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Alexander the Great in Macedonian folk traditions

GUENDALINA DANIELA MARIA TAIETTI
University of Liverpool

Abstract

This paper focuses on the figure of Alexander the Great in a set of Macedonian folk traditions circulating in Northern Greece in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Macedonian Alexander-folk traditions represent a peculiar set among the other Hellenic folk accounts, because they convey chiefly the idea of familiarity with the hero, who seems to be still living and influencing the people's everyday life. This bond – almost a mutual ownership between Alexander and the Macedonians – is in fact constantly highlighted by the choice of the themes treated, such as the attribution of monuments to the great conqueror and the use of his historical and mythical persona to explain local customs, features of the landscape, or toponyms. Moreover, (pseudo-)aetiologies, etymologies, and/or descriptions of facts of local interest populate these narratives which, according to their content and purpose, are here grouped into two main categories, geographical and aetiological, and into two subcategories, geographico-aetiological and aetiologico-mythological. The aim here is confined to the discussion, the categorisation, and the translation into English of the Macedonian Alexander-traditions; I hope that this paper will make this notable and lively material accessible to a wider public and help the preservation of its memory.

Keywords: Alexander the Great; Classical Reception; Reception Studies; Hellenic Folklore; Macedonian Folklore

Alexander the Great in Macedonian folk traditions

Together with myths and folk tales, traditions are amongst the most productive genres of the Greek folkloristic production on Alexander.[1] Notwithstanding the different scholarly attempts made to clarify the core features of each of these genres, a common consensus has not yet been reached internationally.[2]

According to the terminology adopted in this paper, a myth is a story which usually involves gods, heroes, and exemplary figures who lived in a far away, undefined past; yet the events described still matter for a certain community living in historical times. Myths are thus handed down orally within a group of people who feel these narrations to be important, by reason of both their entertaining nature and their cultural bearing: in a way, they hoard information on the life, customs, and beliefs of the ancestors (Burkert, 1982, pp. 23; Bremmer, 1987, p. 7; Dowden, 1992, p. 120).

A folk tale is to be understood as an amusing, comforting, didactic, and often moralising account which deals with the ethical values, aspirations, hopes, longings, and social dilemmas of a community. The protagonists are common figures, often described with stereotyped names. Even when the characters are granted extraordinary powers by luck or magic, or when they are presented as humanised animals, the community is still able to identify itself with them and, at the same time, to amuse itself, thanks to the introduction of various fabulous elements into a familiar geographical setting (Kyriakidis, 1965, p. 265; Kirk, 1970, pp. 38-40; Bremmer, 1987, p. 6; Dowden, 1992, pp. 4-5).

1 To these genres, there could be added vernacular poems, sayings, spells, theatrical plays, and folk art and songs. Worth mentioning are the Karaghiozis shadow-theatre play *ο Μεγαλέξαντρος και ο καταραμένος όφις/το καταραμένο φίδι*, (*Alexander the Great and the cursed dragon/snake*) and the demotic songs, mainly reworkings of famous Greek ballads in which the usual protagonist is substituted or flanked by the Macedonian conqueror.

2 For an overview of the scholarly discussion on the definition of mythology and its distinction from folklore, see Kirk (1970, pp. 1-41); Hadjitaki–Kapsomenou (2002, pp. 32-44).

Folk traditions deal with a set of historical people and facts which are a source of pride for a community. They are a treasure-trove of moral and religious values for new generations, they help the conservation of historical and mythological cultural baggage, and they explain the features of the surrounding reality (Hadjitaki–Kapsomenou, 2002, pp. 35-36).[3] As much as folk tales and myths, traditions are also product of the popular imagination and myth-making capacity, but they are felt as unquestionably true (Kyriakidis, 1965, p. 168; Ioannou, 1973, p. 8): protagonists are national heroes, common people, and sometimes personified natural phenomena which characterise the life of the community; the plot evolves in a historical time and within a geographical background which the community is acquainted with.

This paper focuses on the figure of Alexander the Great in a set of Macedonian folk traditions circulating in Northern Greece in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The study is part of a wider research project investigating the role that the Macedonian hero played in Neo-Hellenic folkloristic production; in fact, numerous folk accounts are still transmitted orally today in little towns and villages of the Greek-speaking world, and their diffusion covers a great number of regions of Modern Greece, such as Thrace, Thessaly, Epirus, the Ionian Islands, Laconia, Naxos and Crete, and of Turkey (Eastern Thrace and Pontus).[4] Moreover, it is worth noticing that similar accounts on Alexander's deeds are also attested in small communities in Romania and FYROM, due to the general influence of Hellenic culture in the Balkans, and to human interactions and circulation of ideas in bordering lands. The aim of this paper here is confined to the discussion, the categorisation, and the translation into English of the Alexander-traditions developed and attested in Macedon, for this region has a predominant position: it represents the great conqueror's motherland and his cultural and political

3 See also Kyriakidis (1965, pp. 168-173), who divides folk traditions into four categories, according to the function they are bestowed: 1. mythological and personifications; 2. historical; 3. aetiological; 4. religious. The division followed in this paper is different, since it is based on Macedonian folk material only.

4 In the last two decades of the nineteenth century the founder of Greek folklore, Nikolaos Politis, and his collaborators gave way to the collection and systematisation of folk material by travelling throughout Greece and asking elderly people to recount their traditions and tales; the traditions here examined are based on Politis and his collaborators' transcriptions and records. For the various methods of collection of folktales adopted by folklorists, see Thompson (1977, pp. 406-412).

background. I hope that this paper will make this notable and lively material accessible to a wider public and help the preservation of its memory.

The Macedonian Alexander-folk traditions represent a peculiar set among the Hellenic folk production: they outnumber the folk narratives from the other Greek lands and they convey chiefly the idea of familiarity with the hero, who seems to be still living and influencing people's everyday life. This bond —almost a mutual ownership— between Alexander and the Macedonians is in fact constantly highlighted by the choice of the themes treated, such as the attribution of monuments to the great conqueror and the use of his historical and mythical persona to explain features of the Macedonian landscape, geographical names, or folk customs. Moreover, (pseudo-)aetiologies, etymologies, and/or descriptions of facts of local interest populate these narratives which, according to their content and purpose, are here grouped into two main categories, geographical and aetiological, and into two subcategories, geographico-aetiological and aetiologico-mythological.

1 Why is Alexander a folk hero?

Alexander had already become mythical during his lifetime: according to the ancient historians, during his childhood his parents fostered in him a strenuous admiration for his heroic ancestry;[5] moreover, his recognition as the son of Zeus-Ammon, duly supported by the intellectuals of his entourage,[6] played an important role in the empowerment of his political agenda and plan of conquest. The insistence on Alexander's alleged descent from Zeus and his heroic status grows bigger in the descriptions of the events in India, as a way to excuse some of his risky or irrational decisions: the attack to the Aornos Rock was thus undertaken to outdo Heracles, who had failed in the attempt,[7] and the *bacchanalia*

5 Plu. *Alex*. 2. 1-2: Alexander was an Heraclid from his father's side and an Aeacid from his mother's side; cf. D. S. XVII. 1. 5.

6 Callisthenes, *FGrH* 124, F14a (= Str. XVII. 1. 43).

7 D. S. XVII. 85. 2. See also Arr. *An*. IV. 29. 7-30.1.

in Carmania to imitate Dionysus.[8] In 324 B.C., close to the end of his life, Alexander was also recognised as θεὸς ἀνίκητος (*invincible god*)[9] by the Greeks living on the mainland, a title which he gained as an acknowledgment of his numerous victories, bravery, and the great military acumen displayed during his campaign.[10] Immediately after his death, his idolisation reached new dimensions with the flourishing of numerous legends about his sayings and deeds.[11] Notwithstanding the disputable historicity of these narrations, Greeks welcomed this legendary material as if true and perpetuated it for centuries.[12]

If we compare Kirk's list of the twenty-four most common themes in ancient Greek heroic and divine mythology (Kirk, 1970, pp. 187-189) with the Hellenistic and early Imperial[13] traditions on Alexander, thirteen contact points can be seen. In the same way as many ancient Greek gods and heroes, Alexander has an unusual birth (no. 23),[14] either because of the strange phenomena which characterised his conception and his natal

8 Plu. *De Alex*. I. 10 (= *Mor.* 332A); Arr. *An*. VI. 28. 1-2. Arrian doubts the veracity of Alexander's Bacchic pomp; nevertheless, the passage – even if invented by a later source – still proves the importance of Dionysus in Alexander's campaign in India. See also Goukowsky (1981, pp. 32-33).

9 The idea that Alexander was invincible was already growing in the Greeks' mindset at an earlier stage of his life: Plutarch (*Alex*. 14. 4) describes the Macedonian's visit to Delphi in order to consult the oracle before his Persian campaign. Since Alexander arrived during the so called ἀποφράδες ἡμέραι – days on which no business was done, Pythia did not want to deliver the oracle; thus he tried to drag her to the temple. At this point, overwhelmed by his ardour (σπουδή) and on the spur of the moment, the priestess said that he was invincible: ἀνίκητος εἶ, ὦ παῖ. Cf. D. S. XVIII. 51. 3, who sets the story in Libya, where the oracle of Ammon bestowed Alexander the title of *invincible* (Tarn, 1948, pp. 342-343; Gouwkosky, 1978, pp. 60-61).

10 Hyperides, *Against Demosthenes*, fr. 7. Mossé (2004, pp. 81-82) highlights that the acknowledgment of Alexander's divinity by the Greeks was not a religious act, but simply a political one.

11 For a discussion on the chronology of the legendary material on Alexander contained in the Vulgate and in the various recensions of the *Alexander Romance*, see Stoneman (1991, pp. 8-17). For the Diadochs' emulation and use of the image of Alexander in their political agenda, see Goukowsky (1978, pp. 116-135); Dahmen (2007, pp. 9-18).

12 For the Ancient Greeks' attitude towards their myths, see Veyne (1988, p. 60): for the Greeks, a mythic tradition is true despite the marvellous; they sought a kernel of truth behind the lies.

13 With 'early Imperial' I mean the Greek literary production during the first three centuries of the Roman Empire.

14 Numbers refer to Kirk's list.

day,[15] or because of Olympias' recourse to Nectanebo's magic in order to conceive a baby.[16] Alexander's longing for the unknown leads him to undertake a long campaign, which encompasses city foundations (no. 17),[17] contests (no. 7),[18] revenge (no. 11),[19] the quest for (no. 6) —and the loss of— immortality because of his deceitful daughter (no. 14).[20] Furthermore, during his peregrinations Alexander has to solve riddles and to find promptly ingenious solutions to problems (no. 1),[21] he goes through transformations and disguises (no. 2),[22] he meets imaginary people living in fabulous far-away places, and he fights against monsters (no. 4).[23]

In ancient lore, the Macedonian is generally considered pious: he reveres the gods, he takes care of the displacement of both his enemies and kinsmen (no. 9),[24] and his death is regrettably foretold by prophecies and seers he trusts (no. 19).[25] On the other hand, his excessive desire for conquest is considered hubristic (no. 8),[26] and he accidentally kills his friend Cleitus (no. 3) because of an incomplete sacrifice.[27]

This comparison shows that during the Hellenistic and the early Imperial period Alexander was deeply transformed into a myth, one destined to last in the Greek tradition. In fact, the core of the story which later became known as Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance* started being developed around the third-second centuries B.C. and flourished particularly in the third century AD. During these six centuries, the narrative of the *Romance* was constantly enriched with new legendary

15 See Plu. *Alex*. 2-4.
16 Ps.-Call., *Alexander Romance* (recension α), I. 4-7 [hereafter: *AR* (α)].
17 Plu. *De Alex*. I. 5 (= *Mor.* 328E); *AR* (α) III. 35.
18 *AR* (α) I. 18-19: Alexander's travel to Italy (Pisa) to compete in the Olympic games.
19 Arr. *An*. II. 14. 4: revenge on the Persians for having burnt the Acropolis in the fifth century B.C. during the Persian wars against Greece; cf. *AR* (α) I. 23.
20 Ps.-Call., *Alexander Romance* (recension β, MS L), II. 39-41[hereafter: *AR* (β)]; cf. *AR* (α) II. 39-40.
21 *AR* (α) III. 5-6; *AR* (β) II. 23.
22 *AR* (α) II. 14-15; III. 22-23.
23 D. S. XVII. 77. 1-3; *AR* (β) II. 23-44.
24 D. S. XVII. 69. 3. *AR* (β) II. 21; cf. *AR* (α) II. 21.
25 *AR* (α) III. 24; III. 30; *AR* (β) II. 44.
26 *AR* (α) II. 40.
27 Plu. *Alex*. 50-51.

facts and curious details about the Macedonian's life and campaign, in consonance with the great interest roused by the exoticism, *mirabilia*, and the lives of sages and holy men (Stoneman, 1991, pp. 8-17).[28] This hodgepodge of curiosities, mythology and historical events was not forgotten but, on the contrary, further developed in the Byzantine[29] and Ottoman periods through the *Rhimada* and the *Phyllada of Alexander* (Holton, 1973). These narrations kept alive in the Greeks' memory the image of a heroic Alexander, who in the nineteenth century was then ready to become the protagonist of different narrative genres of the Modern Greek folk production.

2 Macedonian folk traditions

2.1 Geographical traditions

Geographical traditions are oral accounts which link Alexander the Great to a place familiar to the community, to a specific manmade infrastructure, ruins, archaeological sites, and bridges, or to natural elements, such as mountains, rivers, and water springs. These attributions, scattered throughout the Macedonian landscape, are kept alive especially among peasants living in small villages, where one can trace a greater tendency to ascribe buildings and areas to a blurred ancient era *when Philip II, Alexander III, and Heracles ruled Macedon* (Abbott 1903, p. 279).

(a) In the province of Grevena (Western Macedon), a local tradition maintains that on the banks of the river Venetikos traces can be found of Bucephalus' horseshoes on a rock close to the stone bridge (Spyridakis, 1953, pp. 388).[30] They were left there when Alexander passed from the

28 For the literary production of the culturally thriving Hellenistic period, see Whitmarsh (2010).

29 Vasilikopoulou-Ioannidou (2015): Alexander the Great is considered the first king of all the Greeks and, therefore, the ancestor of the Byzantine Emperors.

30 Many geographical traditions featuring Alexander and his horse are attested in Greece; for now, it will suffice to compare the Venetikos tradition with the one attested in Philippi and in Polythea (Thessaly), where people claim that they can still see the traces of Bucephalus' horseshoes and his manger (τὰ ἴχνη τῶν πετάλων καὶ τῆς πάχνης).

area and crossed the river on horseback with a single leap. The animal's imprints are a matter of pride for the locals, for they provide "solid evidence" of the hero's passage in their region, which allows them to partake in his glorious deeds.

With his long jump from one bank to the other of the river, Alexander is subtly presented as a heroic, gigantic figure gifted with supernatural powers, in the tradition of the Ancient Γίγαντες (*Giants*), the Byzantine Ἀντρειωμένοι (*Antreiomenoi*, "the valorous, brave ones"), and the Modern Σαραντάπηχοι (*Sarantapechoi*, literally "those as tall as forty cubits", i.e. the very tall ones), whose footprints on the soil "are traced" in different areas of the Greek countryside (Kyriakidis, 1965, pp. 176-178).

(b) The inhabitants of Stavros of Chalcidice (about thirty km far from Amphipolis) maintain that the mountain stretching above their village belongs to the Macedonian hero, and they call it Βουνὸ τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου, *Mountain of Alexander*, (Abbot, 1903, p. 280; Spyridakis, 1953, p. 388). They also interpret columns found in the surroundings as the ruins of Alexander's νομισματοκοπεῖον, the mint "he built" there time ago. As Abbott has noticed, the attribution of the mountain to Alexander is entirely appropriate in a district already associated with his tutor and his mother: Stavros is geographically very close to Olympiada, a village bearing his mother's name, and, more crucially, to Stageira, Aristotle's birthplace.[31] On the other hand, I would argue that reference to the mint in the Chalcidice area goes beyond folk associations and is based on a solid historical kernel: Philip II is famous for having taken great advantage of the mint of Amphipolis, and Alexander followed his fathers minting policy and types probably until 332 B.C.[32] The great conqueror's first coins were silver tetradrachms with the head of a beardless Heracles on the obverse, and an eagle or an enthroned Zeus on the reverse, in line with the symbols of power already long established in the

31 Olympiada is about thirteen km far from Stavros; Stageira ca. fifteen km.

32 See Troxell (1997, pp. 86-89); cf. Le Rider (2007, p. 41): "gold and silver coins with the name and types of Philip II would have constituted Alexander's principal currency between October 336 B.C. and April 334 B.C.". For an overview of the scholarly debate about the chronology of Alexander's first coins, see Le Rider (2007, pp. 8-19).

iconography of Macedonian royal coinage (Kremydi, 2011, pp. 161-168; Price 1991, pp. 30-31); furthermore, archaeological excavations have proved that the Amphipolis mint constituted the most important one in Macedon during the first years of Alexander's Persian campaign.[33]

(c) On the way from Drama to Cavala, near the archaeological site of Philippi, a group of four small columns is acknowledged by the locals as τὸ Παλάτι τοῦ Μεγάλου Ἀλεξάνδρου (*the Palace of Alexander the Great*). At Drama, the inhabitants maintain that the palace of Alexander the Great can be found there (Abbott, 1903, p. 279).[34] The attribution of ruins in Eastern Macedonia to Alexander is, as in the case of Stavros discussed before, a natural choice in an area rich in archaeological sites closely related to the Macedonian kingdom. Specifically, Philippi is a colony built by Philip II in 356 B.C. on the site of the Thasian city Krenides, which had called upon the Macedonian king for help against the Thracian threat.[35]

Moreover, according to one of the numerous traditions concerning the toponym Cavala, the name commemorates Alexander's taming of Bucephalus and is derived etymologically from the Late-Latin word for horse, *caballus*.[36] The story is that, in order to win the steed's trust, the Macedonian took it for a ride eastwards, since he had noticed that it was afraid of its own shadow.[37] Only when they reached Cavala was Bucephalus completely tamed.

33 See Troxell (1997, pp. 19-40) for a list of Amphipolis issues dated ca. 332-310 B.C.; p. 73 for the list of hoards containing Amphipolis silver Alexanders; pp. 86-90: Troxell argues that some of the coins normally attributed by the scholarship to the Amphipolis mint might be assigned to a mint in Philippi. Notwithstanding this, a mint in Philippi does not undermine the argument: the site is close enough to Stavros of Chalcidice and it is highly possible that in the folk memory the two mints have been merged together.

34 Cf. this tradition with the "historical" folk tale from Alistrate (Serres), which ascribes the area to the kingdoms of Philip and Darius, providing a folk etymology for the name of the inhabitants, Darnakides. The tale also links Drama and the toponym Cavala to Alexander; cf. Spyridakis (1953, pp. 386-387).

35 D. S. XVI. 8. 6-7.

36 For an overview of the different etymologies put forward for the name Cavala, see Lykourinos (2005, pp. 71-72).

37 Plu. *Alex*. 6. 3.

(d) Τὰ Λουτρὰ τοῦ Μεγάλου Ἀλεξάνδρου (*the thermal baths of Alexander the Great*) is the name given to a stone complex belonging to the water-mill used by the *Colonia Pella*, the colony founded by Octavian in 30 B.C., 1.5 km from the Macedonian's birthplace (Chrysostomou, 1995, p. 117). When the tank of the Roman thermal baths was cleared during archaeological excavations in the 1970s, a huge quantity of coins of different eras was found, including 4,500 ancient ones and many issued by the Hellenic Republic. This heterogeneous coinage certifies that in Pella the custom of throwing coins in the hope that a wish would be granted by the divinity started centuries ago; in modern times, locals appointed Alexander as the lord of the hot springs, having forgotten their Roman origin (Chrysostomou, 1995, p. 118).

2.2 Geographico-aetiological traditions

The following geographico-aetiological traditions make use of the image of Alexander to explain and describe the natural and architectonic elements which shape the surrounding landscape. These accounts present the Macedonian taking active part in the erection of new buildings, in order to embellish the environment or to commemorate an important event. The "Alexander the strenuous builder" folk motif has its archetype in the ancient narratives of the Alexander-historians, who highlighted the pains that the Macedonian conqueror took in the majestic foundation of Alexandria of Egypt, and his eagerness to found new cities as landmarks during his campaign in the Eastern regions of the Achaemenid Empire.[38]

(a) In the plain of Serres, two big rocks are called Πέτρες τοῦ Μεγάλου Ἀλεξάνδρου by the inhabitants of the town of Nigrita, for they believe that Alexander had cast them there "when god still ἀξίωνε τοὺς ἀντρειωμένους (*considered the antreiomenoi worthy*)" – as muleteers of the region used to say (Abbott, 1903, p. 280; Kyriakidis, 1965, pp.

38 For the foundation of Alexandria of Egypt, see Plu. *Alex*. 26. 3-10; Arr. *An*. III. 1. 5-2. 2. For Alexander's numerous city-foundations, see Plu. *De Alex*. I. 5 (= *Mor.* 328E) and *AR* (α) III. 35; cf. D. S. XVIII. 4. 3-4 for the Macedonian's last plans.

176-178).[39] This tradition underlines once again the Macedonian hero's abiding presence in the area: in fact, "Alexander's Rocks" are important not insomuch as they have reshaped the landscape, but because they are an eternal reminder of his heroic physical strength, for he was able to lift and cast these two big stones. This is made clear by the association between Alexander and the *antreiomenoi*.

Heroic deeds and an implacable superhuman force make of Alexander almost one of the mythological giants, the oversized creatures who dared to wage war against the Olympian gods. This underlying resemblance constitutes a common trend in demotic songs on Alexander and Diogenes Akritas of the Byzantine period (around the tenth and the eleventh centuries and after), and it happens in Modern Greek folk tales as well: the two national heroes are said to have the power to lift mountains or to knock down trees, and are characterised by excessive reactions and gluttony (ἀδηφαγία).[40]

(b) In the small village of Aghios Basileios (close to Lake Koroneia, South-East of Laghadas), the ruins of a Byzantine tower are still visible to the passer-by. According to local tradition, the tower was erected by Alexander in the exact place where his daughter's wedding was celebrated. This account is peculiar for two reasons: first, a private event in the Macedonian hero's life is the occasion of the erection of a tower that changes the landscape of the village; secondly, the nature of the "private event" itself. The report that Alexander celebrated his daughter's wedding is not only an almost unique reference to the Macedonian king's family life, but also one of the rare allusions to the existence of a daughter. In fact, in folk traditions Alexander normally appears to be childless, while historical accounts attest that he had two sons. The first one, Heracles,[41] was born in 327 B.C., his mother being Barsine,[42] a Persian

39 These traditions on gigantic figures spring from the belief that ancient times were better and happier than the present, since they were populated by heroic figures. This seems to be a seamless motif in Greek literature: Hesiod's mythological giants become the Akrites and the Antreiomenoi of the Byzantine period, who then evolve into the Modern Sarantapechoi.

40 For example, cf. Alexander's deeds in Minotos & Kyriakidis (1953, pp. 687-688, n. 1; p. 692, n. 9), with the giants in Politis (1975, p. 145); Kyriakidis, (1965, pp. 176-178).

41 Berve (1926, p. 168, n. 353); Heckel (2008, p. 139).

42 Berve (1926, pp. 102-104, n. 206); Heckel (2008, p. 70).

princess, daughter of the satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia Artabazus II, and the ex-wife of Memnon of Rhodes, the commander of the Greek mercenaries in the service of the Persians. After the battle of Issus in 333 B.C., Barsine was captured in Damascus by Parmenio and Alexander decided to take her as a concubine, not only for her political status, but also appreciating her beauty and her profound Greek education.[43] In the aftermath of the great conqueror's death, Heracles was backed as a pretender to the throne by his brother-in-law Nearchus,[44] who was married to Barsine's first daughter,[45] the young boy and his mother were eventually killed by Cassander around 309/308 B.C.[46]

The *Metz Epitome* informs us that the Macedonian hero, while still in the Indus River valley in 326 B.C., had a second child by Rhoxane,[47] the daughter of Oxyartes, the Persian ruler in Sogdiana. This child is said to have died soon after his birth.[48] Rhoxane was pregnant for a second time in 323 B.C.[49] and, a little after Alexander III's death, she gave birth to Alexander IV (Heckel, 2008, pp. 18-19) who, being the only legitimate son of the great conqueror, was designated to reign alongside his uncle Philip III by the Macedonian army at Babylon.[50] In ca. 311 B.C., Alexander IV and his mother were assassinated by the ambitious Cassander, who wished to eliminate Alexander III's offspring in order to put an end to the Argead dynasty and take control of the kingdom of Macedon himself.[51]

The earliest precedent for an allusion to Alexander III's fictional daughter comes in the first letter addressed to Olympias in the β version of the *Alexander Romance*.[52] In this letter, the conqueror tells his mother about the journey to the Land of Darkness and how his unfaithful and

43 Plu. *Alex*. 21. 4. Cf. Just. XI. 10. 2-3.
44 C. X. 6. 10-12.
45 Arr. *An*. VII. 4. 6.
46 D. S. XX. 28. 1-2; Just. XV. 2. 3.
47 Berve (1926, pp. 346-347, n. 688); Heckel (2008, pp. 241-242).
48 *Metz Epitome*, 70.
49 Curtius (X. 6. 9) says that Rhoxane was six months pregnant at the time of Alexander III's death, whereas Justin (XIII. 2. 5) states that she was in her eight month.
50 Just. XIII. 4. 1-3.
51 D. S. XIX. 105. 2; Just. XV. 2. 5.
52 *AR* (β) II. 41.

cowardly cook Andreas had found by chance the Source of Life, long coveted by Alexander. The story is that when the army reached a place where the air was less dark and fragrant, the cook was sent to prepare food and, upon washing dried fishes in a clear spring, he noticed that, once rinsed with that water, they came back to life.[53] Fearing his king's reaction, he decided to keep what had happened secret, but, before leaving the place, he drank from the spring and stored some of the water in a silver vessel. When Alexander discovered his secret, the cook was punished severely; angered by this, Andreas decided to give the remaining water of life contained in the vessel to Kale, Alexander's daughter.

Kale and her mother Ounna, one of Alexander's concubines, are fictional characters unknown to the Alexander-historians of the first and second generation; but the Macedonian's siblings, relatives, and concubines often populate Hellenic folklore and play an especially prominent role in the copious versions of the Mermaid and Nereid tales, which have their archetype in the Late Antique/Proto-Byzantine β recension of the *Alexander Romance*. In fact, the Mermaid and the Nereid folk tales start from Pseudo-Callisthenes' story of Alexander's quest for immortality through the pursuit of the water of life. In the version featuring the Mermaid, the hero's sister, not knowing what the liquid is, pours it on wild onions and – either because of her distress when she understands her mistake, or because the conqueror curses her – she turns into a fish from her waist down and goes to live in the sea. In the Nereid version, Alexander's sisters steal his water of life, drink some, and bathe in the rest. Having turned into immortal fairies, they live in woods on the mountains.[54]

In *AR* (β) II. 41, Alexander confesses to his mother his distress at having missed the magic water of life, and he admits that *he cursed his daugh-*

53 The dried fish coming back to life is an overarching motif in the Greek mindset: attested already in the fifth century B.C. in the Herodotean account of the prophecy of Artayctes' end (Hdt. IX. 120), it reappears in Pseudo-Callisthenes' narration and via the *Romance* it finds its place into modern folklore. One famous example is the Thracian demotic song featuring Alexander the Great and Mikrokonstantinos drinking and eating together at the time of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. In the song, the fish coming back to life is a symbol of the fall of the city into the enemy's hands.

54 For a discussion of the Mermaid/Nereid tales, see Nikolaides (1899, pp. 226-230); Spyridakis (1953, pp. 404-414).

ter and the cook out of envy of their immortality:

> "λαβοῦσά σου τὸν ἱματισμὸν ἔξελθε τοῦ προσώπου μου· ἰδοὺ γὰρ γέγονας δαίμων ἀπαθανατισθεῖσα. Καλὴ μὲν τῷ ὀνόματι ἐκλήθης, ἀρτίως δὲ καλέσω σε Καλὴν τῶν ὀρέων, ὅτι ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῦ λοιποῦ κατοικήσεις. ἔσῃ δὲ κεκλημένη Νεραΐδα, ὡς ἐκ τοῦ νεροῦ τὰ ἀΐδια δεξαμένη, τουτέστιν τὰ ἀθάνατα."
> […].
> τὸν δὲ μάγειρον προσέταξα δεθῆναι μύλον ἐν τῷ τραχήλῳ αὐτοῦ καὶ ῥῖψαι αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ θαλάσσῃ. ὁ δὲ ῥιφεὶς ἐγένετο δαίμων καὶ ἀπελθὼν κατῴκησεν ἔν τινι τόπῳ τῆς θαλάσσης.
>
> [Alexander says to his daughter:] "Take your clothes and get out of my sight; see there, you have become an immortal spirit. You were called Kale, and now I shall call you Kale of the mountains and the hills, as from now on you shall dwell there. You will be called Nereid, for from water you received the gift of immortality." […].
> As for the cook, I ordered that he had a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea. He thereupon became a spirit himself and went away to live in a corner of the sea.
>
> [*AR* (β) II. 41; translation by Stoneman, 1991].

From a comparison between the folk-tale and what appears in Pseudo-Callisthenes, it follows that the Nereid tale is based on Kale's story, as it presents all the main motifs: i) the stealing of the water of life, ii) the curse, iii) the transformation into an immortal fairy, and iv) the mountains. It is interesting to notice that in Macedonian folklore, Kale/Kalo (Κυρία Κάλω) has become the leader of the Nereids,[55] who are said to bring hurricanes and to steal at night σημαδεμένα κορίτσια, girls with a "special mark" of beauty or, more frequently, of ugliness; people can calm their peevishness only by assuring them that Alexander is still alive.[56]

55 Stoneman (1991, p. 193, fn. 87); Henkelman (2009, p. 338, fn. 67; p. 339, fn. 69).

56 Nikolaides (1899, p. 227). Variants of the spell and of the Nereid tale, which feature witches and other minor deities of nature, are also attested in Thessaly and in the Ionian Islands: Spyridakis (1953, p. 409, n. 6).

By contrast, the Mermaid tale shares motifs of the cook's story: in addition to the theft of the water and the curse, there is metamorphosis into a sea daemon and eternal dwelling in the sea.

2.3 Aetiological traditions

In Hellenic aetiological traditions the presence of the Macedonian hero is required to give the reason for a certain phenomenon or custom. These accounts often share the same motifs present in the *Alexander Romance* and developed in folk tales and myths, such as the quest for immortality, gigantic strength, Bucephalus' supernatural features, Olympias' difficulty in remaining pregnant, and a confused memory of the Macedonian's relationships with Philip, Darius, and Rhoxane. Nonetheless Alexander's historical semblance is pursued through his acting for a definite purpose within a defined community.

A folk tradition about women gifted with great courage is attested both in Macedonia, in the area called Roumlouki of Emathia (Ρουμλούκι Ημαθίας) around Yiannitsa, and in Southern Thessaly, at Pharsala and Sophades.[57] The inhabitants of these small towns claim that, when the Macedonian army lost bravery at the sight of the enemy and the soldiers started to withdraw from battle, the women stood up and promptly helped Alexander to win the fight. For this reason, the Macedonian conqueror ordered the men to wear kerchiefs and women to put on helmets.

Through a role reversal, which portrays humiliated soldiers with female scarves and honoured women with a *perikephalaia*, the ancient helmet, this oral account provides a curious explanation of the peculiar hairstyle and headdress of the women living in Pharsala, Sophades, and in the area of Roumlouki. I give here the Thessalian version of the folk tradition, entitled *ἡ βασιλιᾶς Ἀλέξαντρους καὶ οἱ Καραγκούνισσις* (*King Alexander and the Karaghounisses*).[58]

57 Politis (1904, p. 640, n. 8).

58 The Thessalian version is provided because already attested on paper by Politis (1904, p. 6, n. 8. Karaghounides is the name of the inhabitants of Eastern Thessaly.

Τοὺν παλαιὸ κιρό, εἶχι μιὰ φρουρὰ ἡ βασιλιᾶς Ἀλέξαντρους πολέμου ἰκεῖ κατ' τὰ Φέρσαλα. Οἱ Θεσσαλοὶ ποῦ ἤντασαν μαζί του ἦρθι στιγμὴ κ' ἰδείλιασαν κὶ τὸν ἄφ'καν κ'ἐφ'γαν. Τότις οἱ γυναῖκις τουν ποῦ φέρναν νιρὸ 'ς τοὺ στρατό, καθὼς εἶδαν τοὺς ἄνδρις νὰ φεύγουν, ἄρπαξαν τἄρματά τουν, στάθ'καν, πουλέμ'σαν κ' ἰνίκησαν.
Ἡ Ἀλέξαντρους λοιπὸ γιὰ νὰ τιμήσῃ τὴν παλληκαριά τουν κὶ γιὰ νὰ ντρουπιάσ' τοὺς ἄντρις, ἔβγαλε διαταγὴ νὰ φορέσουν τὰ μαντήλια τοῦν γυνικῶν οἱ ἄντρις καὶ τοῦν ἀντρῶν τοῖς πιρικεφαλαίις οἱ γ'ναῖκις. Κι' ἀποὺ τοὺν κιρὸ ἰκείνου φοροῦν οἱ Καραγκούνηδες μαῦρα μαντήλια 'ς τοὺ κιφάλι, κ' οἱ γ'ναῖκις τουν φοροῦν πιρικιφαλαίις.

Long ago King Alexander kept his troops at a military post under Pharsala. The Thessalians who were with him cowered when the moment of the fight came; so they abandoned him and fled away. Thus their women, who were bringing water to the army, after seeing the men flee away, grabbed their weapons, stood there (in front of the enemy), battled and won.
In order to honour their intrepidity and to shame the men, Alexander ordered that the men would wear the women's kerchiefs and the women the men's helmets.

Since antiquity, the attention Alexander devoted to his attire has been a matter of interest: Ephippus of Olynthus says that the Macedonian used to don sacred vestments during his banquets (e.g. clothing and horns of Ammon), adopted the guise of Artemis or Hermes while driving his chariot, and wore Hermes' sandals and *petasus*[59] when spending time with his friends.[60] During battles Alexander wore a κράνος (*helmet*), which, for example, protected his head from the unexpected severe blow of Roisaces' sword in battle at the Granicus River, as Diodorus,[61] Plutarch,[62] and Arrian[63] attest in their accounts. In particular, at chapter

59 The *petasus* was a wide-brimmed hat with a conical crown worn in Ancient Greece; the one worn by men had a low crown, while that worn by women a tall one.
60 Ephippus, *FGrH* 126, F5 (= Ath. XII. 53, pp. 537E-538B).
61 D. S. XVII. 20. 6.
62 Plu. *Alex*. 16. 4.
63 Arr. *An*. I. 15. 7-8.

16.4 of the *Life of Alexander* Plutarch states that Alexander *was notable for his light shield and his helmet's crest* (τοῦ κράνους τῇ χαίτῃ), *on both sides of which there was fixed a plume admirable for size and whiteness* (ἑκατέρωθεν εἱστήκει πτερὸν λευκότητι καὶ μεγέθει θαυμαστόν). This image of the Macedonian hero with his impressive helmet adorned with plumage and a high crest has surely left a mark in the Alexander-reception during the period of the Hellenic Revolution against the Ottoman rule (1821-1832). A fine example of the use of Alexander III with the aim of inspiring the awakening of patriotic consciousness in the Greeks is Rigas Pherraios' portrait of the Macedonian conqueror in his *Pamphlet* (1797), in which the helmet with a crest is clearly visible. Alexander and his symbolic helmet played an important role in the Greek Struggle for Macedonia (1904-1908) too, as demonstrated by N. Engonopoulos' famous painting entitled *The two Macedonians: Alexander the Great and Pavlos Melas* (1977), where the brave heroes are standing alongside each other. A stylised Alexander – recognisable only by the tall red crest of his helmet – is depicted with his left arm on Melas' shoulder in a friendly gesture, almost creating a bridge between ancient and modern battles for freedom, between the fight against the Persians and the one against the Ottoman Empire.

Although the role of women in war is rarely displayed and often overshadowed by that of men, we can assume that with this folk tradition the inhabitants of Pharsala, Sophades, and Roumlouki wanted to praise their women for their endurance in crucial moments of the forging of the Hellenic Nation. A precedent to this tradition is attested by Plutarch in his account of the war between Sparta and Argos in 494 B.C.

> When Cleomenes, king of the Spartans killed many [Argives] (but not as many as 7,777, as some people fabulously say) and marched up against the city, divine resolution and courage made the young women resist the enemy on behalf of their fatherland (ὁρμὴ καὶ τόλμα δαιμόνιος παρέστη ταῖς ἀκμαζούσαις τῶν γυναικῶν ἀμύνεσθαι τοὺς πολεμίους ὑπὲρ τῆς πατρίδος). Under Telesilla's leadership, they took the weapons and surrounded the walls standing alongside the battlements (ἡγουμένης δὲ

τῆς Τελεσίλλης ὅπλα λαμβάνουσαι καὶ παρ' ἔπαλξιν ἱστάμεναι κύκλῳ τὰ τείχη περιέστεψαν).
[…] Some say that this fight was on the seventh day of the month; others that it was on the first day of the month, which is now called the fourth, but was anciently called Hermaeus by the Argives. On this day, even now, they perform the Hybristika, a festival in which women clothe themselves with men's coats and cloaks, whereas the men put on women's veils and head-dresses (καθ' ἣν μέχρι νῦν τὰ Ὑβριστικὰ τελοῦσι, γυναῖκας μὲν ἀνδρείοις χιτῶσι καὶ χλαμύσιν, ἄνδρας δὲ πέπλοις γυναικῶν καὶ καλύπτραις ἀμφιεννύντες).

Plutarch, *Mulierum Virtutes* 4 (= *Mor.* 245C-245F)[64]

The Macedonian and Thessalian traditions are based on the ancient Argive story, since the two key motifs of the plot are the same: the women defend their country and clothing customs are reversed in order to commemorate and honour the women's courage.

A variant is also known in Velvento (Pieria), where women say that they wear the γκιβιζί (*ghivizi*), their traditional red silk foulard, to commemorate a war around Palaiokastro in which men fled away and women took over the fight, eventually defeating the enemy. The king of Velvento is anonymous, but the plot remains similar to the Karaghounisses' tradition in all its basic elements (Politis, 1904, p. 640, n. 8).

2.4 Aetiologico-Mythological traditions

The following Macedonian folk accounts explain the origin of tornados through a modern reception of the mythological Νύμφαι (Nymphs).

As discussed above, the *Alexander Romance* introduced the Nereids and the Mermaids into Alexander-folklore, where they took on the role

64 See also Hdt. VI. 77-82; Paus. II. 20. 8-10. A similar story featuring women at war is described by Aeneas Tacticus, *Poliorcetica* XL. 4-5.

of sisters, mothers[65] or fiancées;[66] they surely are the queen of the Hellenic mindset, for they represent a link between the modern and the ancient mythological world. In fact, modern Nereids remind us of the ancient Nymphs, minor goddesses presiding over various natural phenomena and taking care of the flora and fauna of their domain. Classified into different families according to their duties and characteristics, the fifty nymphs of the sea, called Ἁλίαι/Ἁλιάδες (Haliad Nymphs) or Nereids, were depicted as beautiful maidens riding on sea-horses, dolphins, or sea-monsters, very similar to mermaids. Furthermore, Lady Kalo's substitution for the mythological Thetis, the mother of Achilles and Alexander's "ancestor", gives an additional spin to the multi-layered tradition in Macedon, developed through a continuous process of adaptation of ancient and new material by the Greeks.

In Macedonian folklore, Nereids keep their mythological power over the natural world, for they are believed to bring tornados and hurricanes. People can calm their wrath only by whispering three times "Μέλι γάλα· κα᾽π΄ ἀπ᾽ ἐδῶ πέρασεν ὁ Βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος· ζῇ καὶ βασιλεύει (*Honey and milk! From here too King Alexander has passed; he lives and reigns*)" or "Στὴν ψυχὴ τοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ Ἀλέξανδρου, κακὸ μή μου κάμετε! (*For the soul of King Alexander, do not harm me!*)."[67] Variants of these two Macedonian spells, often embedded in "Nereid-type" tales, are told also in other Greek regions and on the islands.[68] Sometimes the spell is uttered in shorter forms, but the fortune and the persistence of the Nymphs-motif surely give evidence of the Greeks' attachment to their superstitions; core characteristics of these spells are the mention of King Alexander and/or the pair honey-and-milk, which probably refers to a real offering that used to be made to the Nereids in order to "mellow" their bad temper.

65 See Politis (1931, p. 224); Spyridakis (1953, p. 406): a folk tale from Eastern Thrace (modern province of Edirne, Turkey) portrays Alexander's mother, named Φώκια (Seal), causing tornados and whirlpools in the sea.

66 See the Macedonian aetiologico-mythological tradition *Ὁ βασιλιάς Ἀλέξανδρος κ' οἱ Νεράϊδες* below.

67 Nikolaides (1899, p. 227); Politis (1931, pp. 54-59). Kyriakidis (1965, pp. 194-196).

68 See Spyridakis (1953, pp. 404-414), especially p. 409, n. 7: in a tradition from Kastoria Alexander's sisters are called the Μελιτένιες (Melitenies, "made of honey") and are deities dwelling in the countryside close to crossroads and dells.

In a Macedonian tradition attested in the Western part of the region,[69] Alexander the Great guards the water of immortality from his sisters, who are described as three witches (στρίγγλες).[70] Once, during his absence, they steal and drink the precious water. When the Macedonian understands what his sisters have done, he is seized by anger and kills them. Afterwards *he incinerates them and throws their ashes in the air*. This tradition projects the (unusual in Hellenic folklore) image of a choleric and resentful Alexander, which offers the pretext to the introduction of the folk aetiology: tornados in Western Macedon are said to be caused by the ashes of the three witches. As solid evidence in favour of the presence of the three sisters in the air, people say that these violent meteorological phenomena cease only when someone shouts: "Ζεῖ ἀκόμη ὁ Μέγας Αλέξανδρος, τὸ ἄτι του καὶ τὸ σπαθί του (*Alexander the Great is still alive, his steed and his sword too*)."

The enraged Alexander of this tradition is a more human figure than the heroic king of the folk tales, with good qualities but also with flaws. Similarly, in another Macedonian tradition, entitled *Ὁ βασιλιάς Ἀλέξανδρος κ' οἱ Νεράϊδες* (*King Alexander and the Nereids*),[71] Alexander is a failed hero: due to his irascibility he loses his realm and power. This time, the (usually wicked) Nereids play the role of the good characters of the story, and they hold no grudge against Alexander for his excessive anger at them. Because of their generosity, people pray them to stop tornados, which the Nereids immediately dissolve as soon as they hear that Alexander is still alive.

3 Conclusions

In this study on Hellenic folklore, my main focus has been the understanding of the use of the historical persona of Alexander III in Mace-

69 Spyridakis (1953, p. 408, n. 5).

70 Cf. the folk tale *Oi Stringles* from Paxoi: Salvanos (1929, p. 151, n. 9). For the Stringles in ancient mythology and modern folklore, see Politis (1871, pp. 172-181); Kyriakidis (1965, p. 200).

71 Spyridakis (1953, p. 409, n. 6). In this tradition, one of the Nereids is presented as Alexander's fiancée.

donian traditions. The survey includes:

- Seven geographical traditions, in which natural environmental features or buildings are ascribed to Alexander and to his horse Bucephalus. Macedon, being Alexander's motherland, holds the majority of these traditions, but similar attributions are found in Thessaly, Schinoussa, Zante, Crete, and at Cape Sounion, where the temple of Poseidon is said to be the Macedonian's palace.

- Two geographico-aetiological traditions, representing Alexander taking active part in the reshaping of the land, with a show of gigantic strength (the Rocks from Serres) or of building skills (the tower of Aghios Basileios). The former account reminds us of the Cyclopic walls built in Mycenae and Tiryns in the second half of the second millennium B.C., whereas the latter is the folk reworking of the ancient reception of Alexander as strenuous builder and city-founder.

- One aetiological tradition from Roumlouki, a variant of which is attested in Pieria and one in Thessaly. The motif of the brave women fighting for their country is ancient and it finds its literary archetype in Plutarch's *Moralia*.

- Two aetiologico-mythological traditions about the Nereids, a prolific motif in modern folklore, with tales and spells attested throughout the Greek-speaking world.

The geographical distribution of the Macedonian Alexander-traditions here studied runs across the entire Northern Greek region, with some accounts attested in a single area (Western, Central, or Eastern Macedon) and other widely popular in different Macedonian villages.

The themes treated draw upon ancient mythology (Nereids, giants), history (Alexander's political agenda and minting policy), and Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Romance* (Kale, the water of life); via Alexander they are all put into dialogue with the present. Alexander is transformed into a king

living in the countryside, into a national hero, or into a mythological giant; however, he is also a more human figure, not errorless but liable for violent actions and capable of repentance. Concluding, the great conqueror is charged with characteristics, symbols, and ideologies belonging to later historical periods and experiences of the Greek *ethnos*; thus, he has a unique role in the Macedonian mindset: he is both the recipient and the bearer of the Greeks' cultural identity, who will teach the values of the past to future generations.[72]

72 Cf. Nikolaidis (1899, p. 230): no other hero has personified so much the spirit of the Hellenic people, especially for the inhabitants of the country-side, the hills, and the islands. To the Greeks, notwithstanding his conquests until India, Alexander has remained a "Macedonian King".

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