

NAPOLEON'S POLICIES, EDUCATING NATIONALISM AND LEARNING ARCHAEOLOGY ON THE EDGES OF THE BALKANS

Ljuben TEVDOVSKI

*Faculty of Educational Sciences, Institute of History and Archaeology, Goce Delcev University –
Stip,
Republic of North Macedonia
ljuben.tevdovski@ugd.edu.mk*

UDC: [327.2+323.13]:[37:902]”1796/1815”(44:497)

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the influence of Napoleon's imperial policies on the emergence of the narratives of early nationalism and the development of archaeological interest and traditions in the Balkan peripheral regions. Through the dissemination of Napoleonic universalism and classical cultural revival, traditional medieval identities in the region were supplanted by new national narratives rooted in ancient “real” or “imagined” Mediterranean cultures or “civilizations”, created upon ancient ethnonyms, such as the Illyrians and Dacians. Archaeology emerged as a crucial ideological tool, legitimizing nationalist claims by linking modern Balkan peoples to classical antiquity, through ancient narratives and artifacts. The challenging of the Habsburg monarchy, including the creation of the Illyrian Provinces and the French intellectual influence, catalyzed early South Slavic and Romanian nation-building processes, fostering archaeological institutions and educational and cultural discourses that reinforced these identities. This study argues that Napoleonic cultural imperialism and its short-lived intervention on the edges of the Balkans inadvertently spurred archaeological nationalism, contributing to the construction and still rooted in modern ethnonational identities. By situating Balkan archaeological nationalism within broader European trends, the paper highlights the complex interplay between imperial politics, cultural heritage, and identity formation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southeastern Europe. Furthermore, it explores how competing nationalist agendas utilized archaeology not only to assert legitimacy but also to challenge imperial and neighboring powers, revealing the persistent role of archaeology as both a political and cultural instrument in the Balkans' volatile sociopolitical landscape. This investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of nationalism's material culture and the lasting legacy of Napoleonic influence in educating and shaping Southeast-European identities in the long nineteenth century and beyond.

Keywords: *Napoleonic imperialism, education, nationalism, archaeology, Balkan edges.*

Introduction

The early nineteenth century witnessed a wave of profound transformation across Europe, driven in large part by the expanding influence of Napoleonic France.

On the four sides of the world, under the onslaught of the new and intensified Gallo-roman universal imperialism, under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, new European nationalisms and identities were born, which, following the example of France, continued with the erasing of

pre-Renaissance European traditions and identities (Diaz-Andreu 2007, p.79). The older medieval traditions were rapidly replaced with identities, cultures, and symbols that resonated with the “glorious culture” of the ancient Mediterranean, that we frequently refer to as classical.

This process did not include only ideological change, but also massive institutional, professional and societal transformations. As part of the argumentations, legitimation, and competition within such a process, new scientific interests, fields, and perspectives were created. This included the development of the modern discipline of archaeology, and later on the invention of classical archaeology, as one of its most prominent subfields, which played a critical role in legitimizing and framing the emerging national narratives (Trigger 2006, p.61-67).

Commenting on the phases of transformation that European identities experienced from the period of the French Revolution, the prominent expert on “nation branding”, Wally Olins, noted that already in the period of Napoleon, “France was no longer large enough, and Europe itself was to be rebranded” (Olins 2002, p.242-243). Indeed, a brief look into the names of the new provinces and semi-dependent and dependent states that emerged from the policies of Napoleon’s Empire reveals the reemergence and reinterpretations of ancient identities, such as Belgians, Illyrians, Helvetians, Parthenopeans, or Romans.

In the east and southeast, the new universal monarchy, based on universal knowledge and pre-Christian traditions, France, clashed with the interests of the Vatican and the Holy Roman Empire. Napoleon stripped the Vatican of its power in Italy and dealt a final blow to pre-Renaissance traditions on the Apennine Peninsula, particularly diminishing the influence of the Papal States and the Holy Roman Empire. A significant portion of Rome’s accumulated wealth was transferred to Paris, the “city of light and universal knowledge (rule)” (Dyson 2006, p.23-26), while Rome itself underwent archaeological projects led by artists, archaeologists, and urban planners to “purify” the city of newer layers of cultural heritage in favor of preserving authentic buildings from the ancient period (Diaz-Andreu 2007, pp.70, 72).

The consistency of Napoleonic cultural imperialism and political restructuring not only reshaped Europe’s geopolitical map, but also sowed the seeds for modern nationalism and the discipline of archaeology. While some aspects of these policies might be attributed to Napoleon’s ambitions, political and military needs, others were certainly part of the wider ideological and intellectual transformation in France and Europe. This new trend that in few decades transformed into *zeitgeist* of 19th century Europe and the world reached the edges of the Balkan peninsula in its early phases, during the short-live advances of Napoleon’s armies and cultural policies.

Methodological approach

This study employs a multidisciplinary historical research methodology to explore the intersections of Napoleon’s imperial policies, early nationalism, and the development of archaeology on the Balkan periphery. The research methodology integrates critical analysis of primary historical documents, including political decrees, official correspondences, and contemporary writings from the Napoleonic era, combined with secondary scholarly literature on nationalism, archaeology, and Balkan history. A historiographical approach is applied to trace the evolution of national identities influenced by Napoleonic cultural and political imperialism, focusing on the role of classical antiquity as a legitimizing framework. The study also incorporates comparative analysis of archaeological narratives and institutional developments in different Balkan regions to understand how archaeology was mobilized in nationalist projects.

Special emphasis is placed on the role of education and formal learning in disseminating

Napoleonic ideas, with a focus on how reforms in schooling and teacher training helped propagate new national identities and fostered archaeological knowledge. Napoleon's systematic modernization of education—including the establishment of centralized curricula, teacher training institutions, and secondary schooling—served as a vehicle for inculcating classical ideals and republican virtues. This facilitated the spread of archaeological interests as part of the broader cultural agenda to rebrand nations under the influence of universalist and Enlightenment principles. By critically engaging with theories on nationalism, colonialism, and cultural heritage, this methodology enables a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between imperial power, education, identity formation, and archaeological practice in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southeastern Europe.

Moving East with the Ancients

The rapid ideological and societal transformations moved east from France, approaching the Balkans through the centuries culturally dominant Apennine peninsula. From the period of the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte to that of Napoleon III, the “reformed” France had a crucial influence on the creation of the modern Italian national identity and statehood, both through the ideas of the Enlightenment and “archaeological excavation” of the “pure” ancient Rome (Diaz-Andreu 2007, pp.70, 72). It placed the classical antiquity even deeper in the consciousness of the 19th-century Italian elites, contrasting it against the influence of medieval church traditions and the Habsburgs (Diaz-Andreu 2007, pp.71-72). This was the novel French “software” educating the minds of future Italian revolutionaries and independence fighters, that were, later on, directly supported with military assistance from France.

At the same time, the transformation into a culturally and economically integrated empire, modeled after the classical (Macedonian and partly Roman) and earlier Middle-eastern empires, did not develop quickly enough in the more conservative Habsburg monarchy. With its religious heritage of the “Holy Roman Empire,” it slowly moved from medieval tribal and particularistic identities towards the classically (or rather Mediterraneanly) acculturated modernity. This allowed for a “cultural war” by Napoleonic France aimed at permanently undermining the unity of this political formation (Hutchinson 2005, p.77-78), whose roots and legitimacy still rested on the Carolingian 10th century. Napoleonic cultural assaults were focused on emphasizing and promoting ancient identities in the different regions of the Habsburg Empire. The policies of cultural particularization were implemented widely. In this regard, Napoleon Bonaparte's policies did not only encourage the “Italian national spirit,” but also, through a call for the Hungarians to rise for independence from Austria, and promotion of “anti-Russian feelings in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw,” France long-term disrupted the cohesion of these two rival empires (Black 2010, p.144).

These aims and set of policies towards once mighty Habsburgs, affected the Balkans most directly, at least from the north. During this period, autonomy was established for the so-called “Illyrian provinces”, a move that gave a serious impetus to the Illyrian movement and separatism among the South Slavic-speaking elites in the Habsburg monarchy (Blažević 2010). These policies placed new political and institutional emphases on the earlier post-Renaissance practices and Vatican traditions, and helped the prominence and stable presence of the Illyrian narrative. Thus, while the name Illyrians, itself, derived from the Roman province of Illyricum, without clear endonymic connotations in ancient historiography, it remained in long association with the distinct identity of the Balkan Slavs (White 2000, pp.143-144). Although later developments of the Serbian and Croatian national projects showed influences from German “cultural nationalism,” and some protagonists criticized the associations with ancient identities (Ćorović 2001, pp.324-331), the

“culture of the Illyrians” and archaeological artifacts and hypotheses related to it remained relevant up to the 21st century.

In Croatian cities under Habsburg rule, the first museums opened as early as the first half of the 19th century—in Split (1818), Zadar (1830), and Zagreb (1846)—and Illyrian ideas remained current and instrumental even in the creation of the later South Slavic political entity, Yugoslavia.

On the other hand, in the second half of the 19th century, as direct reaction to the emerging power of Illyrism (and later Pan-Slavism) this territorially and culturally undefined, but long-present “ancient identity” began to acquire disperse political connotations (Wilkes 1996, p.5).

In 1856, Austrian science and foreign policy, represented by the diplomat and scholar Johann von Hahn, for the first time argued against the previously monopolized right to the “Illyrian heritage,” artifacts, and narratives by the “Southern Slavs.” Hahn’s book, *Albanian Studies* (*Albanesische Studien*), convincingly presented yet another European people in the Balkans. The Albanians, who had often before been portrayed by Western authors in non-European unfavorable contexts, was also announced by Austrian diplomatic and intellectual reaction as a serious potential claimant of the fables and articulations of the “Illyrian myth” (Wilkes 1996, p.5).

Contrary to Austrian Balkan policies, emancipated Slavic-speaking elites, particularly in Croatia, did not abandon their archaeological, cultural, and political heritage by the end of the 19th century. In 1878 the Croatian Archaeological Society was founded, and in this period significant research and hypotheses on the continuity of “Illyrians” and “Slavs” in the Croatian-Bosnian regions were provided by one of the future “famous” figures of modern archaeology, Arthur Evans, who simultaneously became an important political lobbyist for the freedom of Balkan Slavs from extended Habsburg domination (Wilkes 1996, p.5).

The rootedness of the “Illyrian narratives” in the Balkan identities, has since shown important signs of resilience and continuity. In the twentieth century, the Illyrian myth gained significant interpretations in the attempts to build a Yugoslav identity or at least cohesion within the multi-national kingdom, as well as in the construction of the national identity of the new Albanian state. In this sense, archaeological studies, projects, and scholarly debates gained particular importance within Yugoslav scientific and cultural institutions, with the Illyrian question primarily addressed by the Center for Balkan Studies (*Centar za balkanoloska ispitivanja*) in Sarajevo, as well as the museums in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Skopje, and their professional journals such as Belgrade’s *Starinar*, Zagreb’s *Vjesnik*, and Sarajevo’s *Glasnik*. Further strengthening of unitarist tendencies came from the authoritative journal of the Yugoslav Archaeological Society, *Archaeologica Iugoslavica*, as well as the multilingual *Archaeological Preview* (Wilkes 1996, p.9).

Parallely to this development in neighboring unitary Albania, the “Illyrian myth” escalated into Enver Hoxha’s Cultural Revolution, establishing a clear and unambiguous national myth in which the Illyrians were the unique and direct ancestors of the modern Albanians. It was in this particular context, that in 1972, the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha “established the Academy of Science of the People’s Republic of Albania and through this institution financed numerous excavations, conferences and archaeological, linguistic and historical publications on the Illyrians” (Gori 2012, pp.77-78).

Yet, the impact of the 19th century French “cultural war” with the Habsburgs was not limited to the western edges of the Balkan peninsula. Simultaneously with the promotion of the “Illyrian myth,” French ideas and influences from the period of Napoleonic military-political offensives also gave significant impetus to the creation of the modern Romanian identity, reimagined as a continuation and heritage of ancient Rome (Cărbuș 2004, pp.185-193; White 2000, pp.48-56). During the French administration in Rome, the prominent Moldavian intellectual and early archaeologist Gheorghe Asachi, inspired by Napoleonic administrative ideas for the formation

of a “Dacian Kingdom,” returned to his native Moldavia, where he exerted a strong influence on cultural, educational, and political processes. Asachi and a number of Moldavian, Wallachian, and Transylvanian intellectuals in the subsequent period built the modern Romanian identity based on the ancient fables of the Roman province of Dacia. In the following two centuries, affirming the Roman and Dacian identity of the modern nation became the primary goal of the Romanian national project (Cărbuș 2004, pp.185-193).

In this regard, early studies of archaeological monuments in Rome, such as Asachi’s research on Trajan’s Column and the Vatican libraries, later transferred to the northeastern Balkans in intensive archaeological research of the “Romano-Dacian” and “Dacian” culture of the Balkans, through which modern Romanian nationalists ideologically and territorially envisioned their state and national project. The Romanian national myth, in many respects, structurally resembles France’s “Gallic myth.” On the territory where older Eastern Mediterranean authors placed the Getae, in the Roman period appears a “barbarian tribe” which, according to romantic national narratives, was defeated by the Romans and, like the “Gallo-Celts,” was “ennobled” by Roman culture and marked the territory of modern Romania in antiquity, giving its name to the Roman province of Dacia.

Analyzing the role of archaeology in the construction of Romania as a nation-state, in the *Archaeological Review* from Cambridge, Cătălin Nicolae Popa and Russell Ó Ríagáin observe that “the Dacians gained the status of mythical ancestors of the Romanians, and the task of archaeology became providing material evidence that would demonstrate the strength of the Dacian nation” (Popa & Ó Ríagáin 2012, p.61).

Within these conceptual frameworks, the culture of this region was completely transformed, creating new ethnological characteristics of the “ancient Romanians.” As part of this process, the Slavic and Byzantine scripts were discarded in favor of the new Latin alphabet, and the modern Romanian language was “constructed” through the cleansing of “Slavic, Germanic, Hungarian, Greek (Byzantine), and ... Turkish words, phrases, and grammatical constructs” in exchange for newly accepted Latin and French contributions (White 2000, pp.119-125).

This land, whose history was linked to the constant migration of nomadic tribes from Asia to Europe and often during the Middle Ages called Pechenegia or Cumania (István Vásáry 2005, pp.7-8,27-33,58-59,136), built its modern identity on the “Daco-Roman myth” primarily supported by the presence of archaeological artifacts from the Roman Empire period.

Only in the second half of the twentieth century did the narrative of Romanian national archaeology discreetly change, placing the Dacians in a broader “cultural” context alongside Thracian tribes through the methods of cultural-historical archaeology. The idea behind this politically and nationally motivated narrative is to enable modern Romanians to reject the thesis of their civilization being solely the result of Romanization, but instead to seek a place for their ancestors, the Dacians, within the cultures that created the civilization of the Eastern Mediterranean, from which even the Romans themselves were civilized. These hypotheses, strongly supported by the Romanian communist leadership, “reached their peak ... in 1980, when the party ordered celebrations on the occasion of the 2050th anniversary of the founding of the first Romanian state, during the reign of the Dacian king Burebista” (Popa & Ó Ríagáin 2012, pp.61-63).

Conclusion

The enduring impact of Napoleonic imperialism on the Balkans illustrates how cultural and political forces can intertwine to reshape identities and nation-states. The Napoleonic era’s promotion of classical antiquity provided a powerful ideological resource that Balkan nationalisms

harnessed through archaeology to construct and legitimize their emerging identities. These processes were deeply embedded in the broader context of 19th and 20th-century nationalist struggles, state-building, and cultural revival across the region. Beyond mere academic interest, archaeology became a field of political contestation and nation-building, reflecting competing claims over heritage and belonging. At the same time, Napoleonic France's revolutionary ideas stimulated independence movements not only in the Balkans but also in Western Europe and Latin America, highlighting the global reach of these transformations. Therefore, placing these processes of early development of nationalism and archaeological interest on the edges of the Balkan peninsula in the wider, if not global context, provides a new universal frame for less bias, or at least culturally more neutral, analyses of these important phenomena. Ultimately, the Balkans' encounter with Napoleonic cultural imperialism reveals the complex interplay between empire, nationalism, and cultural memory that has shaped the modern Southeast European landscape.

References

- Blažević, Z. (2010). Indetermination: Narrative identity and symbolic politics in the early modern Illyrism. In B. Trencsényi & M. Zászkaliczky (Eds.), *Whose love of which country: Composite states, national histories and patriotic discourses in early modern East Central Europe* (pp. 203–224). Brill.
- Black, J. (2010). *A history of diplomacy*. Reaktion Books.
- Cărbuș, G. G. (2004). Asachi - un separatist avant la lettre. *Codrul Cosminului*, 10, 185–193.
- Diaz-Andreu, M. (2007). *A world history of nineteenth-century archaeology, nationalism, colonialism, and the past*. Oxford University Press.
- Gori, M. (2012). Who are the Illyrians? The use and abuse of archaeology in the construction of national and trans-national identities in the southwestern Balkans. In *Archaeology and the (De) Construction of national and supra-national polities, Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 27(2). University of Cambridge.
- Hutchinson, J. (2005). *Nations as zones of conflict*. SAGE Publications.
- Čorović, V. (2001). *Istorija srpskog naroda*. Projekat Rastko.
- Olins, W. (2002). Branding the nation – the historical context. *The Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4).
- Popa, C. N., & Ó Ríagáin, R. (2012). Archaeology and nationalism in Europe: Two case studies from the Northwest and Southeast of Europe. In *Archaeology and the (De)Construction of national and supra-national polities, Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 27(2). University of Cambridge.
- Vásáry, I. (2005). *Oriental military in the pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185–1365*. Cambridge University Press.
- White, G. W. (2000). *Nationalism and territory: Constructing group identity in Southeastern Europe*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Wilkes, J. (1996). *The Illyrians*. Blackwell Publishing.