

## Aristotle and Alexander of Macedon – By-products of Greco-Macedonian Cultural Symbiosis and Eternal Tribal Contest

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**Abstract.** This essay looks at the problem of cultural symbiosis and cultural ownership exemplified by the ongoing biographical discourses on Aristotle and Alexander of Macedon which through time continue to display the validity and correctness of Aristotle’s notion of cultural universals, manifested in the eternal strife for tribal extraordinariness, cultural exceptionalism, emphasis on Otherness and ownership of a particular tribal hero, despite the essential similarity of the civilizational ascent. Both figures are treated as permanent universal cultural signs, viewed with the semiotic lenses.

**Keywords:** hero, heroism, cultural signs, cultural ownership, cultural symbiosis, signs of Greekness, signs of Slavdom, ethnic origins, civilizational ascent.

**Резюме.** В данном эссе рассматривается проблема культурного симбиоза и культурной собственности на примере продолжающихся биографических дискурсов об Аристотеле и Александре Македонском, которые со временем продолжают демонстрировать обоснованность и правильность аристотелевского понятия культурных универсалий, проявляющихся в вечной борьбе за племенную экстраординарность, культурную исключительность, акцент на Инаковости и право собственности на особенного племенного героя, несмотря на существенное сходство цивилизационного восхождения. Обе фигуры рассматриваются как постоянные универсальные культурные знаки, рассматриваемые через семиотические линзы.

**Ключевые слова:** герой, героизм, культурные знаки, культурная собственность, культурный симбиоз, знаки гречности, знаки славянства, этнические истоки, цивилизационное восхождение.

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### *Выводы*

***Introduction.*** Pondering over the pathway of modern Europe and the central orientation of current European cultural discourse, Jacques Derrida, himself a product of cultural symbiosis and choice, reminded that “culture never had single origin, despite the universal tribal desire to impose and assert it [1991:10]. Over millennia, the panorama of the civilizational ascent has demonstrated that human pathway has been very complex, extremely convoluted and contradictory, despite the tribal desire to simplify it and draw borders between the cultural routes in order to assert cultural status, cultural ownership and superiority of some versus others.

For a long time, Homeric 8<sup>th</sup> century epic was the single most authoritative source about the exceptional Greek cultural legacy, its uniqueness and superiority ignoring its actual Phoenician origins and influential impact of the Hellenic-Phoenician cultural symbiosis. However, even Greek dramatist Euripides (485BC–406BC) whose life ended in Slavic Macedonia already produced a creative-antithesis to Homer, alluding to the re-assessment of the Greek cultural pathway and re-

evaluation of the Phoenician cultural impact and the forgotten Helleno-Phoenician cultural symbiosis. The same idea of collective cultural construction would re-appear in the Roman poet Virgil (79BC–19BC) who asserted that “mixing and mingling” in general constituted the universal mechanism of cultural development and human civilizational ascent.

Regrettably, our age of paradoxes and cultural amnesia is repeatedly embarking on the same futile and impossible questions of tribal exceptionalism, tied to race, ethnicity and discovering the alleged hidden origins. Despite the impossibility and futility of determining the precise ethnogenesis, historical fictions and nonsensical questions arise again and again. Whose is Alexander the Great?

What are the actual ethnic origins of Aristotle, the towering figure of humanity? We try to unpack the multiple meanings of these two cultural signs and denote the complexity of the discourse around them and multiplicity of meanings and contexts evoked by them. The purpose of the current undertaking to emphasize the mistaken interpretations of these well-known cultural signs, which basically reflect the modern context of the universal tribal reversal to oversimplification and the desire to assert one’s own superiority.

### **1. The New Meaning of the Old Icon – Aristotle, the Stagirite**

On the basis of the multiple biographical accounts over two millennia, Aristotle (384BC–322BC) as a heroic cultural icon can be simultaneously referred as the cultural property of the two ethnic and cultural groups – Macedonian and Greek. Athens made him a towering immortal cultural figure, the creator of his own school of philosophy, the son of Hellas, while Stagira, Aristotle’s place of birth, was a proto-Slavic land, now a Greek territory, but a part of the Macedonian kingdom in the past. Thus, Aristotle belongs to two homes – Greek and Slavic. His belonging to Stagira has been acknowledged by the thousand-year-old tradition of Aristotle commentators who had bestowed upon him the name-symbol “Stagirite”. As a universal cultural sign Aristotle is the cultural property of the global intellectual community, but as a native of Stagira he could be claimed as a Macedonian and a Slavic tribal hero. None of the mainstream commentators dared to unpack the semiotic ambiguity of this cultural sign and the complexity of the phenomenon. But certain doubts were occasionally raised over millennia.

It is not incidental that the recent modern monograph-biography by the Italian scholar Carlo Natali, “*Aristotle. His Life and School*” (2013) sheds the new light of the complicated biographical reality of the ancient thinker. Carlo Natali informs, for instance, on page six of this new modern biography that Stagira, Aristotle’s birthplace, “was a polis of Thracia” and that in 424BC it aligned itself with Sparta.

But in 328BC Philip of Macedon forced independent Greek city-states into submission. Aristotle himself never mentions Stagira in his works, with the exception of his will. According to Carlo Natali, Aristotle's mother Phaestis "descended from one of the leaders of the expedition from Chalcis who colonized Stagira (2013:7). Nonetheless, C. Natali timidly retreats to the familiar narrative and, in the next sentence, asserts that "both parents were likely of Greek origin." The post-modern scholar raises legitimate doubts regarding origins but timidly moves away from doubts and complex facts. Thracia was a proto-Slavic land and this fact bothered future biographers. On page eleven, Natali quotes Bishop of Cyprus Epiphanius from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC who allegedly wrote, "Aristotle, son of Nicomachus, said by some to be a Macedonian from Stagira, but, according to some others, was a Thracian." C. Natali also mentions that Aristotle himself and his relatives and pupils "were involved in the political affairs of Athens but often took the pro-Macedonian side" [2013:14]. On page ninety-six of his biography, C. Natali states that Aristotle was an outsider. His open affiliation, support and friendship with Macedonians support this claim. In fact, the outsider motif becomes prominent in this post-modern biography of Aristotle.

C. Natali persistently reminds his readers of Aristotle's position of an outsider and finally states that:

in Athens, Aristotle lived as a "metic," an alien resident, subject, like all fellow "metics, to various obligations" – he had to pay a tax to state while citizens were exempt from taxes; he had to procure a legal sponsor; he had to serve in the army or navy; he could not take part in political life, nor could he own real estate, nor hold a magistracy [2013:19].

These legal rules were stemming from the traditional Greek dislike of foreigners, many of whom were labeled as "barbarians". Thracians were a target of the traditional Greek xenophobia, so must have been Aristotle, the pupil of Plato. His position must have been rather precarious in Athens, and he "was harmed by the rivalry between Athens and Macedonian kingdom, being forced to flee Athens twice by the outbreak of the anti-Macedonian hatred – in 348BC and upon the death of Alexander" [2013:143]. C. Natali hints that the outbreaks of critique of Aristotle's works could have been also explained by his position of an outsider or his non-Greekness. The ties with Macedonia or reports about his alleged Thracian origins would undermine the later heroic status and the tribal heroic narrative about belonging and cultural ownership of Aristotle.

## 2. Macedonia, Thracia and Greece

Given the geographic proximity of the three tribes, the opportunity of "mixing and mingling," mutual cultural exchanges, sharing theological mythologies and epos, despite the linguistic differences, it would be impossible to define the precise ethnic origins of these neighbors. The populations were in close contact for centuries, and since the earliest times, the boundaries between Thracia, Macedonia

and Greece “were never fixed” [S. Casson, 1926:36]. Due to the permanent proximity, constant battles for territory, unstable borders, the question of origins on which each tribe would later insist had been obviously always futile. The awareness of the Thracian, Macedonian and proto-Slavic presence in the area has been manifested even in Homer’s *Iliad* [A.Fol, 1997:38]. Aristotle mentions Thracia in his “*Politics*” and describes Thracians as militaristic tribe. The surviving toponyms though point out to the Slavic origins of Thracia and Macedonia whose long presence in the Balkans would be later attested by the archeological excavations of the modern times. River Struma, lake Ostrovo, river Zdravnik confirm the Slavic origins of the tribes inhabiting the area next to Greece. At Salonika (modern Thessalonika), objects had been found belonging to the pre-historic Bronze Age [S. Casson, 1926:153]. Stagira, Aristotle’s birthplace, was the suburb of Thessalonika and in the middle position of this historic contact between Thracia, Macedonia and Greece. The Greek pottery found in the area was of later period. Despite the traces of Thracian language in the Greek toponyms, the Greeks had been ethnically and linguistically different. The “mixing and mingling” was not excluded and would later inspire biographical fictions.

In 1532, the Dominican monk from Dalmatian island of Hvar, Vinko Pribojevic, published work on the pan-Slavic ethno-linguistic kinship and suggested that all well-known historic personalities from the Balkans had been of Slavic descent, such as twenty four Roman Emperors and Aristotle. The Slavic origin of Aristotle was asserted by Bulgarian Prof. Ivan Kaltchev, in his presentation at the Second International Seminar on Biocosmology, in Veliky Novgorod; July 2011 (as told to me by Prof. Konstantin Khroutski). In addition to the Thraco-Macedonian linguistic substratum and possible cultural impact upon the Greeks, modern scholars also included Paeonia, mentioned by Homer in his *Iliad*. Paeonia fell to the Macedonian rule in 358 BC but the end of the Paeonian state is dated around 230 BC [E. Petrova, 1999:XI,3). Bylazora, “the largest Paeonian city, twice mentioned by Polibius,” has a Slavic sounding name (ibid.:71). Sary Grad, Bylazora, Lisicin Dol are the toponyms that clearly allude to the Slavic origins of the population which inhabited the part across Salonika (Thessalonika), i.e. Macedonia. Despite the futile and impossible task of discovering the true origins of the Balkan people, modern scholars undertake the same task and again look into the distant past. The civilizational pathways of the Slavs and their neighbors, the Greeks, crossed but the languages remained different, despite the geographical proximity. The obviously more advanced Hellenic civilization contributed to the collective mimesis of their Slavic neighbors and popular Phil-Hellenism which contributed to the Slavic cultural development in the Balkans, a significant and influential cultural phenomenon in itself.

The superiority and successes of the Hellenic civilization became evident and obvious to the neighboring Macedonians, who eagerly embraced Hellenism as a civilizational model, causing the historic march of Hellenism, undertaken eventually by the historic mission of Alexander of Macedon spreading Greek civilization in the world. To many Greeks their Slavic neighbor was a “miserable Macedonia” whose societal norms and moral values were largely different from the Greek. For instance, polygamy abandoned by the Greeks, was still practiced by the Macedonians. King Philip took seven wives without divorcing the previous ones [Worthington, 2014:5]. Alexander the Great saw marriage as a geopolitical tool in his conquest. The Greeks condemned the Macedonian practice of polygamy, regarding it as barbaric. However, paradoxically the “barbarian” Macedonians would become the most ardent promoters of Hellenic civilization and Hellenes, regarding them as their mentors. Pantelis G. Vyssoulis addresses this question in his book *Macedonian Hellenism* where he provided not only parallel portraits of Aristotle and Alexander the Great but also shed new light on the Slavic roots of Aristotle:

Aristotle, the Stagirite and Alexander the Great  
both were born in Macedonia and ennobled Hellenism  
as none other [1983: intr.].

The Hellenic and Thracian cultural pathways had been also crossed in many ways in antiquity. Out of the twelve rivers mentioned by Homer in his *Iliad* only two are Greek, rather than Thracian naming or of Slavic linguistic origin, all the rest alluding to the Thracian history. The river Rhesos is the name of the Thracian King who was ally to the Trojans [A. Fol, 2010:38]. The Thracian toponym Odessos for the modern Bulgarian city of Varna referred to the old Greek name borrowed from their neighbors. The historical mythology of Greeks ignored their mixed proto-origins where Phrygia, Thracia, Phoenicia played a significant role. The surviving toponyms and theonyms point out to the cultural cross-pollination of the neighboring tribes in the ancient past and later intentionally forgotten. The echo of this ancient past could be found in Plato who mentions the festival of the Bendis, one of the Thracian ancient tribes [A. Fol, 2010:73]. The same scholar makes supposition that Orphism practiced by the Greeks has ancient roots in the cults of the Thracians and their pre-literary Orphism which could be, in turn, traced to the Phrygian antiquity and influence [2010:77]. The pan-Hellenic god Dionysus is related to the Thracian Orphic Dionysus, the bull god who arrived every third year. Macedonia that has given birth to both great men in European, Greek and Macedonian history could easily claim them to be their national heroes.

### 3. Alexander under the Tutelage of Aristotle

Macedonian kingdom and its capital were shaped around 700BC when the rulers expressed their fascination with the Greek culture, choosing to emulate it and spread among themselves. Nonetheless, some modern scholars suggest that attraction to Hellenism was not purely cultural but would like to attribute it to mixed ethnicity since blood and belonging again became very important in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Tsuras, scholar of Greek origin, claims that Alexander's mother was Greek:

She was Olympias, daughter of the late Epirot King Neoptolemus  
She was not the typical Greek – red-haired  
whose beauty was intoxicating [2004:13].

The biographer accords genetic advantage to Alexander the Great by which he explains his talents, physical endurance and intellectual uniqueness:

The boy proved to be phenomenally gifted student.  
He excelled in reading and writing much earlier than  
other children. He also learned music and played  
the lyre with exceptional ability and feeling [2004:15].

His father chose Aristotle as the most proper mentor to his precocious child at the age of twelve. Under Aristotle's guidance Alexander was exposed to the Greek epos, poetry and philosophy. Homer's *Iliad* would be his handbook and permanently used manual for the art of war which he would take in all his campaigns next to his dagger [2004:20].

This legendary man is pictured as a byproduct of two ethnicities – Macedonian and Greek. The post-modern mythmaker writes that "his eyes were said to be of different colors, one brown and the other gray or green" [2004:22]. According to the story, Alexander even physically carried the duplicity of his origin. It is remarkable that even the all-knowing 21<sup>st</sup> century is so obsessed with blood and belonging. In Canada, the representatives of the two Toronto diasporic communities, Greek and Macedonian, continue to have a custom meeting in the city's Greek town to pay tribute to the greatest cultural icon and the greatest Emperor whom both groups claim to be theirs.

Nobody would ever know what was Aristotle's mother tongue and whether he knew Macedonian, but the available records testify Alexander's bilingualism which he publicly demonstrated on numerous occasions, communicating with his soldiers in the Slavic tongue. Alexander's public career as a promoter of Hellenism stemmed from his profound knowledge and admiration of Greek culture which he promoted with the skillful military tactics and the ability to win the dedication of his Slavic

soldiers. It went down into history as a unique case of conquest when the “barbaric Slavs,” the Macedonians, ironically became the most efficient and ardent promoters of the culture of the Other, having achieved the victory which the Hellenes could have never dreamt. As a result of Alexander’s astonishing historic military campaign and unique strategy, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Hellenic Empire ultimately stretched from Greece and Macedonia to Punjab. In addition to the most successful and unprecedented campaign and diplomacy, this was the most exciting moment in the Greek history, the brief colonial triumph of Hellenic civilization attained by the Macedonians, the cultural converts to Hellenism.

#### **4. From Peaceful Phil-Hellenism of the Macedonian Elite to the Military March**

Despite the post-modern attempts to attribute Macedonian phil-Hellenism and personal achievements of Alexander the Great to his allegedly partially Greek ethnic origins, while the actual philo-Hellenism was the consequence of the Macedonian profound fascination with the cultural achievements of their Greek neighbors. It shaped the persistent will of the Macedonian rulers to emulate Greek architecture, art, literature and thought, having created the cultural circumstances which predated Alexander the Great and his campaign. King Archelaus, who ruled from 413BC up to 399 BC, invited Socrates and the Athenian playwrights Agathos and Euripides to his court [I. Worthington, 2004:20]. Euripides wrote his plays *Bacchae* and *Archelaus* while residing in the Macedonian city of Pella [ibid.]. King Philip, Alexander’s father, honored Plato when he died. Plato was known to have benefitted from his special relationship with Macedonian kings. King Perdiccas III patronized Plato’s Academy. Plato was known for his pragmatic character and non-altruistic behavior, his fondness for drakhmas led him to the Macedonian connections. He used the Macedonian phil-Hellenism to gain financial support. At a time, preceding the rise of Alexander’s military campaign and his triumph, Macedonia became a genuine generous patron of Greek art and thought. King Philip used to invite the most outstanding and brightest Greek poets, playwrights and philosophers to the Macedonian Kingdom. Despite the regular clashes between the Greeks and Macedonians, the Greeks acknowledged the Macedonian efforts to promote and cultivate Greek heritage in their kingdom. The Macedonian kings were mesmerized by the Greek architecture, art, music, and philosophy and it was very flattering to the Greeks to see the desire to emulate and transplant their culture.

The collective cultural mimesis of the Macedonians lasted for centuries. The Slavic substratum was sustained by the populace, that is why the Slavic tongue would never disappear, nor their epos and mythology. By 400–350BC, the Macedonian court already imposed Greek as the language of the Kingdom in the presence of the Macedonian native tongue. The bilingual climate in Macedonia raised



the cultural level of the Kingdom and shaped its eventual pathway to the world military conquest under the banner of Hellenism. The proximity to the Greeks and observation of their cultural development inspired the Macedonian rulers to chart their political course, marked by the spread of Hellenism in the world. The Macedonians observed the Greek cultural edifice in making, acknowledging the differences and the superiority, as well as embarking on the ambitious goal of raising themselves to the same level. The post-modern attempts to explain Macedonian Hellenism by purely ethnic origins completely contradict the actual reality.

Macedonian rulers and ordinary people observed the Greek ethical and moral values and kept their own customs. Polygamy, long abandoned by the Greeks, was still practiced by the Macedonians. King Philip, as we mentioned earlier, was known to have seven wives without having divorced the previous six [I. Worshington, 2014:5]. While Greeks regarded polygamy and theological shifts signs of barbarism, the Macedonians used it for conquest. Alexander the Great was known to take “Persian customs to endear himself to his subjects” [ibid.:200]. King Philip and Alexander the Great had been in awe of Athens, the city that struck all with its beauty. Macedonians and Thracians did not possess such urban centers. The coming of Alexander to the historical and political arena occurred when Greeks could not fight their aggressive neighbors in face of Persia, Tyre and others. Macedonians, in contrast, infused their energy into the weakening Greek civilization. All the previous efforts of the cultural conversion by Kings Archelaus, Philip, Perdiccas III helped Alexander of Macedon to embark on the mission of spreading Hellenism and raised the status of Macedonians in the world.

Prior to exercising his historic mission, Alexander had a solid background in Hellenic culture and it was very flattering to the Greeks to observe the Macedonian cultural conversion. Many even regarded Macedonians as Greeks. Hesiod, Thucydides and even Strabo in the Roman times would make the same claims, but there was no unanimity of opinions, historic fictions coexisted with facts. Despite the philo-Hellenism of the Macedonian ruling elite, the populace maintained the Slavic tongue which they would carry into modernity and preserve it. The Greek language was spoken by many Macedonians in 315 BC, while the Macedonian-speaking population actively participated in the spread of Hellenism. Stanley Casson argued with confidence that Thessalonika was not a Greek colony (except under Olynthas) [1926:34]. Moreover, seventy Macedonian cities were located between the area of Olympos and Strymon, and only six had Greek and Roman foundation [ibid.:ibid.]. Herodotus never called Macedonians “barbarians” but claimed that Alexander of Macedon would have been excluded from the Olympic contests because he could not prove his descent from the Argive line [S. Casson, 1926:158].

## 5. Motivation for Military March

King Philip, Alexander's father, a philo-Hellene, who painstakingly tried to transplant the Hellenic civilization in Macedonia and educate the elite in the Greek manner, was convinced that the Greeks could not promote their own civilization and defend their statehood militarily themselves. At the moment of encountering Macedonians, Athens had reached the stage of readiness to deal with their neighbors via diplomacy. The differences in the civilizational organization justified their attitude towards their less advanced neighbors who adhered to the strategy of primitive militancy and aggressive use of force. Having in mind the ultimate unity and peace with Athens, King Philip encouraged his son, "talented strategist, logician" to embark on the military campaigns for the promotion of Hellenism.

Peter Tsouras, a post-modern biographer of Alexander the Great, informs that scholars have argued and debated Alexander's motivations— whether it was the ultimate proof of fascination with Hellenism or personal heroic frenzy and aggrandizement. The "inimitable" Alexander did not stop after his campaign in Egypt. After foundation of Alexandria, which immortalized his beginning of the "oriental campaign", it inspired him to conquer Babylon and India. His army marched to Maracanda/Samarkand and the river Syr Daria, he founded another Alexandria next to Khodzent and another in the Caucasus. "Alexander channeled his energies into his drive for glory and love of war," writes this post-modern biographer [2004:23]. Despite his diplomatic skills and clever manipulation of customs, religious rituals and attitudes of the conquered, Alexander fervently pursued his conquest ideal which he nurtured since childhood – his heroic march for the spread of Hellenism was his "Macedonian Iliad" which mesmerized the Greeks who granted him a semi-divine status while he was still alive, and many explained it by his alleged tribal belonging. His life-legend would eternally nourish the tribal mythology among the Macedonians and Greeks, bringing it into post-modernity.

**Conclusions.** Despite the millennia of "mixing and mingling," using Virgil's successful characterization of the mechanism of human cultural development, our confused 21<sup>st</sup> century is again obsessed with blood and belonging and cultural ownership. Throughout history, each tribe has been jealously guarding its cultural heroes, with the same intensity as its often disputable territorial borders.

The discourse about the ethnic origins of the cultural heroes now is as intense as in the past. Both legendary figures – Aristotle and his pupil Alexander the Great – continue to excite popular and scholarly imagination, tackling the impossible and futile task of defining the biogenesis.

Aristotle's thought and teaching have defied time, having become the shared cultural property of the enlightened humanity. His talented and eager student Alexander the Great, fascinated by the Greek legacy and raised on Hellenic heritage, immortalized the value of Hellenism during his historic conquests and has become the cultural property of both tribes, Greek and Macedonian. The tribal desire to claim unique ownership and determine the biogenesis has proven to be impossible and futile. Both names are now the universal permanent cultural signs, owned by all.

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