N. Bucky Stanton on James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers, _Lakes and Empires in Macedonian History: Contesting the Water_

Pettifer and Vickers’s _Lakes and Empires In Macedonian History_ endeavors to provide readers with a wide-ranging review of the long-term historical developments (4500 BCE to the present) around the Prespa Lakes, today shared by Greece, North Macedonia, and Albania. The text’s focal point is the village of Psarades in Greek Macedonia, but it regularly departs to nearby sites on the shores of the lakes. Reading this book is comparable to consulting a compendium—no greater arguments about the region, conceptual frameworks, or historiographic discussions, are advanced. Instead, it cogently communicates masses of tremendously well-researched and well-reasoned information through a fairly straightforward “nodal” history. In this monograph, environment is more of an underlying condition than a critically engaged category. For example, the preface opens by discussing the geographic features of Macedonia in relationship to the Mediterranean and discussing environmental “determinants” and “change” in the study. The authors’ only explicit comment on their approach toward the environment sets their agenda clearly: to provide a study of the “people, history and environment” of the Prespa region and “not … an ‘ecohistory’ divorced from economic, political and military realities” (p. xi).

The opening chapter synthesizes the ecological and human geography of the region today, introducing a landscape of places, ethnicities, languages, and nation-states. Briefly emphasized is the importance of attending to “real and invisible borders and the acceptability of those borders to those living inside them” (p. 10). The next chapters report on the general development of human societies around the Prespa Lakes from the Neolithic era to the decline of the Ottoman Balkans in the nineteenth century. While this is an enormous amount of material to cover, the text succeeds at communicating important historical patterns—perhaps better than anywhere else. From the initial three chapters, structuring themes are related to the geographical and political remoteness of the region and the relationship between the ecology, economic self-sufficiency, and political autonomy. Cycles of sociocultural movement, friction, fragmentation, and integration meet and tangle with attempts by imperial states, like the Roman and Ottoman Empires, to provincialize the area. It is
up to the reader to construct these themes and patterns since the authors only review details without overt analysis. Nonetheless, the faint outlines of a rich understanding of the co-construction of lifeways, landscapes, and political structures are most visible in these opening chapters.

The next batch of chapters chart the evolution of the Prespa Lakes from the mid-1800s to the eve of the Second World War. The text depicts how cultural, social, and religious communities, non-state partisan organizations, and states around Prespa developed under the decay, and eventual destruction, of Ottoman hegemony. A highlight of this narration is the ossification and subsequent influence on society and environment, of social, economic, cultural, technical, and political practices derived from centuries of Ottoman rule. Culminating with the renaming of Bulgarian/Macedonian “Nivica” to “Psarades,” these chapters explore the increasing efforts of the nascent nineteenth-century Greek state to construct and enact continuity with antiquity to secure expanded land rights. The authors adequately trace the development of a national culture and bureaucracy that enacted a new Hellenized landscape through interventions such as renaming villages and through escalating population control measures. In this chapter, the category of environment is diminished to a geography for movement or as a resource activated by human agency, that is, “land.” Rather than leaving it a subtext for reader analysis, the authors should have more explicitly explored Hellenization as the development of not only legal justification but of state interventions for transforming a thick transnational ecology of sociopolitical, religious, and environmental forces into the Greek state’s preferred configuration. The pieces for such, and other, interesting and useful analyses are presented, yet the authors fail to tell readers what this array of information means.

The next two chapters recount the region’s experience of invasion and occupation in the Second World War and as a porous Balkan conflict zone, particularly in the Greek Civil War. The text connects communities in the mountains, chronic periphery underdevelopment by Balkan states, and heroic resistance to Axis occupation as the structural basis of later transnational communist forces. The environmental aspect here is only noted as part of an explanation; for example, the successes of partisan forces are connected to their knowledge of the landscape through lived experience, or the remoteness of the area allowed the communist forces to establish their bases and supply caches. The environment is strictly an operational terrain. The following chapter on the Greek Civil War does an excellent job arranging the international and domestic forces that clashed and the difficult politics of such a devastating conflict. Still, it repeats the view of the environment as strategic and tactical feature. The story of how Psarades became the “epicentre of the struggle for the future of Greece” (p. 110) in the later stages of the civil war is, however, strikingly recounted.

In the final group of chapters, covering the Cold War to the near-present, the Prespa region begins as a bygone but disputed borderland. The inherent interconnectedness of the region, in view of its stiffening borders, is exemplified by the rippling effects of economic and political change across borders in the precarious existence and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Parallel to the decades of political changes are environmental changes to the lakes, namely, rising pollution and declining water level and quality. In this chapter the lake becomes an important object for new and old actors: a hydrological mystery for scientists, an at-risk ecology for activists of the Dalmatian Pelican and its environs, and a possibly attractive tourist space for various government planners and private investors. These environmental problems and developments are connected with the establishment of the transnational Prespa Park in 2000. The authors’ juxtaposition of the unification of the region under ecological alliance within a greater political dynamic of fragmentation, if not recession, of the post-Soviet
decades is subtly executed. Yet the engagement with environment, even as a core subject in the chapter, is shallow. Events are described, and connections made to the past, but the result is a constellation of forces rather than a robust or insightful historicization about the environmental politics of Prespa. The short final chapter discusses the name deal between Greece and Macedonia in 2018. The happenstance of Psarades’ selection as the signing location is recounted, along with subsequent unrest, before the book unceremoniously ends without a conclusion providing some broader ideas and analysis.

Lakes and Empires in Macedonian History deserves appreciation for its efficient prose and historical coherency as well as the novelty of the work. Some praise is warranted for the authors’ ability to navigate the many disputes and conflicts of the region without ignoring them. However, critique of the text’s general execution and relationship to environment is necessary.

It is important to note that the book comprises two separately written parts. Miranda Vickers wrote the chapters on “environment and contemporary Prespa,” and James Pettifer wrote “the history of the ancient, Ottoman and modern periods up to 1990” (p. xi). The seams are glaring if the reader focuses on environment, which seems difficult given the title and the book blurb noting the “innovative environmental historical methodology.” Certain parts of the book more compellingly discuss environment and society than later sections, which clumsily bolt on sentences with tangential and unmeaningful, crudely related environmental details. These added-on bits are usually related to economic practices, with little further analysis or connection otherwise. The authors missed an opportunity to connect productive practices and environment to the history of technology. While the text does historicize the societies and politics around the Prespa Lakes and references environmental things, its conclusions about any of that history, or specific role of the lake environments, are unclear due to the lack of emphasis or argumentation. Fascinating patterns of anarchic lifeways of lakes and mountains or the production of ethnonationalist landscapes, and more state-level arguments about the failure of Balkan states to effectively govern hinterlands can only exist as reader analysis and are not specifically argued. Ultimately, the authors sprinkling bits of enviro-historical anthropology on an otherwise social and political history bracketed by an extremely broad human geography mixed with occasional brief summaries of environmental science, does not add up to something that integrates environment enough to be useful or insightful.

In regard to the stated objective of the authors to avoid an “ecohistory divorced from economic, political and military realities” (p. xi), even the better parts of the text fear getting lost in the environmental analytic so much that they reduce the environment to a mere substrate. The authors write about both environment and society with a tone of distant objectivity. Boundaries between nature and society, and historical truth and falsehood, seem to be unmentioned load-bearing structures. There is little space devoted to exploring how the historical denizens of the Prespa region thought about the nature-society relationship and the changing of that relationship over time, and, further, how this did or did not shape their lives and the environment and world around them. This is particularly noticeable with the spare detail and perspectives on the environmental making and meaning related to the transnational Prespa Park. Considering that the authors describe their oral history research methodology as “close to that of anthropologists,” it is perplexing this research revealed so little about environmental memory or meaning in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (p. x). It is difficult to see exactly how their oral history research was tailored for a project that highlights the environment.

Despite my criticisms, I recommend the book to historians, anthropologists, and sociologists of
modern Greece, the Balkans, and similar areas in southern Europe. Its flaws notwithstanding, thorough case studies are rare. Departments, libraries, and other reference collections that cover this area will certainly want to purchase this text, but individual scholars should make use of library loan systems if possible. The clear and informative prose of *Lakes and Empires in Macedonian History* make it a possible reference text for use in a class, but only as a source of background information or foundation for discussion. But, for classes and scholars focused on the environment, with no direct connection to the region, there is simply not a sophisticated enough integration of the environment, or really anything else, to merit grappling with this book, despite the fascinating history of the Prespa Lakes.

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