A couple of years before the collapse of the Soviet system ignited nationalist passions in the dormant backwaters of South-Eastern Europe an English historian writing in German, observed that “the question of the actual nationality of the ancient Macedonians... is scientifically trivial and has acquired importance in modern times only because nationalists of all sorts in the Balkans and elsewhere have laid hold of it, and each according to the answer, has put it in the service of territorial or other claims.” Moreover, he continued, “All ancient accusations that the Macedonians were not Greeks originate from Athens, from the time of the conflict with Philip II... Only because of the political conflict with Macedonia was the question at all raised.” He also stressed that “today it must be considered as certain that the Macedonians and their kings actually spoke a Greek dialect and bore names of Greek type.” Paradoxically, six years earlier his former thesis supervisor, a reputed scholar, hailing from a German-speaking country but writing in English, delivered at an international symposium staged by the National Gallery of Art at Washington a paper with practically the same title as the present chapter, challenging the Greek credentials of the ancient Macedonians. His communication claimed to concentrate not on what the Macedonians actually were, but exclusively on the way in which they were perceived by their contemporaries, discarding as irrelevant the objective criteria on which national identities are usually evaluated (ancestry, language, religion, customs), only to reserve for the finale the argument that the most important objective criterion, to wit language, proved that the Macedonians were not Greeks. Indeed according to him “Greek was a difficult, indeed a foreign, tongue”

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to Macedonians, and a Greek, such as Eumenes, “could not directly commu-
nicate with Macedonian soldiers.”

How is it possible that such radically opposed opinions can be simulta-
neously aired by historians moving in the same scholarly circles and
working on the same documents? Have the ensuing decades brought forth
new evidence liable to decide the issue? Is it possible to keep clear of
politics and polemics ancient and modern in order to reach a balanced
conclusion? Such are some of the questions we shall address in the fol-
lowing pages.

To begin with we must admit that sometimes, perceptions can ignore
“objective criteria” of national identity and that there are no such eternal
essences as “Greeks” and “Macedonians.” Both terms cover in fact com-
plex realities which never ceased to evolve, from the moment we begin
to apprehend them down to our own days.3 Thus, even if we focus on
the period between the Persian Wars, when Macedonia first comes to the
fore, and the abolition of an even nominally independent Macedonian
state in 148 BC, we realize that the concepts expressed by these terms did
not remain stable. A further complication arises from the geographical
discrepancy between these two ethnics and the corresponding toponyms:
Hellas, variable in itself, is not necessarily co-terminal with the Hellenes
and Makedonia is not necessarily co-terminal with the Makedones. Thus
Hellas can mean in Demosthenes4 only continental Greece north of the
Isthmus, or in Herodotus5 Greece from the Peloponnese to Epirus and
Thessaly inclusively, or in Xenophon6 all lands inhabited by Greeks. As
late as in the second century BC Philip V of Macedon could argue, “How do
you define Greece? For most of the Aetolians themselves are not Greeks.
No! The countries of the Agraei, the Apodotae, and the Amphilochians are
not Greece,”7 in which he was consistent with Thucydides,8 who qualified
the Aetolian tribe of the Eurytanes as “most unintelligible in tongue and
eaters of raw flesh.” Conversely Makedonia could alternatively designate
the Argead (and later the Antigonid) possessions irrespective of the origin

3 See in particular J. M. Hall, “Contested Ethnicities: Perceptions of Macedonia within
Evolving Definitions of Greek Identity,” in I. Malkin, ed., Ancient Perceptions of Greek
Ethnicity (Cambridge, Mass./London, 2001), pp. 159–186; id., Hellenicity (Chicago, 2002),
4 19.303.
5 8.44–47.
6 Anab. 6.5.23.
7 Polyb. 18.5.7–8.
8 3.94.5.