

2. Customs of the Ancient Macedonians in Macedonian National Tradition

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Abstract:

The impact of the methodological research of this paper is to highlight ancient Macedonian customs and their influence in the modern Republic of Macedonia. Rather than being altered, vestiges of the past are almost unchanged in some rural areas, as are Macedonian folk beliefs. Indigenous traditions of the ancient Macedonians abounded with numerous ritual activities, although to some extent correspond with the customs of other ancient peoples. However, these practices do have specific features that characterize the folk tradition of the ancient Macedonians interpreted and can be seen as guardians of the Macedonian identity. Although 2,000 years have passed from the ancient period to the present, and it is a bit hypothetical to interpret the rudiments of customs and celebrations from that time, we can allow ourselves to conclude that certain ritual actions from the ancient period, although modified, still largely correspond to the current Macedonian folk customs and beliefs, both in terms of the time of celebration and in terms of ritual actions, procedures and symbolism. Their continuity reflects the Macedonian identity, from antiquity to today.

Keywords:

Customs, beliefs, ancient Macedonian, Macedonian folk tradition, vestiges

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Introduction

Religion in Ancient Macedonia and all that it entailed (customs, ritual activities, holidays, religious, etc.), largely depended on location, which consisted of the territory of ancient Macedonia, "...country on the northern part of the Balkan Peninsula, north of Thessaly. From the east it is bordered by Thrace and Illyria from the west. It occupied areas on the basin of the river Axios, the present age,"¹ also referred to as "the country named Macedon,"² and the climatic conditions. According to historical records, the Macedonian people who lived as vassal tribes of the highlands were satisfied living in groups and spent the bulk of their time in the struggle for pasture land, "Dressed in sheep's wool, which he watched on mountains"³ and in securing farming, hunting and fishing grounds.⁴ Weather conditions depended on astronomical influences, and as well as the dependence on the fertility of the land they cultivated, contributed to the development of a series of rituals and customs that Macedonian farmers and herders observed at certain periods during the calendar year. Most of the customs related to holiday celebrations, as was the case in other ancient civilizations, were centered on four astronomical phenomena: spring and autumn equinoxes and winter and summer solstices. Certain customs are practiced in accordance with seasonal agricultural work, such as planting, and harvesting, while many other customs were associated with the circle of life: birth, new beginnings, weddings, and death.

Many indigenous customs and ritual activities of the ancient Macedonians, who according to Polybius had light hair, "The word ξάνθιον, τό, referring to a plant used to dye hair in yellow and mentioned in Diodorus Siculus as Xanthium Strumarium, a plant with broad leaves without stalk (Dsc.4.136, Gal.12.87), which in turn could connect with ξανθο-κάρηνος, ον, with yellow hair of Dionysus in Apollodorus. AP9.524.15; "Ξανθὸν ἐρεῦθεσθαι" AP12.97 (Antip.), and with golden hair in Homer's Iliad, ξ. κόμη, χρίτη, Il.1.197, 23.141 and Odyssey ξ.τρίχες Od.13.399,431",⁵ blue eyes and a

¹ Herodotus. *History*. (1998), Macedonian translation, 29.

² Herodotus. *History*. (1998), Macedonian translation, 47.

³ Arrian, L. F. (2000), *Alexander Anabasis*, Macedonian translation, 212.

⁴ Thomas, C. G. (2007), 138.

⁵ Liddell, H. G. and Scott, R. A. *Greek-English Lexicon*. Revised and augmented throughout by Sir Jones, H. S. with the assistance of McKenzie, R. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940; Diodorus Siculus (1903-1906) *Diodori Bibliotheca Historica*, Vol 4-5. Bekker, I., Dindorf, L., Vogel, F., Fischer, K. T., in aedibus Teubneri, B. G.. Leipzig. Keyboarding.

light complexion,⁶ were unique among nations in the ancient world, and some of them, although modified today in modern living, are still present among the Macedonian people.

Ancient Macedonian Customs and Folk Traditions

Although the act of pretending is not unheard of in ancient civilizations, they stand out in initiation ceremonies such as those to mark the transition from childhood into maturity and boyhood into manhood. The rituals of passage from childhood to maturity embracing young beardless boys, who through alterations in ritual female, such as dressing as a transvestite, implies the passage from being an immature child to a person with a defined gender.⁷ The characteristic thread of the ritual pretense was to dress the boys in an androgynous fashion, such as Dionysus who was known to appear in women's clothing, who according to legend was raised as a girl by the daughter of Cadmus, Inonu, which thus protected from Hera's jealousy. Ancient Greek mythological legends explaining the occurrence of transvestite boys. According to mythology, Theseus chose two boys with effeminate appearance and trained them to move and speak like girls, in order to replace the two girls convicted and to protect others.⁸ Hence, the rite of passage from childhood to maturity in the Republic of Macedonia was closely related to the observance of the cult of Dionysus. The ritual act of pretense can also be seen in Herodotus, as described by the Persians who came to the Macedonian king Amanita to demand land and water.⁹ Amanita invited them to attend a lavish banquet and they, to which they asked to be escorted by Macedonian girls. But Alexander, son of Amanita, did not allow the girls to be ravished and instead ordered several beardless boys to dress in female clothes and sit down with the Persians in disguise. When the Persians tried to defile what they believed were girls, the disguised boys jumped up and beat them.¹⁰

In the Republic of Macedonia, the ancient custom of pretending has been transported to modern society and is practiced today during the Christmas holidays, specifically in celebration of the holiday Vasilica during the "unbaptized days," which are the twelve days that fall between Christmas on January 7th and Vodici (Epiphany) on January 19th. In that period, according to various folk beliefs, various evil spirits enter the homes of those participating in holiday feasts and try to harm the people inside. In Gevgelija a city in southern R. of Macedonia, these days are known as Pugani days (Damn days), Ristosovi (Christ's) Days, and so on. According to the folklore, Christ was baptized during that time, having overcome the devil's attempts to deceive him so that he would not to be baptized and

⁶ Polyb. XXVIII, 8, 9.

⁷ Proeva, N. (2004), 132.

⁸ Srejovic, D., Cermanovic-Kuzmanovic, A. (1987), 401-406.

⁹ Proeva, N. (2004), 132.

¹⁰ Herodotus. *History*. Vol. V, 18-20.

therefore not to fulfill God's will.¹¹ The period of unbaptized days is filled with processions involving masked male actors dressed in female clothes, which the Macedonian nation refers to as Vasilcars, dzhalamari, Babar, and eshkari. A characteristic feature of the Vasilica holiday procession is made up of masked bachelors or married men younger who knew how to joke around.¹² In the past in Skopje, there were between 30 and 50 Vasilicas, of which there were four were "maskardzhii" ("men's with the masks") selected who were dressed up as the elderly, as a bride, and as Orval, while the other participants played the role of children or army, who acted out a real folk drama with clearly defined in advance roles in which good overcame evil. This drama shows the ritual symbolism of good's victory over evil, which according to popular belief should bring health to the house and an abundant agricultural harvest. In addition to the Vasilcars, there are other masked groups called Babar, who most frequently wear dress as a grandfather or an old man, often both, or as a grandmother and bride. These masks, moreover, are the bearers of the dramatic actions as they go around to the neighbors' houses, and are made to look like a parody of a village wedding, and in rare cases ritual plowing is down to symbolize the death and revival. In the past, ritualized death and revival was an obligatory action during the home visits of the Babars. One of the Babars fell "dead" on the floor and "came back to life" when the bride stepped over him and pretended to "pee" on him. The ritual death symbolized the end of the evil and barren days, while rebirth symbolized the birth of the new sun and the expulsion of those evil spirits.¹³

Ancient sources speak of how Macedonians enjoyed participating in the feasts, after which a trumpeter would signal that it was time to make a sacrifice to the gods.¹⁴ At these feasts it was customary to consume wine that was not mixed with water.¹⁵ They were described as being occasions in which to drink with the sole purpose of getting quite drunk,¹⁶ even to the point of near death.¹⁷ In modern Macedonia St. Tryphon is depicted as patron of the tavern keepers and as the protector of growers and gardeners. In Ohrid and Prilep he is even referred to Tryphon the Drunk. In Radovic one can drink for free in the taverns and the person who is the drunkest is elected "king of the drunks" for the rest of the year.¹⁸

Ancient Macedonian feast days including dancing that simulated the theft of livestock¹⁹ and a military dance called "telesia" that was performed with a sword.²⁰ The ancient Macedonian custom of

¹¹ Kovacheva, L. and Boceva, L. (2014), 234.

¹² Kovacheva, L. (2012), 133-134.

¹³ Kovacheva, L. and Boceva, L. (2014), 30-31.

¹⁴ Plutarch, Book 7, 51, Macedonian translation (2008), 159, 214.

¹⁵ Thomas, C. G. (2007), 50; Arian. *Alexander Anabasa*, IV, 8.

¹⁶ Athenaeus, III, 91.

¹⁷ Thomas, C. G. (2007), 50.

¹⁸ Kovacheva, L. and Boceva, L. (2014), 328.

¹⁹ Thomas, C. G. (2007), 50.

dancing with a sword is largely reminiscent of today's dance of the "Rusaliis", which is still practiced in the modern Republic of Macedonia during the unbaptized days. K. Shapkarev offers a detailed description of the "Rusaliis", in the southern part of Macedonia. The "Rusaliis" group comprised an even number, between 20 to 30 boys or men 20 to 40 years of age or 10 to 30 girls. Each group had its own musicians and drummers. The groups went from house to house performing "Rusaliis" dances and collecting money or gifts which were then allocated to a newly built church. During those 12 days, the "Rusaliis" lived on strict rules, such as not being permitted to shake hands, to baptize, to turn their back, to sleep with women, to drink wine, to walk in the water, or to enter the house where there was a nursing mother because she still considered unclean. The "Rusaliis" dances ended the feast of the Eve of Epiphany, when upon returning to the village they first went to church for prayer with raised sabers and came out of the church with sabers facing down.²¹ The magical and ritual act of the dancing is demonstrated by the "Rusaliis" waiving their swords in the air. A cross above the door symbolized that a household member was ill, and three of the "Rusaliis" would go to the house and cross their sabers over the patient's head, thus symbolically scaring and chasing the disease away. If a child was ill in the house, they would take it in their arms and dance with it, which again symbolically chased disease the disease away.²²

The legend of Demir Hisar (Iron Castle) is of great importance for the continuity of the Macedonian customs from the ancient period to the present. Today along the railroad leading to Demir Hisar are remains of an old castle or fortress overlooking the gorge in which the city is situated. The fortress is thought to have belonged to King Philip V of Macedonia, among the ruins of which a large stone jar was discovered, popularly known as "the wealth of Philip." On the rocky bank of the local river there are two stones, which according to legend the two princesses of Philip used to wash their clothes.²³ The custom is described in the elegiac Macedonian folk song "Biljana Bleached Cloth," a custom that marks the continuity of the Macedonian folk tradition from the distant past to the present.

There are numerous sources offer a partial account of the holiday celebrations, customs and rules of the ancient Macedonians, but they are lacking interpretation. It is assumed that when Bakht wrote the tragedy of Euripides it was inspired by the Macedonian way of life that he encountered during his stay in the Macedonian capital of Pella, invited by the Macedonian king Archelaus.²⁴

²⁰ Proeva, N. (2004), 134.

²¹ Kitevski, M. (1996), 40-43.

²² Kovacheva, L. (2012), 131-132.

²³ Abbot, G. F. (1903), 279.

²⁴ Thomas, C. G. (2007), 50.

Conclusion

Ancient records testify that the Ancient Macedonians had much love, respect, and devotion to their customs. Loyalty to the king was unlimited as well as the carefully guarded awareness of belonging only to the Macedonian nation. They took pride in their origin, their language and religion and firmly held onto Macedonian folk customs, as evidenced by Quintus C. Rufus: "Macedonians must not forget the language and customs of their ancestors. The uniqueness of their language was one of the ways to distinguish themselves from the citizens of the Hellenic city-states. They are therefore proud." The testimony of Q. C. Rufus attributed to the speech of Philo, who, when he was commanded to talk back to somebody else, not in their native language, i.e. Macedonian, which was accused by Alexander of Macedonia with the words: "Now you will judge you Macedonians ... [...] But let him speak as he pleases, and you remember that he is equally alienated from our customs and our language." After Alexander said it he left the gathering.²⁵

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²⁵ Rufus, Q. C. *History of Alexander the Macedonian*. Macedonian translation (2008), 43-44.

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