonian case the nation is understood in ethnic terms, as first and foremost a nation of exclusively ethnic Macedonians. The idea of a 'glorious' antique origin of the nation functions as a buffer against allegations of non-autochthony in a particular socio-political context (post-1991), in which the markers of Macedonian identity have been contested by politicians and intellectuals in the neighbouring countries; these include the name of the state in the context of relations with Greece, the distinctiveness of the Macedonian language and ethnicity in the context of relations with Bulgaria, and the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in the context of relations with Serbia. In this narrative the Macedonian nation is seen as morally superior to its neighbours, who 'falsely' attack the markers of Macedonian identity. The Macedonian nation is portrayed as older, more glorious, and thus with an absolute right to its present territory. The contemporary experience of a 'small' and 'weak' state is seen as a direct consequence of the attempt of neighbouring states to 'hijack' the glorious antique historical heritage of Macedonians.

This interpretation of the myth is lent weight by the contemporary state of relations between Macedonia and Greece. Since 1991, the governments of Greece and Macedonia have been involved in a political and diplomatic conflict centred around the right to the use of the name 'Macedonia', although the conflict has much wider implications. Both sides venture back into ancient times, to the age of Alexander the Great, in order to demonstrate their legitimate and 'rightful' ownership of the name. Or, more accurately stated in terms of elections and the legitimacy of political power, political parties attempt to obtain votes by presenting themselves as protectors of the Greek or Macedonian nation respectively. In this context, following Bottici, the myth of ancient origin provides ethnic Macedonians with a meaning for the conflict, a *significance* for their situation and values, and a call to action for the defence of an identity. Kolstø argues that:

No magician's trick can turn the South Slav into the autochthonous population of the area they now live in, unless they accept that they fused with the older groups. By seeing their nations as a mixture of old and new population segments they can extend their local roots by many centuries, if not millennia.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, through the myth of *antiquitas*, which projects modern Macedonians into classical times through the fusion of ancient Macedonians and Slavs, ethnic Macedonians feel more confident and morally secure in their current struggle for identity. The major economic and diplomatic blockades<sup>42</sup> through which they have lived since the independence of the country thus make better sense to them.

The myth of the 'obvious' linear historical continuity between ancient and contemporary Macedonians, coupled with the myth of historical right over the territory, represent two prime arguments in the ongoing name dispute with Greece.<sup>43</sup> In this narrative, Macedonians have an absolute right to use the name 'Macedonia', firstly because they are descendants of ancient Macedonians, and secondly because they resided in the given territory for many centuries. Even though neither of the two arguments is valid in the context of international relations, they provide a satisfactory explanation to Macedonians of what exactly is wrong with Greece's position.

An important part of the Interim Accord signed by Macedonia and Greece in 1995 is Macedonia's obligation not to use symbols associated with the regimes

41 Kolstø, 'Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society', in *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Pal Kolstø (2005), p. 26. He rightly points out that this solution contradicts with the nationalist belief that national groups are eternal and unchanging, i.e. the same belief which rendered autochthony dependent upon ethnic mixture in the first place.

42 The economic blockade in 1994 and the blockade to NATO membership in 2008 being the most serious examples.

43 In a TV debate in June 2009 one of the main supporters and myth-makers, Pasko Kuzman, then a director of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, argued that 'we' must prove an ancient origin if 'we' don't want to lose our name.

known as ancient Macedonia (primarily the kingdom of Philip II and Alexander III the Great).<sup>44</sup> From 2006 the Macedonian government began to change its position on this issue and moved towards a policy of using ancient Macedonian symbols either openly or in ‘disguised’ form. The government re-named one of the country’s highways and the airport in Skopje with the name ‘Alexander the Great’. This met with instant objections and accusations of non-compliance with the Interim Accord in Greece. From 2010 the government initiated a large-scale project to re-build Skopje, the capital of the country, in which antique symbols and references were used even more openly. The main feature of the project is a 14.5 meter statue of Alexander the Great in the main square in Skopje with the cautious title ‘The Warrior on the Horse’. Statues of Philip II and Alexander’s mother Olympia also feature in the city centre, while new buildings used as administrative facilities and museums are built in neo-classical and baroque styles. Statues of other Macedonian national figures from Antiquity to contemporary times are also present as a part of the project, entitled ‘Skopje 2014’.

The project has been highly controversial in Macedonia’s public sphere since its unveiling to the public. However, it can be argued that such an open use of ancient symbols and references has fueled the national pride of ethnic Macedonians, since it is widely perceived that this was not allowed previously due to Greek objections. The myth of the ancient origin of the nation is particularly important in this regard, providing as it does a ‘rationale’ for the use of these symbols. It explains that the use of such symbols is the right of ethnic Macedonians, to which no one may object.

### **Competition over Historical Precedence: Contemporary yet Ancient Macedonians versus Contemporary yet Ancient Illyrians**

The ‘Skopje 2014’ project touched on another sensitive issue in the Macedonian public sphere, important from the very first days of the independence of the state. The two largest ethnic groups have long disputed the principles on which the state and nation are built. This was best exemplified in the demands of ethnic Albanian politicians and intellectuals in the 1990s for a revision of the Preamble of the Macedonian Constitution to include ethnic Albanians as a ‘constitutive

44 Article 7, paragraph 3 of the Interim Accord states that ‘If either Party believes one or more symbols constituting part of its historic or cultural patrimony is being used by the other Party, it shall bring such alleged use to the attention of the other Party, and the other Party shall take appropriate corrective action or indicate why it does not consider it necessary to do so’. <[http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK\\_950913\\_Interim%20Accord%20between%20the%20Hellenic%20Republic%20and%20the%20FYROM.pdf](http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK_950913_Interim%20Accord%20between%20the%20Hellenic%20Republic%20and%20the%20FYROM.pdf)> [accessed 29 August 2014].

element' of the state. This issue was seemingly resolved after the conflict of 2001 when the Preamble was altered to include the 'shared constituency' of all communities residing in the Republic of Macedonia (Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Romas, Serbs, Bosniaks, and Vlachs). Previously, the Constitution had identified the Macedonian ethnic group as a 'constitutive element', while 'full equality and co-existence' was guaranteed for the members of minority groups.<sup>45</sup>

'Skopje 2014', first and foremost a project aimed at the promotion of the ideas of ancient origin and continuity of ethnic Macedonians, fueled ethnic Albanian resentments for at least two reasons. Firstly, the project obviously lacked representation of Albanian national figures. This yet again introduced the question of the place of ethnic Albanians in the political Macedonian nation. Secondly (and more importantly for our discussion here), the issue of the historical claim to the city was also re-examined. Irritated by the ethnic marking of a shared territory, some ethnic Albanian groups and organizations from Skopje have challenged this activity by invoking their own belief in their ancient Illyrian origin, and the historical right to the city that this might afford them. This phenomenon was most clearly observed during and after the archaeological excavations at the medieval and Ottoman fortress ('Kale') in the city centre. Many local Albanians suspected that the archaeologists, i. e. the state, were hiding or destroying any evidence of the Illyrian/Albanian character of the site, and thus their autochthony in the Skopje area. Some aspects of the activities of both sides seem absurd: the government's efforts to interpret new artifacts as Macedonian or as a sign of continuity at any cost (in the context of the 'name dispute'), as well as the Albanian paranoia that their 'historical precedence' in Skopje might be denied, for example. However, this situation serves to display the interdependence of and interrelation between historical myths in the region.

More importantly and troublingly, these events have led to inter-ethnic violence. In keeping with with the program for national 'renaissance', the government decided to build a church at the archaeological site mentioned above, located in a zone considered their own by both Macedonians and Albanians. The result, in February 2011, was a clash at this contested location between groups of young men who apparently felt that 'historical truths' could be settled through physical violence.<sup>46</sup> Two myths of *antiquitas* had been confronted. The aftermath of the event saw many minor ethnically motivated acts of violence throughout the city, which was but a snapshot of the wider ethnic urban violence there over

45 For a broader discussion on this issue see Jovan Bliznakovski, 'Symbolic Aspects of Nation-Building: The Story of Three Versions of the Preamble of the Macedonian Constitution', *Political Thought* 44 (2013), *Ethnic Conflict. New Perspectives of the Old Reality*, 115–22.

46 Filip Stojanovski, 'Macedonia: Violent Inter-Ethnic Incident on Skopje Fortress', *Global Voices* (2011) <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/15/macedonia-violent-inter-ethnic-incident-on-skopje-fortress/>> (accessed 29 August 2014).

the last several years. Younger generations live the myths fabricated by their parents' generation. Through nationalist and pseudo-historical ideas, a space can be created for politics, public discourse, and education to lead to violence.

In this way, it can be argued that some recent manifestations of the myth of the Illyrian origin of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia has been provoked by the resurgence of the myth of the ancient Macedonian origin of ethnic Macedonians. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that each myth feeds off its counterpart, and thereby gains more ground. At the heart of this process stands a quite common feature of nationalism: the dispute over which group has historical precedence over a given territory.

### Recent European Analogies

The myths of *antiquitas* seen in Macedonian history textbooks have several analogies in contemporary Europe. In Romania, until recently, history textbooks emphasized the ancient origin of the contemporary Romanians by linking them with the Romans and the Dacians.<sup>47</sup> One 1998 textbook teaches that 'the Romanian people formed via the living together of the Dacians with the Roman colonists and the assimilation of the Latin language by the Dacians', while others from 1999 and 2003 even tried to establish similarities between the national costumes of the Dacians and Romanians. This situation changed in the years prior to the country's EU entry in 2007, although similar ideas were suggested more subtly as recently as in 2006.<sup>48</sup> In the region of Galicia, in north-western Spain, a 'Galician nation' was legitimized by means of a theory of Celtic roots, as opposed to Spanish Iberism, or of Germanic Suebian roots as opposed to the myth of Visigoth reign. These narratives were challenged and deconstructed by a new generation of local Galician historians, influenced mainly by the 'Annales school', at the very end of Franco's dictatorship.<sup>49</sup> A peculiar case in this context is Greece and the idea of direct descent from the ancient Greek city-states. It is probably the only myth of *antiquitas* in the EU left unchallenged, perhaps in part because Western European civilization itself traces its origins back to the rise of culture and philosophy in ancient Greece.

47 Anamaria Dutceac Segestan, *Myth, Identity and Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Romanian and Serbian Textbooks* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2009), consulted at the library of the Georg Eckert Institute in Brunswick, Germany, pp. 252–5.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

49 Ramon Lopez Facal, 'Teaching history in Galicia', in *School and Nation: Identity Politics and Educational Media in an Age of Diversity*, ed. by Peter Carrier (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 74–5.



Whatever the differences and similarities between these myths, researchers have repeatedly highlighted their potentially dangerous role in any society. In a brief discussion of myths in Kosovo, Geary emphasizes the Serbian myth of the Battle for Kosovo (1389) and the Albanian myth of Illyrian descent. In both myths he recognizes the workings of a 'deadly logic' of the 'historical right' to a territory.<sup>50</sup> The same point is made by Kolstø in his reflection on *antiquitas* myths in general; he warns that they can be 'pernicious and politically destabilizing'.<sup>51</sup>

In this context, the mixed teams of ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians responsible for writing textbooks propose to their students myths of *antiquitas*, introducing them to a 'we were here first' mentality that insists that this place is 'ours', and that the Other is an unwanted visitor. Historical facts may be forgotten later in life, but the values transmitted through history education remain.

## Conclusion

The myth of *antiquitas* has been explicitly present in Macedonian history textbooks for over a decade. The narrative is constructed with the use of hypotheses and presumptions that are unsupported by scholarship in late ancient and early medieval history and archaeology, as well as identity theory. While it has hitherto received relatively little attention in textbooks (a single unit), its message is quite clear. The narrative style and the didactic section play an important part in the presentation of the narrative. How such portrayals first entered textbooks is another line of inquiry, rendered complex because textbook writing in the region was and is conditioned not only by political context, but also by personal interests and connections as well as by different personal interpretations of history. Which of these factors, if any, played a part in the introduction of the *antiquitas* myth into Macedonian history textbooks some ten years ago is a question yet to be answered.

The particular form in which the myth of *antiquitas* has been presented in the last decade is considerably more explicit than the treatment of ancient history in textbooks from the 1990s. We consider it a new stage in its functioning, and an illustration of 'work on myth', rendering it worthy of increased academic attention.

Current theories of the functioning of political/historical myths provide a relevant framework for a general understanding of the myths of *antiquitas*

50 Geary, *Myth of Nations* (2002), p. 7.

51 Kolstø, 'Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society', in *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Kolstø (2005), p. 10.

among ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia; we follow for the most part Bottici and Kolstø.

The myth presented in the textbooks is in keeping with a set of ethnocentric policies focused on antiquity, identity and ‘historical rights’, exemplified in the ‘Skopje 2014’ project, the large-scale archaeological excavations subject to political (mis)interpretation and the campaign of renaming places, streets and objects in an ‘ancient’ style. These endeavours are part of a policy to re-brand the nation and (re-)invent tradition.

The main purpose of the *antiquitas* myth in Macedonia, we believe, is twofold: to provide significance and to mobilize for action. In the context of the ongoing name dispute with neighbouring Greece, the myth renders the complex problem of having to defend one’s own identity in the democratic Europe of the twenty-first century understandable and bearable. It provides significance and even a feeling of moral superiority to those ethnic Macedonians who feel that their identity is endangered. At the same time, for both ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, it renders justifiable their desire to separate themselves from their respective Other, and to mark (even through aggression) as an exclusive historical territory something which is in reality a shared space. Through the idea of the ‘historical right’ to a territory that they promote, *antiquitas* myths have played a role in a number of violent events in Skopje. This of course does not mean that one or two school lessons on ancient origin and continuity have led directly or indirectly to any particular violent event in the last few years. However such lessons do contribute to the same symbolic ‘mythologized’ discourse and mindset manifested in ethnocentric ‘anticomania’ and the struggle for ‘historical territories’.

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