Macedonian Values and Beliefs

**Society**

Macedonian society was dominated by aristocratic families whose main source of wealth and prestige was their herds of horses and cattle. Macedonia was ruled by a monarchy from its earliest history until the Roman conquest in 167 BC. Kingship was hereditary along the main male line. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Macedonian kings were notoriously polygamist, sometimes resulting in sibling rivalry.

An important aspect of Macedonian social life were court symposia, which were characterized by heavy drinking (of apparently unmixed wine), feasting, and general debauchery. Symposia had several functions, amongst which was providing relief from the hardship of battle and marching. They provided a venue for interaction amongst Macedonian elites. The idea of egalitarianism (equality) surrounded symposia, allowing all male elites to express ideas and concerns, although built-up rivalries and excessive drinking often led to quarrels, fighting and even murder. The degree of extravagance and tendency for violence set Macedonian symposia apart from classical Greek symposia. Like symposia, hunting was another focus of elite activity, and it remained popular throughout Macedonia’s history. Although the Macedonians created their own athletic games and, after the late 4th century, non-royal Macedonians competed and became victors in the Olympic Games and other athletic events such as the Argive Heraean games, athletics were a less favored pastime compared to hunting.

Nevertheless, Alexander the Great sponsored athletic contests for his men; along with other facets of cultural life, such as philosophy and theatre, which increasingly incorporated Macedonia into the Greek world.

Religion The ancient Macedonians worshipped the Olympic Pantheon, especially Zeus, Artemis, Heracles and Dionysus. Evidence of this worship is found from the beginning of the 4th century BC onwards, as there exists little evidence regarding Macedonian religious practices from earlier times. From an early period, Zeus was the single most important deity in the Macedonian pantheon. Macedon, the mythical ancestor of the Macedonians, was held to be a son of Zeus, and Zeus features prominently in Macedonian coinage. The most important center of worship of Zeus was at Dion in Pieria, the spiritual center of the Macedonians, where beginning in 400 BC King Archelaus established an annual festival in honor of Zeus and featuring lavish sacrifices and athletic contests.

Worship of Zeus's son Heracles was also prominent, with coins featuring Heracles appear from the 5th century BC onwards. This was in large part because the Argead kings of Macedon traced their lineage to Heracles, making sacrifices to him in the Macedonian capitals of Vergina and Pella. Numerous dedications also attest to the importance of the worship of Artemis. Artemis was often depicted as a huntress and served as a tutelary goddess for young girls entering the coming-of-age process, much as Heracles Cynagidas (Hunter) did for young men who had completed it. By contrast, some deities popular elsewhere in the Greek world, notably Poseidon and Hephaistos, were largely ignored by the Macedonians.

Other deities worshipped by the ancient Macedonians were part of a local pantheon: Thaulos (god of war equated with Ares); Gyga (later equated with Athena); Gozoria (goddess of hunting equated with Artemis); Zeirene (goddess of love equated with Aphrodite); Xandos (god of light); Totoës (god of sleep); Darron (god of healing); Aretos (local version of Heracles); Bedu (from Edessa; god of water or air); the Echédorides (nymphs); the Arantides (possibly the Furies); the Sauadai (water spirits or demons identified with the Satyrs); Pasikraia (a goddess attested in Macedonia and Thessaly); and Sabazius-Dionysus (a Thracian god). A notable influence on Macedonian religious life and worship was neighboring Thessaly; the two regions shared many similar cultural institutions. The Macedonians also worshiped non-Greek gods, such as the "Thracian rider", Orpheus and Bendis, and other Balkan cult figures. They were tolerant of, and open to incorporating, foreign religious influences. By the 4th century BC, there had been a significant fusion of Macedonian and common Greek religious identity, but Macedonia was nevertheless characterised by an unusually diverse religious life. This diversity extended even to the belief in magic, as attested by curse tablets. It was a not an insignificant, but secret aspect of Greek cultural practice.

A notable feature of Macedonian culture was the burials reserved for its rulers. The Macedonian elite chose to construct lavish tombs at time of death rather than construct temples during life. Such traditions had been practiced throughout Greece and the central-west Balkans since the Bronze Age, and Macedonian burials contain items similar to those at Mycenae (burial with weapons, gold "death masks", etc). From the 6th century, Macedonian burials became particularly lavish, displaying a rich variety of Greek imports, reflecting the incorporation of Macedonia into a wider economic and political network centred on the Aegean city-states. Burials contained a repertoire of jewelery and ornaments of unprecedented wealth and artistic style.

From the 6th century BC, cremation replaced the traditional inhumation rite for elite Macedonians. One of the most lavish tombs is one dated to the 4th century at Vergina, believed to be that of Phillip II. It contains extravagant grave goods, highly sophisticated artwork depicting hunting scenes and Greek cultic figures, and a vast array of weaponry. This demonstrates a continuing tradition of the "warrior society" rather than a focus on religious piety and "technology of the intellect" which had become paramount facets of central Greek society in the classical period.