

Sandra Uskoković

University of Dubrovnik
Arts and Restoration Department
Branitelja Dubrovnika 41
HR - 20000 Dubrovnik

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Hegemony of the Antiquity's Heritage: Sharing a Common Past?

Hegemonija antičke
baštine: nasljeđe
zajedničke povijesti?

ABSTRACT

While focusing on Greece and North Macedonia, I will argue that the hegemony of authorized heritage discourse reveals the dominance of Hellenophilia, which has been continuously reinforced since the nineteenth century by archaeological discoveries of the ancient Greeks. The heritage narratives around the Warrior Hero statue in Skopje (2011) and the New Acropolis Museum in Athens (2009) glorify the ancient past and exclude other historical periods and cultural/ethnic influences, which creates a pregnant imaginary for Eurocentrism, while the hegemony of heritage sites is being harnessed for political agendas. Contrary to that, a celebration of shared civilizational heritage is being forged around imaginings of a glorious antiquity of East and West conjoined by the new Silk Road, specifically between China and Greece, emphasizing it via archaeology, heritage sites, and museums related to the Silk Road. This article is an attempt to demystify the domineering force of Eurocentric heritage studies and practice that suppress multi-cultural views, and ask whether heritage narratives constructed around the new Silk Road's identity and shared past that look beyond borders can rebuild a dialogue of transnational heritage.

Keywords: hegemony, heritage, Antiquity, Silk Road, Balkans

SAŽETAK

Ovaj članak pokazuje kako se hegemonija službeno odobrenog baštinskog diskursa, utemeljena na helenofiliji, kontinuirano provodi i zagovara još od 19. stoljeća, počevši s arheološkim otkrićima antičke Grčke, očita na novijim primjerima baštinske teorije i prakse u regiji. Kip Heroja ratnika u Skopju (2014.) i novi Muzej Akropole u Ateni (2009.) naglašavaju i veličaju antičku prošlost te isključuju sva druga povijesna razdoblja i kulturne/etničke utjecaje, što pridonosi stvaranju eurocentričnog imaginarija podržanog od političkih čimbenika. S druge strane, paralelno se u ovoj regiji stvara i oblikuje novi imaginarij zajedničke, civilizacijske baštine istoka i zapada utemeljen na antičkoj arheologiji, a rekonstruiran kroz Put svile i njezinu baštinu, koji promiče Kina. Ovaj članak demistificira eurocentričnost baštinskih studija i praksi koje potiskuju multikulturalne perspektive, te propituje mogu li multikulturalni baštinski diskursi izgrađeni oko identiteta i zajedničke prošlosti Puta svile uspostaviti dijalog transnacionalne baštine koji nadilazi granice etnocentričnosti.

Ključne riječi: hegemonija, baština, antika, Put svile, Balkan

THE “HEGEMONY” OF ANTIQUITY

“For better or for worse, the history of even the most distant Mediterranean pasts is always already politicized – indeed, one might argue that its distance is precisely what allows politicians to have their way with the past in the present.”

W.V. Harris, *Rethinking the Mediterranean*

Historically, the Mediterranean has been during some remarkable periods the site of ritual coexistence, bringing together different religious and ethnic groups, and ideas of cosmopolitanism and tolerance.¹ Since the early Middle Ages, the Adriatic Sea – a miniature Mediterranean – brought the inhabitants of Italy together with the Slavs, Albanians, and other Balkan peoples, and the linguistically and ethnically mixed societies created along the coast reflect these contacts.² Also, the Adriatic had long been a route by which eastern goods reached the West (Silk Road trading, travels of Marco Polo), and in that sense it was indeed well integrated into the trade networks of the rest of the Mediterranean.

Boruta notes that during the imperial expansion of Europe to the south (19th and early 20th centuries), the idea emerged of a “Mediterranean region” as a unified natural and cultural area.³ He further elaborates that the archaeological excavation of the monumental pasts of Mediterranean antiquity served to justify Western European imperial dominance and hegemony: “By presenting themselves as legitimate heirs of ancient Egypt, Greece or Rome, European powers effectively restored the Mediterranean unity and continuity allegedly destroyed by Islam, and the region was thus conceived as the cradle of a Western civilization that was both universalistic and Eurocentric.”⁴

Whether dealing with the ancient culture of a single country, nation, region, or all of humanity, Kohl and Fawcett argue that the standard archaeological narrative requires that a certain ancient trait be identified, celebrated as noble and timeless, and linked to the present across a long period of ignorance or neglect.⁵

According to Kaiser, authorized versions of the past can be used to lend legitimacy to the current order in various forms, such as: “(a) the establishment of a link between present governors and ultimate sources of power and legitimacy which reside in the past; (b) the advancement of claims to the effect that a nation’s population is in some ways superior to all others, on the basis of past achievements; or (c) to glorify the present by casting the past in an unfavorable light.”⁶ Kaiser argues that archaeology is one of the means of uncovering and presenting the symbolic resource of the past and, as such, it is used in the quest for political legitimacy; and in the Balkans it has an unambiguous contemporary relevance. The Balkan past, as Kaiser claims, has been made to serve a number of mutually reinforcing goals: “a) the establishment of political and territorial legitimacy; b) buttressing of political ideology; c) the maintenance of cultural identity; and d) the invention of tradition.”⁷

Ever since the late nineteenth century, when the post-imperial political boundaries of the Balkan nation-states began to be established, there have been conflicting territorial claims of neighbouring countries on the basis of historical precedents. Even today, Romania and Hungary, for example, still dispute their present boundary, which gives Transylvania to Romania, while Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia all dispute some territory of the Republic of North Macedonia.⁸

The emotional power of archaeology in Greece and the regions of former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria implicitly links the present to a particular golden age. Recently, we have witnessed the outbreak of hostilities over the appropriate name for the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” which to the Greeks represents an unacceptable historical appropriation of Greek history (the name of Macedonia and the glories of Alexander) and therefore a territorial claim on their northern territories.⁹

The situation between the two neighbouring countries was even more aggravated when in 2011 (amidst the Greek economic crisis) a giant statue of a warrior king (with uncanny resemblance to Alexander the Great) was erected as part of the *Skopje 2014* project in Plošad, the central square of in Skopje, North Macedonia, and the airport was named after him (Fig. 1).¹⁰ While his kingdom lay in the region of Macedonia in Greece, the similarity of names and geographic proximity between ancient Macedonia and North Macedonia has led the latter to claim Alexander the Great as their own.¹¹

By linking North Macedonia to the famous antiquity ruler, its government is casting the nation as the descendant of one of the largest kingdoms of the ancient world. The debate surrounding the statue of Alexander the Great is clearly a question of ownership over history and of associating a nation with a chosen past. The image of Alexander ready for battle has been patriotically adopted to empower and heighten the comparatively young nation's idea of heritage, authority, and prestige.¹²

At that time, the overtly nationalist government in Skopje used such overtake as a propaganda tool in its long battle with Greece over the country's name, and the right to claim Alexander as a national hero. Antonio Milososki, the state's former



1.
Statue of the Warrior Hero, central square, Skopje, North Macedonia, 2011 (photo: B. Bakal, 2022)

Kip Heroja ratnika, središnji trg, Skopje, Sjeverna Makedonija, 2011.

2.
Skopje 2014, Skopje, North
Macedonia (photo: B. Bakal, 2022)

Skopje 2014, Skopje, Sjeverna
Makedonija, 2014.

foreign minister and a member of the VMRO-DPMNE party, justified their claims by stating in 2010: "Alexander the Great, in fact, had no passport or birth certificate. We all live in a geographic area where we share a common past, but our attitude towards history is inclusive. That of the Greeks is exclusive."¹³

The Macedonian right-wing government aimed at creating a Macedonian national identity amidst the competing neighbouring agendas, and regardless of the multicultural setting of the country, with a project that materializes nationalist myth in a hegemonic way.¹⁴

Benedict Anderson explained that nation-building constructs usually centre around narratives about the past: "(...) the preservation of symbolic loading of the material past as heritage has been pivotal in creating the 'imagined communities' of nation-states in the modern era."¹⁵

Obviously, the Greeks consider such claims absurd and argue that the territory now occupied by North Macedonia was not even part of the ancient kingdom of Macedonia (the Romans added it to their province of that name later on in the 2nd century BC).¹⁶

North Macedonia is a country of two million people where just over 60 percent are Macedonian, of Orthodox faith; around 25 percent are Albanian, mainly of Muslim faith; and the rest are Serb and Vlach (both communities are Orthodox as well), or Turkish, Bosniak, or Roma (which are mostly Muslim).¹⁷

This process of creating a history that leads straight back to North Macedonian antiquity was not a neutral and objective process, but a very biased and instrumen-



3.
Skopje 2014, Skopje, North
 Macedonia (photo: B. Bakal, 2022)

Skopje 2014, Skopje, Sjeverna
 Makedonija, 2014.



talized field of producing of national narratives. Unfortunately, one of the most immediate effects this project has been further division of Macedonian citizens along the ethnic lines, since those who are not members of the titular nation – Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, Vlachs and others – have been left out of this dominant discourse of ethnonationalism.¹⁸

Although the Alexander narrative is related to the North Macedonian claim to autochthony, using the figure of Alexander the Great as a cohesive building construct for the emerging nation is quite misleading in interpreting the ancient past, especially when revoking Hellenic cultural roots. During Alexander the Great's reign, the Greeks came in contact with outside peoples and their Hellenic, classical culture blended with cultures from Asia and Africa fusing into Hellenism. The reconstruction, or rather reinvention of their own ancient past/culture has no similarity or continuity with the culture that flourished under Alexander the Great. Hellenism was syncretic, culturally polycentric, and polycasual, being a result of crossing between Hellenic and Oriental thinking, i.e. a phenomenon of permeation and crossing between the classical Hellenic culture and a local, especially Oriental one. Alexander's policy of racial fusion even brought increasing friction to his relations with his "beloved" Macedonians. He managed to create a kingdom as a uniform economic and cultural world stretching from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Indus River, with a common civilization that led to the moving of the great centres of civilization eastward.¹⁹

The Alexander statue also announced a massive government-sponsored urban renovation plan named *Skopje 2014* (Fig. 2) that promised Skopje a new image, one that would deliver to Macedonia a properly "European" capital, an investment in Macedonia's international recognisability and competitiveness in a global marketplace where monuments serve as engines of economic value and "soft power" on the world stage.²⁰ By linking the mythic past to future ambitions, *Skopje 2014* supplied a revamped historical narrative to the locals while also packaging a place-based identity for consumption by the foreign tourists (Fig. 3).²¹

Although this claim for European belonging came in the age of European integration, such an attempt at reclaiming an ancient past that would situate Skopje and Macedonia within the perceived mainstream of European history was based on “widespread belief that the ancient Greeks were the original fount of modern (i.e. Western) civilization,” which John Hobson identified as the “Greek clause” in European historiography.²² Neil Silberman has described this situation in the following way: “The modern discovery of the ancient splendors of the Near East by trained European and American scholars seemed to put Europe and America – rather than modern Egyptians, Palestinians, Turks or Iraqis – in the position of legitimate heirs.”²³

Interestingly, there are some similarities in the politics of nation building between these two neighbours, as the Greeks provide an unusually effective demonstration of hegemony since as Europeans they have been taught to adopt a neoclassical posture that accorded with the liberal philhellenism of the tutelary Great Powers.²⁴ As Winter has noted in his latest book, “(...) by the nineteenth century Greek antiquity had also been reconstructed as a shared European past, thereby identified as a foundation of Western civilization.”²⁵ Herzfeld has also explained that “based on nostalgised Eurocentric construction of their identity, today the modern Greek identity relies on its antiquity, classical past that excludes Islamic, Coptic, Roman, Slavic layers of the past, i.e. non-Hellenic ethnicities that inhabit Greece today.”²⁶ Greek national identity is based on exclusive Hellenic origins, thus Turkish, Macedonian, or Albanian ethnic and cultural influence is erased from the equation.²⁷

While disputing over the country's name, origin, and heritage, both countries evidence that micro-regional ethnic homogeneity is the goal, and what is determinative of ethnicity is history (in this case ancient history), thus it follows that history, or rather specific parts of the past *as they exist in the present* must be eradicated.²⁸

The Balkan region is a part of the world where “history” is ever so often invoked as the basis for establishing a cultural presence and then discerned, or re-thought, as a form of heritage, especially in Greece, where history is often instantiated in the materiality of archaeological finds of “marble column-filled” classical sites.²⁹ With its obvious political attachment to the images of Greek antiquity, the extensive excavations and presentation of classical cities are clearly linked to modern national self-consciousness.³⁰ Consequently, the Acropolis in Athens acts as “a reservoir of meanings” to the Greeks, to which multiple values, myths, and ideologies can be ascribed in the making of a modern Greek identity.³¹

In this region, profuse historical ruptures have sedimented in a richly layered history including fragments of earlier periods that stand witness to the frequent changes and mixing of cultures and civilizations, which makes a uniform essentialist narrative in these two countries difficult to achieve. Throughout the Balkan region, management of cultural heritage is a politically charged process, which is also evident from the recently built New Acropolis Museum (2009) in Athens, which epitomizes the prevailing national ideology.

Resurrected from the ashes of a tremendously destabilizing crisis, the Old Acropolis Museum in Athens (constructed in 1874 and expanded in 1950s with modern curatorial setting and interpretation) enshrined the aspirations of the dominant cultural and political forces in Greece about its role in post-WWII Western world that was rooted in the aesthetic, moral, and ideological legacy of Greece's classical past.³²

In such political climate, architecture was tasked with providing a visual manifestation of the country's identity. There was a renewed interest in Greece's classical heritage, and monuments such as the Parthenon in Athens played an important political role, instilling a nationalistic sense of pride in a populace fatigued by years of civil war and political uncertainty.³³ For example, the narratives of Athenian glory, embodied in architectural ruins and artworks, provided what Yannis Hamilakis has referred to as a “monumental topography of the nation.”³⁴



4.
The New Acropolis Museum,
Athens, Greece, 2009 (Wikimedia
Commons, Jean_Pierre Dalibera,
2016)

Novi Muzej Akropole, Atena, Grčka,
2009.

In 1982, the Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, started a campaign against the British Museum for the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles. The counterargument of the British Museum was the lack of a suitable place in Athens that could host and protect the marbles from air pollution.³⁵ The need for a museum became more urgent and an issue of national importance.

Creation of a gallery for displaying the Parthenon Marbles was key to all proposals for the design of a new museum and Greek officials expressed their hope that the new museum would help in the campaign for bringing back the Parthenon Marbles. A controversy erupted over the plans for the new museum and whether it was appropriate to build it on the archaeological site in the Makrygianni neighbourhood (also known as Acropolis), while another concern was whether a large modern building would fit well into the landscape.³⁶

The building of the new museum materializes a political concept that addresses the reunification of the Elgin Marbles. The New Acropolis Museum (NAM) located at the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis Hill in Athens, Greece, was founded in 2003 and opened to the public in June 2009 (Fig. 4).³⁷ It was designed by Bernard Tschumi and his Greek associate Michael Fotiadis. The museum was built to house artefacts found on the hill and the surrounding slopes, from the Greek Bronze Age to Roman and Byzantine Greece. It was set 300 metres away from the Parthenon, which makes it the largest modern building erected so close to an ancient site.³⁸

But, architecture and politics conflict here in their joint attempt to reconstruct the past. The architecture of the NAM materializes a political statement and addresses the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, and although it is represented as an autonomous structure inserted in the Athenian landscape, it is not a coherent extension of the Acropolis site, as it protrudes over the urban horizon.³⁹

Such intervention raises a question about the way in which a spatial past is perceived in the present and how this is expressed in architectural terms. Winter explains that “the processes of heritage are about ordering the past into particular spatialized narratives where the state continues to be a key force exerting its will on the cultural past.”⁴⁰



5.
Archaeological Museum Skopje,
North Macedonia, 2014 (photo:
B. Bakal, 2022)

Novi Arheološki muzej, Skopje,
Sjeverna Makedonija, 2014.

The NAM is merely acting as a political statement, an attempt for national unity, and it appears that the repatriation of the Marbles has always been, and still is, a symbol of national identity.⁴¹ In 2014, UNESCO offered to mediate between Greece and the United Kingdom to resolve the dispute, but this was later turned down by the British Museum on the basis that UNESCO works with government bodies, not trustees of museums. In 2021, UNESCO issued its first decision on the Parthenon Marbles, calling for the United Kingdom to return them to Greece, but the two-century controversy about the fate of the ancient friezes still prevails.⁴²

Nation branding consists of strategic efforts to formulate national identity as a branded commodity that can motivate and enhance the movement of capital into a country.⁴³

The projects in Skopje and Athens demonstrate how the dominant discourses, whilst seemingly oppositional, are in fact power-ridden, hegemonic discourses, imposed by the ruling political elite. They are largely organized around three key propositions articulated by the government: that “the project contributes to the growth of the local economy, to the development of tourism and to the reification of subjugated history.”⁴⁴ Politics and ideology are integral parts of these two nation-building projects, stipulated by the heritage industry that underlines search for uniqueness in order to generate a pervasive sense of homogeneity. Salzaar has argued that “in globally circulating tourism imaginaries, ideas of cultures as passive, bounded, and homogeneous entities prevail because it is widely assumed by marketers and service providers alike.”⁴⁵

Even though some critics claim that the New Acropolis Museum has managed to create a symbol of modern Greece, Dragonas disagrees by arguing: “(...) the NAM consists a powerful tool of identity formulation, which does not renew the special Athenian identity but disintegrates it. It does not review the relationship of the modern city with the antiquity but adjusts the antiquity to the needs of the modern touristic industry and it expresses the ideological confusion of our age and especially of modern Greece.”⁴⁶

Unlike the New Acropolis Museum, designed in an cutting-edge contemporary architectural expression by a world-renowned architect, the new Archaeological Museum in Skopje (completed in 2014 within the *Skopje 2014* project) again simulates “ancient Macedonian” history through its architectural expression, while simultaneously claiming that the Archaeological Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia finally got its “modern” museum venue (Fig. 5). However, there is no doubt that, although it is “new and modern,” the new Archaeological Museum in Skopje does not say anything about modern North Macedonia.

In surveying the role of the past in the present on the example of recent North Macedonian and Greek heritage projects, we may argue that heritage in the Balkans has been of active assistance in the invention of traditions, a process which is, as Hobsbawm explains, “to cloak the present with the respectability of antiquity.”⁴⁷ What is invented are the condensation symbols that are fused “into one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations.”⁴⁸

We can see that, compared to the recent past, the ancient past is more attractive, more loveable, and safer.⁴⁹ The Mediterranean region has a particular relationship to the phenomenon of parochial universalism, as Herzfeld argues, “because it is seen as being at once the *fons et origo* of Western culture and power, and yet also, in part precisely because of an antiquity that confers both gilded respect and political marginality, as a region was excluded from the advantages of a privileged modernity.”⁵⁰

SHARING THE COMMON PAST

In his latest book on the Silk Road, Winter notes that “by the late nineteenth century much of the research conducted in the ‘Near east’ sought evidence of the regional connections of antiquity and the broader trends of early twentieth century historiography on the Levant, primarily framed the past through Hellenistic and Roman connections and the accounts of Alexander the Great, Herodotus, and Ptolemy, as well as writings of more recent European travellers to the region.”⁵¹

Such construction of the past reflects a conflict between romantic Orientalism on the one hand and the Eurocentric fear of cultural absorption into something “Middle Eastern” on the other. Orientalism or Eurocentrism is a worldview that asserts the inherent superiority of the West over the East. Specifically, Orientalism constructs a permanent image of the superior West (the “Self”) that is defined negatively against the no less imaginary “Other” – the backward and inferior East.⁵² Hobson's book also argues that the East (which was more advanced than the West between 500 and 1800) provided a crucial role in enabling the rise of modern Western civilization.⁵³

Over the past decade, Greece started to play an important role in narratives about antiquity constructed around the new Silk Road, using it as a connectivity link between East and West, while conjoining different cultures along this route into a transregional heritage concept with common, shared past.⁵⁴

The research conducted by the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki claims that according to the historical sources and the cultural heritage analysis of Greece, there is a strong common history linking Greece and the Silk Route over the centuries.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Marx notes that “various civilizations and cultures were connected along the Silk Route length of more than 12.000 km, which makes it arguably the longest cultural route in the history of humanity.”⁵⁶

Since ancient times, the Silk Road had served as a bridge between East and West, uniting three continents and different cultures along its route (Fig. 6).⁵⁷ Based on some sources, the UNESCO report claims: “(...) much of the Silk Road and the surrounding regions opened for the first time to the western world by Alexander the Great.”⁵⁸

6.
Silk Route Map (Wikimedia
Commons, NASA/Goddard Space
Flight Center, 2010)

Mapa Puta svile



These attributions and claims conjoin with the *World Tourism Organisation Report on Silk Road*, which elaborates further: “Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) was one of the first Silk Road travelers from the West. While being on the road with his army for around 10 years, he traveled across Central Asia, Persia Empire and North India. Through his military conquests he opened maritime routes and enabled trading between the East and the West.”⁵⁹

However, as Tim Winter reminds us, many narrative inventions about the Silk Road’s past are constructed nowadays that lead to misconception and romanticism that puts into question the actual validity of the concept: “There are competing claims over when the Silk Road supposedly opened, to which regions it reached and at what point trade and exchange reached its height. Scholars working across countries and disciplines toil, debate and congregate over Silk Road pasts, adding new themes, locations and forms of connections. All too often it is the present that influences how the past is interpreted.”⁶⁰

We will see in this chapter that some narratives of the past are forging the ancient Silk Road’s identity in Greece through branding in order to enhance national tourism development that they have labelled as a “civilization dialogue.” Nowadays, the Silk Road is revived as an up-and-coming tourist destination engaging numerous countries, with rich natural and cultural heritage. The new Silk Road is a rich tapestry of tourist destinations and products based on the unique and outstandingly rich heritage, nature, and traditions of dozens of distinct histories, peoples, and cultures.

The Silk Road identity of Greece is emphasized in the *UNESCO Silk Road Programme* that depicts Greece as located on the edge of the eastern world, playing a major role in the commerce of valuable textiles and other merchandises through the maritime silk routes, and a Silk Road’s production centre in Byzantine times. The traditional silk industry persisted in some Greek cities up to the 19th century with the invention of artificial silk.⁶¹

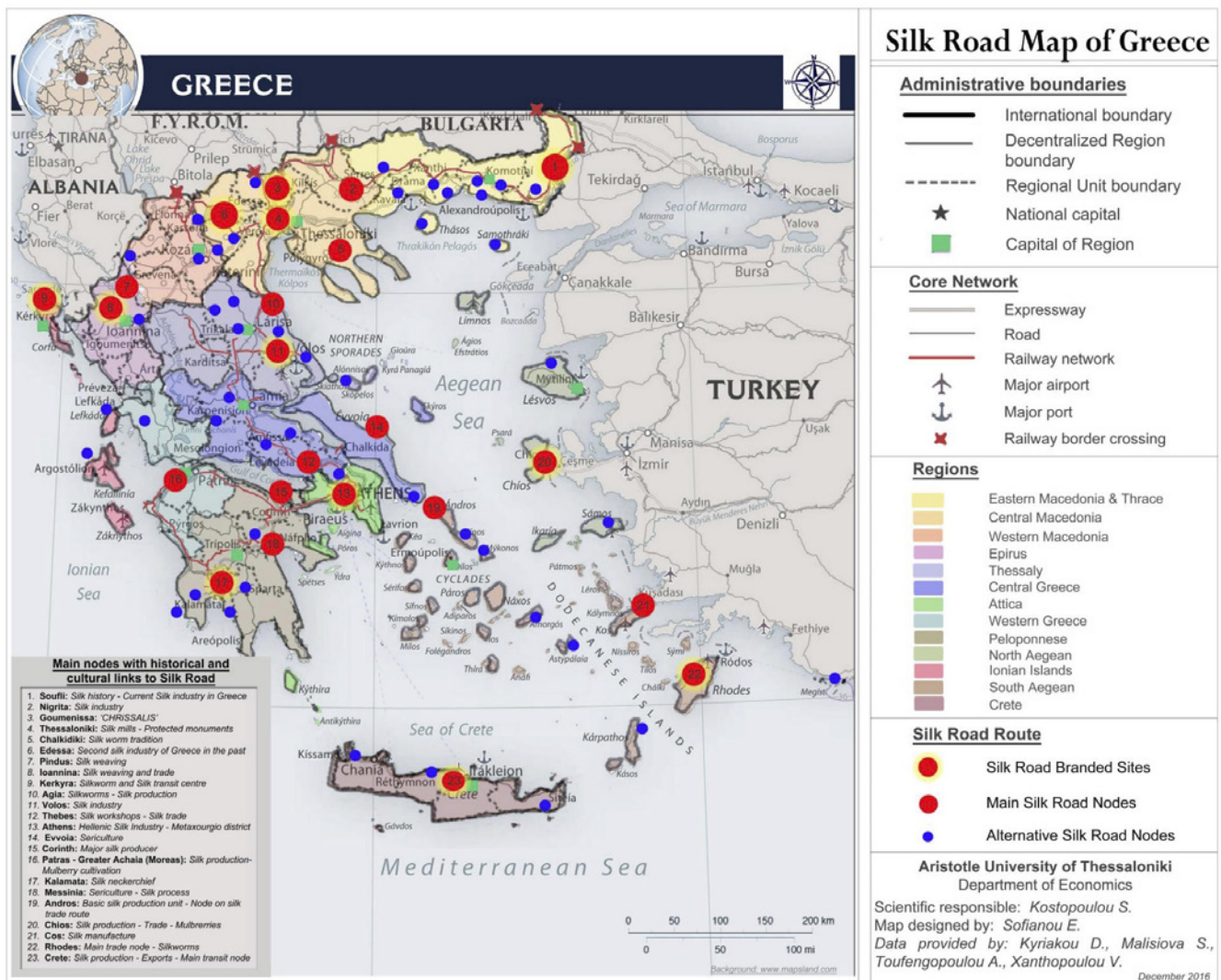
In 1993, the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) launched the *Silk Road Programme*, a collaborative initiative designed to enhance sustainable tourism development along the historic Silk Road, aiming to maximize the benefits of tourism development for the local Silk Road communities, while stimulating investment and promoting the conservation of the route’s natural and cultural heritage.

7. Map of the main nodes along the Silk Route and the branded heritage sites in Greece (*Silk Road Programme 2016*, Western Silk Road Tourism Initiative, a UNWTO-EU Initiative, 2016, p. 19)

Mapa glavnih čvorišta i „brendiranih“ baštinskih lokaliteta Puta svile u Grčkoj

A key segment of this programme is the *Western Silk Road (WSR) Tourism Development Initiative*, a joint tourism project launched by UNWTO and the European Union (EU) in 2016. The project aims at revitalizing the Silk Road heritage located in the European region: around the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, and along parts of the Mediterranean basin.⁶² The main assets that have motivated UNWTO and the EU to pursue this joint project are the untapped unique Silk Road heritage of the region, the available land and sea routes, the diverse cultural assets and the market that increasingly demands authentic travel experience, features that the travellers can also easily come across in Greece. Once applied to the entire Silk Road region, the label will reinforce the idea of the Silk Road as a cultural and trading route consisting of many different countries and also identify the participating Silk Road tourist destinations as such.⁶³

This branding of the Silk Road identity across the country connects and links tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Greek key destinations, revealing the “hidden” resources directly or indirectly related to the Silk Road in order to differentiate and enrich tourism products and provide sustainable development for the less developed regions (Fig. 7).⁶⁴



8.
Silk Museum, Soufli, Greece,
1990 (Wikimedia Commons,
Kalogeropoulos, 2014)
Muzej svile, Soufli, Grčka, 1990.



For example, the small Greek town of Soufli in eastern Macedonia is hoping to revive its long-dead local economy, silk production, as a way to bring tourists to northeastern Greece.⁶⁵ The Art Silk Museum of Soufli is a living thematic museum of sericulture whose main aim is to promote the local cultural identity of Soufli as an important Silk Road destination in order to attract local and foreign visitors (Fig. 8).

As stated in the Western Silk Road report by the Aristotle University: “Thessaloniki, the second largest city of Greece, located in Macedonia, was a crossroads of the Great Silk Road for many centuries. Thessaloniki was the most important port of the eastern Roman Empire and – along with the Via Egnatia route, the city functioned an important role, in relation to the Silk Road. Among the industrial heritage complexes of Thessaloniki, there is the silk mill ‘Helios’, dating from 1931 to 1947, and the complex was classified in 1991 as a ‘protected historical monument.’”⁶⁶

Obviously, when it comes to new museums of the Silk Road in Greece, “economic considerations opened the way to an era in which archeological resources of antiquity were selectively exploited, not for scientific or ideological reasons but according to someone’s idea of what sells.”⁶⁷ Heritage, the most visual of the historical disciplines, is inescapably didactic. The full complexity of its political and ideological associations, whether nationalist or postcolonial, sometimes merely paves the way for the discipline’s exploitation by other, even more transcendent ideologies – profit and tourism.

The focus of UNWTO, the EU and the WSR Initiative is primarily on the use of Silk Road heritage to construct the image of a tourist destination and to provide a foundation for the Western Silk Road to function as a fully operative tourism brand. Therefore, we see the antiquity again being promoted, not for nation branding, but as a multicultural tourism brand, since the narratives about it are here centred on the notions of shared past between different cultures and cultural internationalism.

Along the new Silk Road, a celebration of shared civilizational heritage is being constructed around imaginings of a glorious antiquity of East and West conjoined by this new route. Civilizational imaginaries are used to forge connections between East and West, and specifically between China and the Mediterranean, while focusing on Greece, thus emphasizing their “shared” heritage via archaeology and new heritage sites and museums related to the Silk Road.

Silk Road discourses craft pasts and futures around certain ideologies analysed through specific concepts/images/effects, i.e. a system of imaginary representations

such as the “shared destiny” or “shared past” that are reading the regions differently in a form that is interpreted as a dialogue. The new Silk Road dialogue is producing knowledge of a “shared multicultural history” for the purpose of international trade using maritime Silk Route ports to exchange commodities, capital, and technology, as well as for the purpose of exploiting heritage tourism.⁶⁸

Winter explains that the new Silk Road has also become a platform on which particular transnational corridors of heritage production are now forming; thus, culture and heritage are now being used to maintain or build relations with others where histories and cultural pasts overlap.⁶⁹

However, just like the narratives of empires or nations, Silk Road histories are constructs that also carry political consequences. Winter argues that the introduction of Sinocentric narratives of connectivity and civilization is perhaps especially charged for regions where borders and cultural sovereignties are contested or where artefacts, cultural practices, and archaeological sites are already enmeshed in the memory politics of nationalism. He explains it in the following words: “In a world of Silk Road cooperation, that which is celebrated as ‘shared’ is inevitably a small, carefully selected, carefully curated part of conjoined pasts. (...) It often finds fertile ground where there is, in reality, little shared history.”⁷⁰

Speaking about the conjoined pasts and metaphysical ties between Greece and China, Professor Zhang Lihua (director of the Research Centre for China-EU Relations at Tsinghua University) emphasized during her visit to Greece in 2014: “The philosophers of Greece, like the philosophers of China shaped the ideational cultures of two of the world’s greatest empires located opposite of the Eurasian landmass: The Greco-Roman Culture and the Han-Tang culture. (...) Greece like China are civilizations pretending to be nation states with millennia old histories and very diverse traditions.”⁷¹

Thus, it is not too surprising that during the opening event of “Greece-China Year of Culture & Tourism 2021” (when culture and tourism relations are celebrated together for the first time), statues of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates and the Chinese philosopher Confucius were unveiled at the archaeological site of Ancient Agora near the Acropolis hill in the centre of Athens. The sculpture titled “Socrates and Confucius: A Meeting” was made by the curator of the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC), Wu Weishan, who donated the artwork.⁷²

This heritage construct of rewriting history reduces complex, fragmented events into a single overarching romanticized narrative and raises the question whether Eurocentric histories of premodern past are now going to be overlaid with Sinocentric depictions.⁷³

Sino-Hellenic cooperation is developing in many relevant areas, such as the prevention of theft and illegal trade of cultural relics; the Ancient Civilization Forum; protection of cultural and natural heritage; or opening of the Chinese cultural centre in Athens dedicated to heritage preservation & underwater archaeology (2016) in order to better understand their shared values. Furthermore, the new Silk Road provides a golden opportunity for the Mediterranean countries – especially Greece – that seek to liberate themselves from Western hegemony and Eurocentrism, and decolonize the image of the Mediterranean as premodern.

Still, identifying the cultural heritage of the Silk Road, as Winter notes, requires Greece and other Mediterranean countries “to look beyond its own borders, flatten out the sense of hierarchy between different ethnic groups and in part to relinquish the concept of *patrimoine national* in favor of a language of shared heritage and diversity.”⁷⁴ Therefore, using the Silk Road as a heritage vehicle might provoke and enable Greece to adopt a policy of cultural internationalism in the attempt to counter the hegemony of ancient pasts associated with the territorial nation.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

Images and symbols from the past play conspicuous and powerful roles in the present. We have seen how remnants from the past become battle-banners of modern ethnic groups and nations; and how heritage interpretation can often reflect and reinforce the centralizing policies of emerging nation-states. This article attempts to show that nationalist/hegemonic bias in heritage interpretation evidences that heritage has by its nature an unavoidable political dimension – and that, as Silberman states, “nationalism or hegemony is simply one of many possible manifestations of its character as both a scientific and a political enterprise.”⁷⁶

Focus on distinctive national histories is to some extent a result of the Eurocentric bias that continues to pervade international organizations dedicated to heritage conservation.⁷⁷

While contemporary heritage discourses have privileged the era of European discoveries, colonialism, and intraregional maritime trade, Winter argues that the concept of Silk Road, regardless of its thematic and empirical biases, “will go some way to making the cultural paraphernalia of national identity less inwardly territorial, the identities of the region's cities less culturally centripetal, and perhaps, the narratives of the world history a little less Eurocentric.”⁷⁸

Critical analyses of recent north Macedonian and Greek heritage have revealed that objects are a “potent force in forging self-consciousness,” and play important roles in the construction and expression of national, ethnic identities.

Paradoxically, the crux of contestation between North Macedonia and Greece is their “shared past” embedded in the figure of Alexander the Great, but unlike the Silk Road's “shared past,” which connects different cultures and nations, the former is a cause of mutual conflict, enmity, and potential violence between the two countries involved. The fact is that the entire Balkans has been a mixture of cultures and civilisations throughout its long and rich layered history. Quoting Michael Herzfeld: “And even if historians of Europe may neglect the Balkans, they do not neglect Greece, if only because in the established schema of European history it holds an inalienable place as the fountainhead of European culture.”⁷⁹

The hegemony of heritage lies in the will and means to control heritage sites on the ground. The power to imagine these sites as linked to specific historical periods, while ignoring others, gives a variety of people the agency to curate their material in the present through praxis and for the future – either intentionally or not – via the tangible residue.⁸⁰ The heritage of the Balkans (and the Mediterranean) conveys a pervasive sense of hegemony in which power relations are continually reasserted, challenged, and modified. Furthermore, as Herzfeld argues, “the Mediterranean region exhibits a particularly tight association between cultures deemed to be ancient with relatively young nation-states embroiled in crises that bespeak the discontents of aggressive modernity: war and nationalist extremism.”⁸¹

Compared to this sense of pervasive homogeneity (hegemonic appreciation of the ancient past) that marks this region, the new Silk Road's internationalism based on antiquity i.e. a “shared past” that is constructed and reconstructed around the ideals of cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and intercultural dialogue, “privileges ideas of transoceanic and transcontinental exchange between East and West, harmony and open borders that could be viewed as a response to the destructive consequences of modern nationalism.”⁸²

Critical approaches to heritage are today increasingly moving toward the development of cross-culturally oriented approaches to the management, care, and interpretation of their sites, with the intention of liberating them from the hegemony of Eurocentrism.⁸³ Thus, the Mediterranean region (along with the Balkans) unravels

as a site for rethinking comparatively about the significance of different geopolitical, national, regional, linguistic, and cultural contexts that might provoke new, counter-hegemonic heritage dialogues in the future.

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