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"Three Countries, Two Lakes, One Future:" The Prespa Lakes and the Signing of the Prespa Agreement

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The Prespa Lakes and the signing of the Prespa Agreement

Loring M. Danforth (Bates College)

From the crest of the ridge at the high point of the only road access from the rest of Greece, the view over the Prespa Lakes opens suddenly in one stunning panorama. Dense forests of beech and oak in the immediate foreground slope down to the open fields and small villages that surround Lesser Prespa Lake. To the west across its shimmering blue water, dark mountains rise along the Albanian frontier. To the north, a narrow isthmus of reeds and sand separates Lesser Prespa from the much larger Greater Prespa Lake. Greater Prespa is bisected by two invisible perpendicular lines: running east-west is the border between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia; running north-south is the border between these two countries and Albania. The borders of all three countries meet at a singular point in the southwest corner of the lake. Beyond Greater Prespa, fading into the distant haze, are the often snow-capped mountains of North Macedonia (see Figure 1.1).

The Prespa Lakes are among the oldest in Europe. They lie in a long trench-like basin created some five million years ago with the formation of a series of faults striking in a northeast-southwest direction. During the Pliocene Epoch, the two lakes were part of one much larger lake whose surface lay some 80 meters higher than that of the present lakes. Greater Prespa, which reaches a depth of 55 meters, covers an area of 250 square kilometers, 65% of which lies in the Republic of North Macedonia, 18% in Albania, and 17% in Greece. Lesser Prespa, which reaches a depth of only eight meters, covers an area of about 50 square kilometers, 90% of it lies in Greece, with only the southwestern corner extending into Albanian territory. Water from Lesser Prespa flows into Greater Prespa through a small stream, while Greater Prespa drains into Lake Ohrid to the north by a series of underground channels. The entire Prespa basin is known worldwide as a center of endemism and exceptional biodiversity.¹

On June 17, 2018, the Prime Ministers of Greece and the Republic of Macedonia met to finalize an agreement to end the bitter dispute that has dominated the relationship between their two countries for almost 30 years. This dispute has centered on the name, “the Republic of Macedonia,” which the newly independent country adopted after the breakup of the former

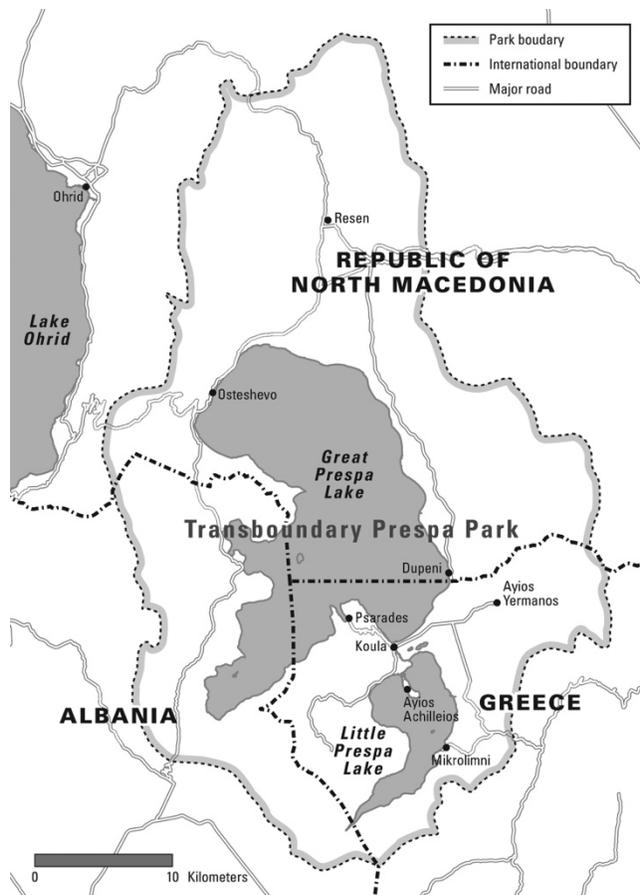


Figure 1.1 Map of Prespa

Credits: "Nat Case, INCase LLC. Road and water data (c) OpenStreetMap contributors."

Yugoslavia in 1991. It is, however, part of a much larger historical conflict, known as the Macedonian Question or the Macedonian Issue, which extends back over a century through the Greek Civil War, both World Wars, the Balkan Wars, the Ilinden Uprising, and the Macedonian Struggle.²

With the signing of the Prespa Agreement, leaders of the Republic of Macedonia agreed to change the name of their country to the Republic of North Macedonia. In exchange, Greek leaders agreed to drop their government's veto of the Republic's applications to join NATO, the European Union, and other international organizations. This agreement, therefore, holds the promise of transforming the relationship between the two countries from one of hostility and conflict into one of good will and cooperation. The choice of location for the signing ceremony—in Greece, on the

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shore of Greater Prespa, in the village of Psarades, just a few kilometers south of what Eleni Myrivili (2004 and 2019) has called "the liquid border" between the two countries—was highly symbolic.

In this essay, I examine the history of the meaning of Prespa as a place in order to understand its significance as the site for the signing of the agreement that bears its name. I offer a "biography of a place," a biography of Prespa, by presenting a series of historical accounts that convey the meaning that Prespa as a place has had at various points in time.³ More specifically, I consider Prespa as the capital of the Bulgarian Empire of Tsar Samuel in the tenth century, the site of the highly contested process of defining the borders of the new Balkan states after World War I, the location of the headquarters of the Provisional Democratic Government of Greece and the capital of "Free

Greece” during the Greek Civil War, the site of the Transboundary Prespa Park, which was established in 2001, and finally the place where the Prespa Agreement between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia was signed on June 17, 2018.⁴

During certain points in its long history, Prespa has occupied positions of political importance and seemed to lie at the center of major historical events. During others, it has seemed to lie forgotten and isolated at the periphery, at the margins, of the Balkans. On the one hand, the Prespa basin is a single, unified ecosystem of worldwide importance because of its incredible biological diversity; on the other, it is a place that is fragmented by the closed borders of countries whose relationships have often been hostile. The Prespa Lakes have been the scene of terrible conflict and violence, but they are also a place of peace and natural beauty. Prespa may seem like the end of the world. It is located, as its residents say, “at the end of Greece.” But it is also located at the center of Macedonia.⁵

The capital of the Bulgarian Empire

During the Byzantine era, the Prespa region was an important center of Orthodox Christianity. From the tenth through the sixteenth centuries, many significant monuments were built there in testament to the vital role the Orthodox Church has played in the lives of the people of Macedonia. Hermitages, churches, monasteries, and a great basilica—many in ruins, some still in use—can be found on the islands and along the shores of the two lakes. The Via Egnatia, the main land route linking Rome and Constantinople, passed nearby.⁶

In the last quarter of the tenth century (ca. 976), Tsar Samuel ascended to the throne of the First Bulgarian Empire, a Christian Empire engaged in a fierce struggle with the Byzantine Empire for hegemony over the central Balkans. One of Samuel’s first acts as emperor was to establish a new imperial capital on a small peninsula (now an island) in Lesser Prespa Lake. Here Samuel built fortifications, a palace, and an immense basilica that was intended to serve as the seat of an autocephalous Bulgarian

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Patriarch. At the height of its power, Samuel’s empire, with its capital in Prespa, controlled a vast area extending from the Danube River in the north to the Aegean Sea in the south and from the Black Sea in the east to the Adriatic in the west.⁷

In 986, as part of his efforts to expand his empire, Samuel captured the city of Larissa in Central Greece. In addition to taking captive thousands of the city’s inhabitants and bringing them to Prespa to help build his new capital, Samuel took the holy relics of St. Achilleios from the metropolitan church of Larissa and “translated” them to his new capital, where he placed them in the basilica he had just built. According to one Byzantine chronicler, this basilica, the Basilica of St. Achilleios on the island of the same name, was “a building of the greatest size and beauty” (Skylitzes 2010, 313).

In 1014, the Byzantine army under Emperor Basil II inflicted a devastating defeat on Samuel’s forces in what is now Southwestern Bulgaria. During the battle, Basil captured Samuel’s entire army—some 15,000 men—and proceeded to blind them all, leaving one of every hundred men with sight in one eye so they could lead the defeated army home. As a result, Basil II came to be known throughout the Byzantine world as “Basil the Bulgar-slayer.” According to tradition, Tsar Samuel died soon after his defeat and was buried in the Basilica of St. Achilleios.

For the next 200 years, the Prespa region enjoyed great prosperity, but by the end of the 11th century, the major buildings of the area had been destroyed by Latin mercenaries. Over the following centuries, Prespa fell successively under the control of the Second Bulgarian Empire, the restored Byzantine Empire, the Serbian Empire, and finally the Ottoman Empire. Then, after World War I, the Great Powers drew the present national borders in the area, borders that divided the two Prespa Lakes among Greece, Albania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and

Slovenes, which later became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and still later the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The history of Tsar Samuel in the Prespa region took on national significance for the countries involved in the Macedonian Conflict in the second half of the 20th century. In 1965, during the first systematic excavations of the Basilica of St. Achilleios, the Greek archaeologist Nikos K. Moutsopoulos of the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki discovered a sarcophagus containing a partial skeleton and a small horde of Byzantine coins. After years of careful analysis by what Moutsopoulos refers to as a “scientific committee” of professors and priests, the Greek Orthodox Church officially recognized the remains as those of St. Achilleios. On the eve of May 15, 1981, these sacred relics, vested now with national significance, were “retranslated” from Prespa back to Larissa in a Greek military helicopter. The next day, the patron saint of Larissa was received in a special ceremony held in the city’s soccer stadium in the presence of the Archbishop of Athens and the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece. Today the relics of Larissa’s “unsleeping and loving shepherd” lie encased in a silver chest

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that rests in an elaborately carved bier in the city’s metropolitan cathedral (Moutsopoulos 1999, 131).

During further excavations of the basilica, Moutsopoulos discovered a grave that would prove even more noteworthy than that of Saint Achilleios, a grave containing a complete skeleton covered with a fragment of cloth woven from gold and silk threads. After the skeleton was examined at the Laboratory of Comparative Anatomy at the Medical School of the University of Thessaloniki, Moutsopoulos announced that he had discovered the body of Tsar Samuel himself. His conclusion was based on the correspondence between two sets of “facts:” physical attributes of the remains, on the one hand, and historical accounts of Samuel’s ancestry, on the other. The skeleton exhibited slight prognathism of the face, which was “a Mongoloid trait” indicating “traces of proto-Bulgarian ancestry,” while the great height of the nasal bone was a clear sign of “Armenian racial admixture” (Moutsopoulos 1999, 182). According to one Byzantine chronicler, Samuel was the son of a Bulgarian count and his wife, who had the common Armenian name Ripsime (Skylitzes 2010, 312). More cautious scholars hesitated to accept Moutsopoulos’ identification of the remains.⁸

On October 6, 2014, the 1000th anniversary of the death of Tsar Samuel, celebrations were held throughout Bulgaria to honor the death of the “father of the Bulgarian nation.” The same day a formal ceremony took place at the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki. “Samuel’s remains” were removed from storage and put on display so that the President of Bulgaria and Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the last King of Bulgaria, could pay their respects. In the preceding months, Greek and Bulgarian officials had worked hard to negotiate an agreement by which this “national treasure” (which had been “imprisoned” in Thessaloniki) could be “returned” to Bulgaria. In the end, the negotiations were unsuccessful, as difficult memories of past conflicts prevented from taking place what the President of Bulgaria called “a symbolic act of historic reconciliation between the Bulgarian and Greek people” (Leviev-Sawyer 2015).⁹

It is not just Bulgarians, however, who claim Tsar Samuel as their illustrious ancestor. In an effort to assert their existence as a nation distinct from the Bulgarians, the Greeks, and the Serbs, Macedonians have constructed a canon of national heroes that also includes Samuel. Macedonian nationalists claim that he was the leader of a *Macedonian*, not a *Bulgarian*, empire both because of its geographical location and its supposed linguistic and cultural distinctiveness.¹⁰ Speaking to a Bulgarian reporter, Moutsopoulos dismissed these Macedonian claims out of hand. “Macedonians,” he said, “have nothing else to prove their existence” (Dobrev 2007).

Moutsopoulos presents a more formal refutation of Macedonian claims to Tsar Samuel in the epilogue of his 1999 monograph on the Basilica of St. Achilleios. He explicitly describes his archaeological excavations in Prespa as a service to the Greek nation and claims that they demonstrate the Greekness of the inhabitants of the Prespa during Samuel’s reign

his conclusion, Moutsopoulos draws parallels between the conflict between the Byzantine Empire and Samuel’s Bulgarian Empire in the tenth century, on the one hand, and the conflicts between Greece and its Slavic neighbors to the north in the 20th century, on the other. Moutsopoulos ends his monograph with a description of Prespa as “the most beautiful Greek landscape,” adding “just like its population, its customs, and its soul; it is Greece” (Moutsopoulos 1999, 327).¹¹

Delimiting the borders of the Balkans

After World War I, the process of imposing national borders on the Prespa region and Macedonia more generally was complicated, protracted, and highly contested. The Treaty of London, signed in May 1913 at the conclusion of the First Balkan War, committed the Great Powers of Europe to the establishment of an Albanian state, but it left the borders of the new state undefined. The task of drawing these borders was delegated to a Conference of Ambassadors, which on December 13, 1913, with the Protocol of Florence, proposed a tentative solution to the competing claims of Greece, Albania, and Serbia over territory in central Macedonia. Even at this stage of the negotiations, however, the Conference of Ambassadors was unable to agree on the location of the proposed borders in the Prespa region at the southeastern corner of the new Albanian state because all three Balkan countries were making conflicting territorial claims in the area. All three sought to include the Prespa Lakes within their own boundaries.¹²

Because of the ethnic and linguistic complexity of the area’s inhabitants and their conflicting national loyalties (a literal “*salad Macédoine*”), and because of the fierce counterclaims presented by Greece, Albania, and Serbia, the Conference of Ambassadors decided to adopt a “lacustrine solution” and divide the Prespa Lakes among all three states in order to share among them the important economic resources the lakes provided. The two Prespa Lakes, therefore, became “frontier lakes;” lakes, in other words, that formed the international border between two or more states. As a result of the outbreak of World War I, however, the final determination of the borders of Albania was delayed for many years,

On July 1, 1919, three days after the signing of the Versailles Treaty that marked the end of World War I, the Great Powers appointed another Conference of Ambassadors to determine the southern borders of Albania. This second conference was heavily lobbied by ministers and *chargés d’affaires* from Greece, Albania, and Serbia to incorporate particular villages, monasteries, and lakes within their respective territories. The Albanians, supported by the Italians, charged the Serbians with atrocities, the French and the British exchanged memoranda, and all three Balkan states were instructed to withdraw their troops from the contested zone.

This second Conference of Ambassadors established a Delimitation Commission, whose charge was to physically demarcate the southern border

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of Albania from the Prespa region to the coast of the Adriatic near Corfu. The Commission, which arrived in the area in 1922 and worked steadily for three years, was made up of several hundred people. It was led by delegates from Italy, England, and France and included representatives from Greece and Albania. In addition to diplomats, civil servants, and military officers, the Commission was also staffed by a variety of people with specific technical skill—drivers, typists, interpreters, and surveyors.

While the Commission had been instructed to follow as closely as possible the boundary line that had been proposed by the original 1913 Protocol of Florence, it was granted leeway to deviate from this line in light of circumstances arising on the ground. The Commission consulted old tax records and maps to determine the administrative boundaries of old Ottoman *kazas* and *sanjaks*.¹³ It also took into consideration the preferences of local inhabitants in an effort to give them the right to determine their own future. Mother tongue, religion, incipient national identity, proximity to the cities of Korçë (in Albania), Bitola (in Yugoslavia), and Florina (in Greece), as well as the location of the fields and pastures of specific villages all entered into the Commission’s decisions.

The work of the Commission staff was extremely challenging. They used theodolites, plane tables, and steel tapes to survey the difficult terrain. In creating borders where none had existed before, they cut down trees to open boundary lanes through forests, and they constructed pillars or pyramids out of concrete mixed on the spot. The side of the marker facing each country was inscribed with its initials in the appropriate alphabet; the other two sides were marked with a unique serial number.

When the entire boundary had been demarcated in this way, the Commission prepared detailed maps and descriptions indicating the location and elevation of each border marker and the distance between them. These documents, printed in triplicate at the Geographical Institute of Florence, were then formally submitted to the Conference of Ambassadors. The final instrument of demarcation of the borders of Albania, Yugoslavia, and Greece was signed in Paris on July 30, 1926.¹⁴

In this way, the Prespa Lakes were divided among three countries. What is known as the “tripoint” or “trijunction” (where the border running east-west between Greece and what is now the Republic of North Macedonia meets the border running north-south between these two countries and Albania) is located at 40°51' N latitude, 20°59' E longitude in the southwest corner of Greater Prespa Lake. Twenty kilometers south of this “tripoint,” the border between Greece and Albania cuts across the western arm of Lesser Prespa.

For much of the 20th century, Greece’s border with the former Yugoslavia across the Prespa basin was clearly marked both on land and on the surface of Greater Prespa Lake. A line of white concrete pillars still runs from the wooded slopes of Mt. Varnoundas down a ridge between the villages of Dupeni to the north and Ayios Yermanos to the south. In the past, a lighted

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signal marked where the Greek-Yugoslav border reached the eastern shore of Greater Prespa, and a row of 18 white, cone-shaped buoys over a meter and a half tall and held in place by cement anchors, one every 600 meters, extended for over 11 kilometers from the eastern shore of the lake to the “tripoint” (Pondaven 1972, 83).

With the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, this border was demilitarized. Guardhouses fell into ruin, dirt roads along the border became overgrown, and the line of buoys marking the border across the lake was no longer maintained. In an abandoned field near Koula, a small settlement at the western end of the narrow isthmus that separates the two Prespa Lakes, lies a cone of rusted sheet metal with blocks of wood fastened around its base, which is attached to a short length of chain. The number “7” painted in blue and some patches of white have survived the years of neglect. Out on the surface of Greater Prespa, the border between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia still exists, but it is nowhere to be seen. It is an invisible line that blocks all legal human traffic, but presents no obstacle to the huge pelicans soaring through the air above.

Ground zero of the Greek Civil War

Hitler’s army invaded Greece on April 6, 1941, and in a matter of weeks completely overwhelmed the Greek and British troops defending the country. The Axis occupation of Greece that followed was a period of great deprivation and hardship throughout the country. Many social and political divisions, exacerbated by the occupation, contributed directly to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1946, waged between the Democratic Army of Greece under the control of the Greek Communist Party, on the one hand, and the Greek National Army under the authority of the right-wing Greek government, on the other. The Democratic Army enjoyed some success on the battlefield early in the war, particularly in the mountainous regions near Greece’s northern border, but the tide soon turned in favor of the Greek army. On October 16, 1949, the Democratic Army Radio announced a “temporary end” to hostilities, and over 140,000 refugees left Greece for exile in Eastern Europe. With that the Greek Civil War came to a bitter conclusion.¹⁵

During the early years of World War II, when the Prespa region was occupied by the Italian forces, their headquarters were located at Koula.¹⁶ Because they had experienced severe discrimination during the Metaxas dictatorship in the late 1930s, many Slavic-speaking “local Macedonians” in the Prespa region registered with the occupying forces as Bulgarians. They were then issued identification cards that entitled them to receive rations of soap, sugar, flour, and bread. After the war, many of these “Bulgarians” fled to Bulgaria; of those who remained many were imprisoned by the Greek government.

In September 1943, with the fall of Mussolini and the withdrawal of the Italians, Prespa fell under German occupation. As the Civil War intensified,

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fighting increased between government forces based in towns and communist fighters in the surrounding mountains. The most important Greek Army post in Prespa was located in the village of Mikrolimni on the eastern shore of Lesser Prespa. On June 8, 1947, when communists attacked the police station there, government troops were prevented from sending reinforcements because of well-planned guerilla ambushes that blocked their way. Despite cement machine gun nests along the lakeshore manned by the Greek army, the communists came down from the hills above the village and captured the post killing 11 of the 12 soldiers defending it.

For the rest of the Civil War, Prespa remained fully under the control of the Democratic Army. The communists established the headquarters of the Provisional Democratic Government of Greece in the village of Ayios Yermanos in the hills above the eastern end of the isthmus between the two lakes. They opened a school there to prepare Macedonian language teachers to work in elementary schools in Slavic-speaking areas of Greek Macedonia. They also built training camps, prisons, machine shops, and hospitals; they even planned to build an airport for planes promised by the government of the Soviet Union, but never actually sent.

Living conditions in Prespa were difficult. Food was scarce, with daily rations of 250 grams of corn and no salt or olive oil. Villagers were forced to boil weeds and grind corn cobs into flour to survive. Frequent bombing raids by the Greek Air Force destroyed churches and schools; they also killed and wounded many children. One woman from Mikrolimni I spoke with described napalm bombs as “bottles of gasoline falling like chains.” During this time, Prespa, the capital of what Greek communists referred to as “Free Greece,” was ground zero of the Greek Civil War.

The final battles of the war were contested in the mountains of Grammos and Vitsi to the south and west of Prespa. In August 1949, the defeated communist forces were forced to flee into Albania along the isthmus between the two lakes and then across the stream at Koula. At the height of this retreat, on August 14, 1948, Douglas C-47 Dakotas of the Greek Air Force attacked the isthmus with 155 sorties, during which they dropped thousands of kilograms of ordnance. A Macedonian from Kastoria I spoke with in Toronto, who participated in the retreat, remembers the planes crushing guerrillas with their tires, the wooden bridge across the stream being destroyed by bombs, communist soldiers drowning from the weight of their heavy packs, and the water, full of corpses, turning red with blood.

For many years after the military conflict itself was over, the traumatic impact of the Civil War continued to polarize Greek society. For three decades, Greece was ruled by a succession of right-wing governments—some democratically elected, some not—whose anticommunist policies and Cold War rhetoric led to the persecution of a whole generation of leftists. A process of liberalization and political reconciliation that began after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974 continued when the Panhellenic Socialist

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Movement (PASOK) came to power in 1981. Nevertheless, memories of the Greek Civil War remain a powerful divisive force in Greece to this day.

The impact of the Civil War on the villages of Prespa was devastating. Churches, schools, and houses were destroyed; whole villages abandoned; fields left uncultivated; roads badly damaged; and mountainsides scarred with pillboxes, trenches, and landmines. While the population of Greek Prespa had stood at over 10,000 in 1940, by 1951, two years after the war, it had fallen to under 3,000 (Papadopoulos 2016, 634). More than half of the inhabitants of Prespa had fled to Yugoslavia and other countries in Eastern Europe. Many others scattered to Thessaloniki and Athens, Canada, and Australia, in search of better lives, leaving behind only the elderly to carry on the burden of daily life in what had truly become a deserted place.

During the Cold War, Prespa was declared a “border zone” by the Greek government and placed under a strict regime of military surveillance and control, whose goal was to protect a politically sensitive area, impose national purity on an ideologically and ethnically “polluted” region, and ensure its full incorporation into the Greek state. Political refugees who had been born in Prespa and who were visiting Greece from abroad required special permits to visit the villages of their birth. Even local residents needed to show white identity cards at each one of the military checkpoints located within the Prespa basin.

In the decades after the Civil War, depopulated Prespa villages were either left to fall into ruin or resettled by Vlachs and refugees from Asia Minor, who were considered “loyal Greeks” by the government. Within the Prespa basin, the borders with Albania and Yugoslavia were tightly closed. In addition, “internal borders” were created between Prespa and the rest of Greece, between a dangerous, marginal, and not fully Greek, border zone that required special monitoring and surveillance and what was considered safely and unambiguously Greece.¹⁷

After the fall of the right-wing military dictatorship in 1974, restrictions on entering the Prespa basin were relaxed, and the military presence there reduced. In the 1980s under the socialist government of PASOK, these restrictions were lifted entirely. As the Cold War came to an end, Prespa became less isolated, and its prospects for economic development grew more likely.¹⁸

The transboundary Prespa Park: “Three Countries, Two Lakes, One Future”

The traditional farming, fishing, and grazing practices that characterized village life in the Prespa basin through the 1960s coexisted in relative harmony with the natural environment. The ecological health and the attendant biodiversity of Prespa were generally compatible with the subsistence-based economy of the human population of the area. During this period, the

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relationship between “man and nature” was a stable and positive one (Catsadorakis 1999).

In the late 1960s, the ornithological significance of the Prespa Lakes drew the attention of European naturalists, and in the early 1970s steps were taken at the national and international levels to protect and preserve the natural environment of the region. In 1971, the Greek government designated the Prespa Lakes as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, and in 1974, by presidential decree, the Greek portion of the basin was declared a National Forest.¹⁹ For several reasons, however, these initial efforts at environmental protection proved largely ineffective. Environmental regulations were not enforced, funding for necessary projects was completely inadequate, local residents and regional government agencies were not consulted, and relevant environmental laws did not apply well to a region with a substantial human population.

In the mid-1980s, a pilot project of the Integrated Mediterranean Programmes sponsored by the European Economic Community was carried out in Prespa. Its goal was “to improve the socioeconomic conditions and infrastructure in an isolated and under-developed area” of Greece (Pyrovetsi 1989, 203). The project funded the completion of an

extensive irrigation network, as well as the construction of a fish-breeding station and a fish-canning factory, both of which were unsuccessful and soon closed. During this period, the cultivation of beans in the region was intensified to the point where it became a monoculture. All these developments had a negative impact on the ecology of the region and severely threatened the biodiversity of the area. Irrigation led to a lowering of the level of Lesser Prespa Lake, the use of fertilizer led to its eutrophication, and the steep decline in the extent of wet meadows surrounding it destroyed a crucial environment necessary for the health of populations of a variety of endangered species of birds, fish, and plants.²⁰

One of the most significant events in the on-going efforts to protect the natural environment of the Prespa basin was the 1991 founding of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP). The SPP was created with the participation of a variety of Greek and international environmental organizations, including the World Wildlife Fund, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the Hellenic Ornithological Society. The mission of the SPP has been twofold: to protect the biodiversity of the Prespa Lakes and to improve the standard of living and preserve the cultural heritage of area residents.

The SPP succeeded in overcoming the hostility many local residents felt toward “the ecologists” and eventually persuaded them to adopt more environmentally friendly agricultural practices. The SPP also constructed visitors’ centers in the park, carried out educational and public awareness campaigns for residents and visitors, and conducted much-needed monitoring projects and scientific studies. In addition, the SPP carried out management programs to monitor the level of Lesser Prespa Lake, to increase the area of wet meadows around it, to reduce illegal hunting and logging in the

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park, and to protect the endangered species of birds, mammals, fish, and plants that lived there.²¹

The fact that the Prespa basin was divided among three countries whose relationships for over a century have been characterized by national, religious, and ethnic conflicts presented particular challenges to the ecologists interested in protecting the environment of the region. Since the Prespa basin is obviously one ecological unit in which national boundaries—whether over land or water—were completely irrelevant, any serious steps to protect the biodiversity of the region had to be carried out at a transnational level and involve the participation of all three states among which the basin was shared.

A second major step in the preservation of the environment of the Prespa region was, therefore, the joint declaration by the Prime Ministers of Albania, the Republic of Macedonia, and Greece of the Transboundary Prespa Park, which took place in Ayios Yermanos on February 2, 2001, World Wetlands Day. This declaration recognized that “the Prespa Lakes and their surrounding catchment are unique for their geomorphology, their ecological wealth, and their biodiversity, which gives the area significant international importance.” It acknowledged that “individual national activities should be complemented by international collaboration,” and it proclaimed “the ‘Prespa Park’ as the first transboundary protected area in South Eastern Europe.” The declaration also stated that it would secure “the conservation of the world’s most important biological resources and ecosystems into the next millennium.” Finally, it promised the “enhanced cooperation” among the three countries in order to:

a) maintain and protect the unique ecological values of the “Prespa Park,” b) prevent and/or reverse the causes of its habitat degradation, c) explore appropriate management methods for the sustainable use of the Prespa Lakes waters and d) spare no efforts so that the “Prespa Park” become and remain a model of its kind as well as an additional reference to the peaceful collaboration among our countries.²²

The motto of the Transboundary Prespa Park came to be “Three Countries, Two Lakes, One Future.” (Papadopoulos 2010, 187).

In 2004, another development took place that further established the Transboundary Prespa Park as a symbol of transnational cooperation in the field of environmental protection. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature established the Balkan Green Belt along the northern border of Greece. It passes right through the park. The

goal of the Balkan Green Belt was to transform what had previously been a no-man's land running along the Iron Curtain (broadly defined) into a protected transboundary natural area that would serve as an example of "conservation without frontiers" and provide "a new image for the Balkans" (Terry, Ullrich, and Riecken 2006, 61). The Balkan Green Belt is part of a much

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larger project, the European Green Belt, which runs from the Barents Sea at the Russian-Norwegian border in the north, through Central Europe, to the Balkans in the south. The establishment of the European Green Belt was intended to serve as "a global symbol of transboundary cooperation in nature conservation and sustainable development" (Terry, Ullrich, and Riecken 2006, viii).

One of the main reasons the Transboundary Prespa Park contains such an impressive degree of biodiversity is its location at the intersection of geological, climatological, and biological borders. Unlike the political boundaries between states that the park is better known for crossing, these natural borders mark transitions from one environmental zone or region to another. The Prespa Park is, therefore, a transboundary park not only in a political sense, but in an ecological sense as well.

The geological substratum to the west and south of Lesser Prespa Lake is composed of sedimentary limestones from the Mesozoic era. The soil in this area is alkaline and gray in color. To the east of the lake, the substratum is composed of older igneous granites from the Paleozoic era. The soil in this area is acidic and reddish-brown in color. These two soil types, both found in the Prespa Park, support two very different plant communities. Another natural boundary spanned by the Prespa Park is that between the Mediterranean and European climate zones. According to George Catsadorakis, a leading expert on the natural history of Prespa, the park "occupies a frontier and intermediate position" between the warm, dry Mediterranean and the more temperate climate of central Europe (Catsadorakis 1999, 94).²³

The wet meadows around Lesser Prespa constitute by far the richest biome in the park. These meadows, which are located at the edge of the lake—right at the boundary between water and land—were once much more widespread than they are now because villagers no longer burn and cut the dense reed beds that grow along the lakeshore as they once did. As a result, these reed beds have largely replaced the environmentally more valuable wet meadows. Characterized by shallow water, short vegetation, and seasonal flooding, these wet meadows are the most fertile and productive habitat in the park. This is where large numbers of fish spawn and water birds feed.

Julian Hoffman, who has written sensitively about the natural history of the Prespa region, tells a story that perfectly captures the ease with which the natural world transcends political boundaries. Walking along the southern shore of Greater Prespa Lake, he noticed an irregular line of apple trees growing in the sandy soil parallel to the edge of the lake. Apple growing was, and still is, a major agricultural enterprise on the north side of the lake in the Republic of Macedonia. Surplus apples were often dumped into the lake, where winds and currents carried them south across the border into Greece. When conditions were right, apples from the Republic of Macedonia produced trees growing in Greece. "Immigrant

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apple trees," Hoffman writes, "now flower and fruit along parts of Greek coast, the land having held on to the cargo of seeds, rooting the unregimented arrivals" (Hoffman 2013, 23).

Prespa: "The Lake of Reconciliation"²⁴

Inhabitants of the Greek part of the Prespa basin sometimes refer to Psarades as “the last village in Greece.” Beyond it lie the open waters of Greater Prespa Lake and in the distance the shores of Albania and North Macedonia. The village of Psarades—Nivitsa in Macedonian—is situated at the head of a deep inlet that cuts sharply into a mountainous peninsula at the southern end of the lake. This peninsula, known locally as “Africa” for reasons that are not entirely clear, projects out from Albanian territory between the two Prespa Lakes. Psarades is tenuously linked to the rest of Greece by a small bridge at Koula across the stream that joins the two lakes. Painted on the limestone cliffs across the inlet from the village is a fresco of the All Holy Virgin Mary. Further along the shore, small Byzantine chapels stand in shaded clefts in the rocks high over the lake. Above the inlet, backed up against the Albanian border, rises Mt. Devas, the site of the last desperate battles of the Greek Civil War.

Although Psarades now has fewer than 100 permanent residents, its population swells in the summer with the return of villagers and their families from as far away as Canada and Australia. Some villagers still work as fishermen, the profession from which the village takes its Greek name, but most of them earn a living from the many tourists who arrive by bus for an afternoon meal or who stay longer to enjoy the beauty of the park. At the edge of the village, houses and stables stand in ruin, roofs buckled and balconies collapsed. Along the shore runs a paved promenade bordered on one side with fish restaurants, tavernas, and small hotels. On the other, green reed beds extend out to the blue waters of the inlet.

At the entrance to the village stands a small monument in the shape of an ancient Greek funerary stele. Beneath a small triangular pediment, carved in low relief is the Star of Vergina, one of the most contested symbols in the Macedonian Conflict given its association with Alexander the Great, Phillip of Macedon, and the ancient Macedonians.²⁵ Inscribed below it is a message from a Greek Macedonian organization in Chicago: “Heroic border guards of Psarades, worthy Hellenes, sentries at the borders of our Fatherland, we, your brothers, send you a message of love and solidarity in the sacred struggle you are waging for Macedonia, July 1993.”

Next to this reminder of the role that Prespa has played in the painful history of war and nationalist conflict that has characterized the relationship between Greece and her northern neighbor for over a century, stands a sign attesting to the more positive role Prespa has begun to play in the region. This sign promotes the environmental programs the Society for the Protection of Prespa conducts in the Transboundary Prespa Park.

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On the morning of June 17, 2018, the villagers of Psarades witnessed something most of them had never before seen in their lives—a motorboat approached the village from the north, crossed the invisible “liquid border,” and landed at the jetty in front of the village, a jetty that had been enlarged especially for the occasion. When Zoran Zaev and Nikola Dimitrov, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, respectively, stepped ashore, they were greeted warmly by their Greek counterparts, Alexis Tsipras and Nikos Kotzias. In a large white tent setup nearby, several hundred dignitaries including UN Special Representative, Matthew Nimitz, and high-ranking EU officials awaited the start of the formalities.

The celebratory climax of the signing of the Prespa Agreement was captured in still photographs and videos that accompanied media reports of the event. The two Foreign Ministers exchanged leather bound copies of the agreement. Behind them, stood the two Prime Ministers flanked by their countries’ flags, and in the background the blue surface of Greater Prespa Lake. In his speech, Prime Minister Zaev called on the leaders of both countries to move past “all the issues that divided” them and “stay as united forever as we are on this day.” He praised the signing of the agreement as a “historic victory” that signified “eternal peace and progress in the Balkans.” Prime Minister Tsipras in turn described the agreement as an opportunity “to heal the wounds of time, to open a path for peace and brotherhood and growth for our countries.” He went on to decry “the poison of chauvinism and the divisions of nationalist hatred” that for too long had characterized the relationships between the two Balkan neighbors (Clarke 2018).

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the two Prime Ministers and the two Foreign Ministers returned by boat across the lake—across the invisible, liquid border between their two countries—for a celebratory lunch in the Macedonian resort of Osteshevo. This was the first time a Greek Prime Minister had visited the Republic of Macedonia since its

independence in 1991. Prime Minister Tsipras later told a reporter that the atmosphere at the lunch was “very good ... almost like a wedding reception.”²⁶

Responses to the signing of the Prespa Agreement have varied tremendously. The Greek Minister of Tourism proclaimed: “The two lakes of Prespa are a source of life and of natural and cultural wealth of immeasurable value,” while the Governor of Western Macedonia described Prespa as “a blessed place within the Balkans, with great responsibility for the peoples coexisting there The lake waters must be united rather than divided” (Athens News Agency 2018). Many commentators expressed the hope that in the near future both the land and the water borders in and around the lakes would be opened in order to promote the economic development of the area. As one resident of Psarades told a reporter, “This lake unites us; it doesn’t separate us. We’ve been waiting a half a century for this moment.”²⁷

Locally, nationally, and internationally, however, there has been a great deal of opposition to the Prespa Agreement. Nationalists on both sides have vilified the agreement as an act of treason and a betrayal of their countries’

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national interests. In Psarades itself, the church bell—draped in a Greek flag—rang in mourning throughout the signing ceremony. The village priest said, “Something died today in Greece ... They are taking from us our soul, our name” (Kantouris and Kironski 2018). On the day of the signing, Greek police cordoned off all approaches to Psarades, forcing several thousand demonstrators to protest the agreement in the village of Pisoderi 40 kilometers away. Some protesters carried banners that read: “Macedonian identity can’t be given away” and “There is only one Macedonia and it is Greek.” Others threw rocks at the police, who responded with tear gas and stun grenades, injuring both police and demonstrators. In the months that followed, Greeks staged protests against the Prespa Agreement in Athens, Thessaloniki, and at the main border crossing from Greece into the Republic of North Macedonia. Macedonians staged protests in Skopje and Bitola, some of which also turned violent (Tagaris and Vasovic 2018).

In addition, there was significant hostility to the Prespa Agreement in both Greek and Macedonian diaspora communities in Australia, Canada, and the United States. On the one-year anniversary of the signing of the Agreement, the Federation of World Pan Macedonian Associations (a Greek Macedonian organization) held its annual convention in Psarades. Several hundred people gathered on the lakeshore in front of the village; many were wearing traditional Greek national costumes and carrying Greek flags and flags depicting the Star of Vergina. They sang the Greek national anthem and then danced to patriotic Greek music. Nina Gatzoulis, Supreme President of the Pan Macedonian Association USA, and other officials announced their intention “to invalidate the treasonous Prespa Agreement” and “begin a new Macedonian Struggle” (Tarakoulas 2019).

Conclusion: Macedonia as a transboundary place

I have often stood on the sandy shore of the isthmus between the two Prespa Lakes near the stream at Koula and gazed out at the “tripoint” and the “liquid borders” that meet there. I find the place uncanny—both fascinating and frightening—a mysterious point where the territories of three countries meet, two invisible lines across the unbroken surface of a lake that define borders that people cannot cross.

The Prespa region with these uncanny borders has intrigued other anthropologists as well. Eleni Myrivili (2004, 2019) writes about these borders as “ghosts” or “specters” that “haunt” the present with memories of a more violent past. Sarah Green (2005, 2019) uses other equally suggestive metaphors to convey the significance of these borders. They are “traces,” whose location, form, and meaning change through time; they are “tidemarks,” lines left by the water on the shore indicating a former boundary between sea and land. A “tidemark” is a particularly appropriate image for the Prespa border, evoking as it does the lines running along the limestone cliffs of Greater Prespa Lake that have been left not by the tides, but by

the higher levels of the lake that existed at some earlier point in time. Olga Demetriou (2013) writes about the “capriciousness,” the unstable and “slip- pery” quality of another border, the Greek-Turkish border in Thrace, while she and Rozita Dimova (2019b) focus on the “material and non-material” aspects of borders in general and the apparatus—guards, checkpoints, fences, barriers, and walls—that often accompanies them.²⁸

The invisible point that marks the coming together, the confluence, of national borders in the middle of Greater Prespa Lake lies, it seems to me, at the heart of the Macedonian Conflict. Macedonia has long been a contested place, a place where nation-states, particularly Greece and its northern neighbor of the many names, have unsuccessfully attempted to lay mutually exclusive claim to everything Macedonian—not only the territory of Macedonia, but the name, the identity, the history, the language, the cul- ture, and the people of Macedonia.

George, a good friend of mine, was born in a village near Florina. He identified as Greek (he had a Greek national identity) until he migrated to Melbourne, Australia, and realized he was actually Macedonian and not Greek (he developed a Macedonian national identity). George loved noth- ing more than to argue about Macedonia, at soccer matches, at village dances and picnics, or at construction sites where he worked. George always claimed that at the Niki-Medzitlija border crossing near Florina there were signs on both sides of the border that read: “Welcome to Macedonia.” He jokingly dismissed the whole concept of a border there, saying, “It’s a bor- der between Macedonia and Macedonia. It’s Macedonia on both sides; it doesn’t separate anything at all.”

George is right. In Prespa, on both sides of the border, lies Greater Prespa Lake; on both sides of the border lies the Transboundary Prespa Park; and on both sides of the border lies Macedonia. One could object, of course, that to the south of the border lies what could be called “South Macedonia” (but which is actually known as Aegean Macedonia or more widely Greek Macedonia), while to the north of the border lies “North Macedonia” (which has also been known as Vardar Macedonia, Yugoslav Macedonia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Republic of Macedonia, and which now has been officially designated the Republic of North Macedonia). In the last analysis, however, it’s all Macedonia.

In a more serious vein, following Demetriou and Dimova’s suggestion that we explore the concept of “remaking borders” (2019a, xi), I would like to propose that we reimagine the border between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia by transforming its meaning, its significance, from what has been a negative sense of separation, partition, and conflict, into what could in the future be a positive sense of connection, harmony, and reconciliation. By adopting metaphors from the Transboundary Prespa Park and its ecological unity and integrity, it would be possible to remake the borders of northern Greece so that they are no longer a place of fear and violence, but rather a place of natural beauty and peace.

It is my hope that the Prespa Agreement will help realize the full promise of the Transboundary Prespa Park by serving as a model for future coop- eration between Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia. It is my hope that this agreement will mark the end of a long period of nationalist conflict involving mutually exclusive claims to the territory, the heritage, and the name of Macedonia; that it will initiate a period in which instead pluralism and multiculturalism predominate. In this way, the historical and cultural complexity of Macedonia—like the biological diversity of the Transboundary Prespa Park—can be recognized as the common legacy of all the peoples of the southern Balkans. In this way, the borders between Macedonian national history and culture, on the one hand, and Greek national history and culture, on the other, would be washed away like tide- marks, like traces in the sand. They would become invisible like lines drawn on water. Just as the Prespa Lakes with their endangered species of pelicans and trout are the shared natural heritage of both countries, so figures like Alexander the Great and Tsar Samuel and symbols like the Star of Vergina, would be accepted as the shared heritage of both nations, rather than the exclusive property of one or the other.

If the border between the histories and cultures of North Macedonia and Greece, the border between the definitions of what is Macedonian and what is Greek, were to become as invisible, as immaterial, as the border between the two countries that runs across the surface of Greater Prespa Lake, then it would be possible to recognize Alexander the Great and Tsar Samuel as transboundary historical figures, the Star of Vergina as a transboundary symbol and the Macedonian language as a transboundary language. And finally it would be possible to recognize Macedonia itself as a transboundary place.

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Notes

1. For additional information on the natural history of the Prespa Lakes, see Catsadorakis (1999), Crivelli and Catsadorakis (1997), and Standring (2009).
2. On the Macedonian Question generally, see Cowan (2000), Danforth (1995), Karakasidou (1997), Mackridge and Yannakakis (1997), and Roudometoff (2000 and 2002).
3. On the biography of place, see Kate Brown (2004).

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This chapter is based on short periods of fieldwork carried out in the Greek part of the Prespa basin over the past 30 years, as well as a longer period of fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2017.

I am referring here generally to the geographical region of Macedonia.

The two important islands in the lakes are Golem Grad, located in the southwest corner of Greater Prespa Lake in the Republic of North Macedonia, and St. Achilleios, located at the northern end of Lesser Prespa Lake in Greece. The island of St. Achilleios is now accessible from the mainland by footbridge.

This account of the history of the Bulgarian Empire and the life of Tsar Samuel draws on the work of Fine (1983), Runciman (1939), and Vacalopoulos (1973).
See Fine (1983, 189) and Stephenson (2003, 13).

For other examples of the political significance of the remains of national heroes, see Katherine Verdery's *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (1999).
See, for example, Dimevski (1973), Tashkovski (1973), and Embassy of the Republic of Macedonia (nd).

For the role archaeology has played in the Macedonian Conflict and in Greek nationalist discourse more generally, see Danforth (1995, 163–174, 2003, and 2010) and Hamilakis (2007).
The following account of the construction of these borders is based on the work of Dimitrakopoulos (1991), Dipla (1981), Papadopoulos (2010 and 2016), and Pondaven (1972).

Kazas and *sanjaks* were administrative divisions used in the Ottoman Empire. A *kaza* was a subdivision of a *sanjak*.
See Barros (1965), Giles (1930), and United States Department of State (1968 and 1971a and b).

Valuable sources on the Greek Civil War in English include Baerentzen et al. (1987), Carabott and Sfikas (2004), Clogg (1979: 133–165), Close (1993 and 1995), Collard (1990), Iatrides (1981a and b), Iatrides and Wrigley (1995), Kalyvas (2006), Loulis (1982), Mazower (2000), Panourgia (2009), Vlavianos (1992), and Voglis (2002). For valuable sources in Greek, see Fleischer (2003), Iliou (2004), Koutsoukis and Sakkas (2000), Margaritis (2000 and 2001), Nikolakopoulos et al. (2002), Van Boeschoten (1997), Van Boeschoten et al. (2008), and Voutira et al. (2005).

During World War II, other parts of Greece were occupied by Bulgarian and German forces.
See Rombou-Levidi (2016).

This account of Prespa during the Cold War draws on Koliopoulos (1999), Myrivili (2004), and Papadopoulos (2010).

In 1984 the Prespa National Forest became the Prespa National Park.

See Catsadorakis and Malakou (1997) and Catsadorakis (1999).

For more information on the Society for the Protection of Prespa and the natural history of the region, see:

https://www.spp.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=5&lang=en (Accessed August 19, 2019). For the text of the full declaration, see https://www.spp.gr/declaration_en.pdf (Accessed August 19, 2019).

See also Standring (2009:13–19).

See Athens News Agency (2018).

On the Star of Vergina, see Keith Brown (1994) and Danforth (1995, 63–66). See <https://int.ert.gr/there-was-a-very-good-atmosphere-at-the-dinner-in-otesevo-with-zaev-pm-tsipras-reports/> (Accessed August 19, 2019).

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27. See <http://www.efsyn.gr:10080/arthro/eimai-40-hronon-kai-proti-fora-vleposkafos-na-erhetai-apo-tin-apananti-ohthi/> Accessed August 1, 2018).

28. Other anthropologists who have worked in Prespa include Hart (1999), Papadopoulos (2010 and 2016), and Rombou-Levidi (2017).

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