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Museification of contested medieval heritage. The case of King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion in Petrich, Bulgaria¹

Muzealizacja kontestowanego średniowiecznego dziedzictwa w mieście Petricz w Bułgarii – król Samuel i bitwa pod Klidion

Abstract

The article explores the intricate process of museifying contested heritage, with a specific focus on King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion in the town of Petrich, Bulgaria. The magnified historical significance ascribed to this mediaeval king and the battle is closely related to the complex cultural and political dynamics on both sides of the Bulgarian-North Macedonian border. By drawing parallels with the neighbouring region of Strumica, North Macedonia, the study delves into the multifaceted aspects of museification, unravelling the interplay between historical narratives, cultural representation, and local and national politics. These parallels help to contextualise the museification process in Petrich and to reveal the contested nature of constructing, preserving and presenting historical heritage. Addressing questions of identity construction and negotiation of historical narratives, the cross-border contextualization furthers the investigation of the motivations behind the museification process. This study contributes to the scholarly discourse on the preservation of mediaeval heritage in contested territories and offers insights into the intricate relationship between history, identity, and cultural representation.

Key words: cultural memory, heritagisation, museification, contested heritage, Bulgaria, North Macedonia

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Abstrakt

Artykuł bada skomplikowany proces muzealizacji kontestowanego dziedzictwa w mieście Petricz w Bułgarii ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem postaci króla Samuela i bitwy pod Klidion. Zwiększone znaczenie historyczne przypisywane temu średniowiecznemu królowi i bitwie jest ściśle związane ze złożoną dynamiką kulturową i polityczną po obu stronach granicy bułgarsko-północnomacedońskiej. Nakreślenie podobieństw z sąsiednim regionem Strumicą w Macedonii Północnej umożliwia dogłębną analizę wielu aspektów muzealizacji i odkrywa wzajemne oddziaływanie między narracjami historycznymi, reprezentacją kulturową oraz polityką lokalną i krajową. Podobieństwa te pomagają w kontekstualizacji procesu muzealizacji w Petricz i ujawniają kontrowersyjną naturę konstruowania, ochrony i prezentacji dziedzictwa historycznego. Odnoszone do kwestii budowania tożsamości i negocjowania narracji historycznych są pomocne w analizie motywacji stojących za procesem muzealizacji. Artykuł stanowi wkład w dyskurs naukowy na temat zachowania średniowiecznego dziedzictwa na spornych terytoriach i oferuje wgląd w zawile relacje między historią, tożsamością i reprezentacją kulturową.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć kulturowa, heritagizacja, muzealizacja, kontestowane dziedzictwo, Bułgaria, Północna Macedonia

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Conceptual introduction

According to Anthony Cohen, history is extremely malleable and its recalling is based on interpretative reconstruction (Cohen 1995: 99–101), i.e., in the terminology of Jan Assmann (2011), on the creation of *cultural memory*. Cultural memory refers to the collective memories of a shared past transmitted from generation to generation within a larger or smaller social group, as well as to the collective recollection and the process of remembering an event or person from the past (Miztal 2003: 13). The process of remembering is inevitably influenced by the specific context. In this sense, remembering depends on the “space” in which it occurs, therefore on the momentary aspirations of the remembering subject (Bourdieu 1986: 69–72). Thus, cultural memory refers to human memories constructed through cultural patterns as well as to the cultural patterns available to the people when constructing their attitude toward the past. These cultural patterns are transmitted through various media: social institutions and cultural artefacts, such as museums, memorial complexes, monuments, souvenirs, movies, music etc. (Miztal 2003: 13). Cultural memory is also related to specific cultural practices, celebrations, ceremonies, festivals. It should also be stressed out the importance of teachers, writers, painters and even researchers as bearers and distributors of cultural memory.

Heritage (historical and cultural) is the second important concept in this study. It plays a crucial role in shaping memory and narratives for the past. Here, heritage is “understood as a flexible and malleable concept, open to multiple interpretations and negotiations” (Park 2014: 1). Thus, it is not simply a collection of material objects or

historical sites, but a complex construct that is imbued with meaning and significance by individuals, groups, and societies. This meaning and significance can vary depending on the context and the perspective of the viewer. The population of two or more neighbouring countries can often share the same cultural and historical heritage. The heritage could become a basis for the construction of different cultural memories according to the specific national context. In these cases, contested heritage represents a battleground where differing memories and historical perspectives clash. This often leads to political instrumentalization of heritage and memory by states in order to legitimise certain political claims and/or to reinforce national or ethnic identity and cultural specificity.

The concept of *museification* is deeply interwoven in our study with the previous two. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), it is “the operation of trying to extract, physically or conceptually, something from its natural or cultural environment and giving it a museal status” (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010: 50). The museal essence, however, is not based on technical or institutional aspects and certainly is not the building (the museum itself), but it is the mechanism, the process of museification, that transforms the status of objects and subjects regardless of whether they are artefacts, buildings, historical sites, events, historical persons etc. (Aykaç 2019: 1247). This status transformation within the frames of museification process occurs as a result of activities of their selection, preservation, and presentation.

According to Jefferson Jaramillo Marín and Carlos Del Cairo (2013: 76–78), museification as a process is a way of constructing and legitimizing collective memory based on political and cultural actions deployed by institutions and civil actors that are aimed at selecting and placing an “object” (whether cultural or natural, as well as individuals or communities) within lines of reasoning that “petrifies” the historical and cultural meanings of these objects. In this sense, the selection, preservation and presentation of historical artefacts, sites, events and personalities, i.e. the ways of their museification can play a role in shaping public memory and vice-versa. At the same time display or presentation not only shows or speaks about heritage, but it also has a pivotal role in the production of heritage (Kirshenbatt-Gimblett 1998: 6–7). By creating a physical space where the past is represented, museums can help to solidify a particular narrative about the past. This has a lasting impact on the ways that people understand their history and identify themselves at local, regional and national level.

Based on this theoretical framework, the article explores how the mediaeval King Samuel and an event pivotal to his reign, namely the Battle of Kleidion in 1014, are museified in the town of Petrich, Bulgaria. At the same time we consider the construction and representation of this mediaeval heritage during the last several decades in the context of contestation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia according to confronting historical narratives. By drawing parallels with the neighbouring region of Strumica, North Macedonia, the study delves into the multifaceted aspects of heritagisation and

museification, unravelling the interplay between memory, historical narratives, cultural representation, and local and national politics. These parallels help to contextualise the museification process in Petrich and to reveal the contested nature of constructing, preserving and presenting historical heritage. Thus, unveiling the motivations behind the museification process involves scrutinising political agendas, as heritage becomes a tool for shaping political discourses.

In particular, we endeavour to understand the place of the “Samuel’s Fortress” (Samuilova krepost) National Park-Museum, located a few kilometres from Petrich, in the memory construction and expression of the town’s inhabitants, namely, how this mediaeval heritage is perceived by them and how it contributes to the shaping of their identity. The place of the park-museum in developmental strategies of town authorities and in their efforts to represent town’s heritage in order to attract outsiders, i.e. various types of visitors from the country and abroad, is also among the issues addressed in the article.

King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion: historical outline

Samuel was king of the Bulgarian Kingdom from 997 to 1014. His rule was characterised by the struggle to preserve Bulgaria’s independence from the Byzantine Empire and thus by constant warfare. During his reign, the capital of the Bulgarian Kingdom moved to Ohrid (today in the Republic of North Macedonia) and more than nine centuries later this became ground for North Macedonia to claim that King Samuel was a Macedonian ruler. Today, the most famous event related to the time of his rule is the Battle of Kleidion (also known as the Battle of Belasitsa) between the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarian Kingdom. This battle, which took place on 29 July 1014, was the culmination of a nearly half-century struggle between the two countries. Its result was a decisive Byzantine victory.

The battle was fought in the valley between the mountains of Belasitsa and Ograzhden that stretches in the regions of both Petrich and Strumica. However, the main events took place in the area around the mediaeval fortification system near today’s Bulgarian village of Klyuch in the region of Petrich. The decisive encounter occurred on 29 July with a Byzantine attack in the rear. The ensuing battle was a major defeat for the Bulgarians. The Bulgarian soldiers were captured and reputedly blinded by order of Emperor Basil II, who would subsequently be known as the Bulgar-Slayer. King Samuel survived the battle but died two months later from a heart attack, reportedly brought on by the sight of his blinded soldiers. The heirs of Samuel could not hold off the Byzantine advance and in 1018 the Bulgarian Kingdom was finally destroyed by Basil II.

Cultural memory and the beginning of the heritagisation process

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, with the 19th-century emergence of new national states on the map of the Balkans, the regions of Petrich and Strumica,

being a part of the historical-geographic area of Macedonia, became focal points of political disputes between the Balkan states. The ethnic origin of the population in these two regions was a subject of constant disputes and after the liberation from the Ottoman rule in 1912 the political border was constantly changing: the Petrich region became part of the Bulgarian state, but from that date until 1944 the Strumica region successively fell within the Third Bulgarian Kingdom (until 1919), the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1919–1941), and once again Bulgaria (1941–1944). In this context, Bulgaria aimed to prove the contested Bulgarian ethnic origin of the population in these regions and to strengthen its Bulgarian national identity. Part of this strategy was the project of the General Staff of the Bulgarian Army to conduct a scientific expedition in Macedonia and the Morava Valley in the course of World War I (Petrov 1993).² Members of the expedition were three prominent Bulgarian scholars – Bogdan Filov, Vasil Zlatarski and Yordan Ivanov, in whose works we find one of the first ethnographic data related to King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion. This expedition marked the first stage of purposeful introduction of the population of Petrich and Strumica regions to these historical events, as well as the first stage of the construction of cultural memory. The main reason (besides the time distance) to believe that this is precisely a case of collective cultural memory construction rather than an “authentic” cultural memory transmitted from generation to generation is the historical-demographic fact that in the late 19th and early 20th century, a significant part of the population of the Podgorie villages³ was Muslim. For example, by 1900, according to Vasil Kanchov’s statistics, the village of Klyuch had 1000 inhabitants, of whom 800 were Turks and 200 were Bulgarians (Kanchov 1900: 187). The situation was similar in the other Podgorie villages. In the course of the Balkan Wars and World War I, however, the majority of this Muslim population emigrated to Turkey. Today’s population of the Podgorie villages on both sides of the border is composed mostly of descendants of settlers from the villages in Ograzhden Mountain or from Aegean Macedonia.

The scientific expedition laid the beginnings of a process in which the historical studies gradually began to lay upon existing legends and to objectify themselves through already existing toponyms. This could also explain the simultaneous existence today of similar legends related to the same toponym but referring to two different epochs – the time of King Samuel and the Ottoman period. Here, we shall give some examples.

² The expedition was carried out in the newly liberated lands. Its aim was likely to obtain scientific materials with a view to future peace negotiations and to determine the western Bulgarian ethnic border.

³ Podgorie is a geographical area in the northern foothills of Belasitsa Mountain, falling on the territories of Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

The name of the village of Klyuch (Petrich region) means 'key' in Bulgarian. Today, the local people relate the name to the Battle of Kleidion. During our fieldwork, we registered three legends. According to the first one, King Samuel's soldiers were kept under lock and key somewhere in the vicinity of the village. The second legend has it that part of the Byzantine forces managed to find an encircling route through the mountain, thus overcame the Bulgarian fortification and attacked Samuel's army in the rear, i.e. they surrounded it, trapped it (*zaklyuchvat*). According to the third legend, the Bulgarians were defeated in this very locality and they concluded (*sklyuchvam*) a peace treaty. This etymology is recorded as early as 1916 by V. Zlatarski (Petrov 1991).

Today, the name of the village of Skrät (Petrich region) is associated with two legends. According to the most popular one, Skrät derives from the Bulgarian word *skrāb* (sorrow, grief), i.e. it is associated with the grief over Samuel's soldiers blinded or killed in the battle. The second legend which is rarely registered refers to the older form of the village name (Iskrit) and to the Bulgarian word *skrit* (hidden), i.e. the hidden Byzantine forces who attacked the Bulgarians in the rear. In conformity with the first legend is the opinion of B. Filov (Filov 1993: 80). V. Zlatarski questioned this interpretation and considered that the name derived from the word *skrit* but, relying on local stories, he related the name to the Ottoman period when facing the threat of being forcibly converted to Islam, the local people used to hide in the woods above the village. According to B. Filov, the name of the village of Svidovitsa (Strumica region) derives from the word group *vsī vdovitsi* (meaning "all widows"). He related it to the women who became widows after the Battle of Kleidion (Filov 1993: 80). Later on, Dimitar Gyuzelev (2005: 61), as well as other Macedonian scholars, also adopted this opinion. According to the local stories, the name of the village of Vodocha (Strumica region) derives from the word group *vadi ochi* (to remove, pull out eyes) and is related to the blinding of Samuel's soldiers. B. Filov (Filov 1993: 80) and later on D. Gyuzelev (Gyuzelev 2005: 61) suggested the same etymology.

In the following three decades, the process of constructing a cultural memory of King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion continued. As part of the state cultural policies in this relation, in 1935, the village of Dimidovo in the region of Petrich was renamed Samuilovo.

Contestation of King Samuel's heritage and emergence of two opposing national narratives

While during the interwar period the territory of today's North Macedonia was only a province (*banovina*) within the borders of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in 1944 Macedonia was proclaimed a republic within the newly established Yugoslav federation. In the territory of the federation, the propagation of the so-called Yugo-Macedonism intensified, following the policy of Comintern for creating a worldwide proletarian state and accentuating the common cause in the struggle for freedom and social justice in

which national specifics were not of primary significance. At the same time, however, although as a secondary idea, this type of Macedonism clearly discriminated between Macedonian and Bulgarian ethnicity on the one hand, and Macedonian and Serbian ethnicity on the other (Gruev 2011: 51–53). In the 1940s and 1950s, the Yugo-Macedonism spread into that part of the geographic region of Macedonia which was part of Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia), including the region of Petrich. In the period 1944–1948, as part of the preparations for the formation of Yugoslavian-Bulgarian federation, the new Bulgarian authorities forced the so-called “Macedonization”⁴ of Pirin Macedonia. This process continued until 1948 when, following the Tito-Stalin split, the Yugoslavian Communist Party was expelled from the Cominform Bureau and the project for federation was brought to an end. In this short four-year period Bulgaria dropped the cultural policies aiming at strengthening the Bulgarian identity among the population of Pirin Macedonia. In Macedonia, on the other hand, the ground was being prepared for the emergence of the so-called civil Macedonism⁵ (Gruev 2011: 54–55), and the idea of the “Macedonian King Samuel” was born within that.

After the Tito-Stalin split, Bulgaria renounced the project of “Macedonization” of Pirin Macedonia and pursued a policy of gradual “re-Bulgarization” of the region. King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion appeared once again in the cultural policies of the state. In the 1960s, the Institute of Archaeology with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Historical Museum of Blagoevgrad began joint excavation works of Samuel’s fortification system in the Kleidion Gorge near Petrich. At the same time, history teachers gave lessons in the schools in the town, as well as in the surrounding villages, and lectures on history were organised for the adults. Along with the work of archaeologists and historians, there appeared scientific and local historical literature, as well as publications in the regional press, which additionally contributed to the dissemination and confirmation of legends and etymological interpretations of local toponyms among the local population. Thus, the toponyms Vadiochi (from *vadya* – to remove, to pull out, and *ochi* – eyes) – a locality with a large rock above the village of Skrät, in Belasitsa Mountain, and Ochivadets (from *ochi* – eyes, and *vadets* – someone who removes, pulls out something) – a locality between the villages of Klyuch and Yavornitsa, gained popularity as places where Samuel’s soldiers were blinded. The name of the locality Smärdeshnitsa (from *smärdya* – to stink) in the village of Klyuch is associated with the smell that wafted from the decaying bodies of Samuel’s fallen

⁴ During the 1940s and 1950s, the Bulgarian authorities pursued a policy of purposeful dissemination of “Yugo-Macedonism” in Pirin Macedonia. Studies in “Macedonian language” and “history of the Macedonian people” were introduced in the local Bulgarian schools and the population was forced to declare “Macedonian nationality” in the censuses.

⁵ In the 1960s, as a result of the split between Tito and Stalin, the civil (non-communist) Macedonism gradually began to develop, in which the idea of ethnic and national differentiation of the Macedonian population came to the fore. For more information, see Gruev 2011 and Maxwell 2007.

soldiers. The name of the locality Skopets (a eunuch, a castrated male) in the village of Klyuch is associated, according to the interpretations of local treasure hunters and amateur historians, with the castration of a part of Samuel's soldiers.

Across the border, a similar cultural policy developed, shaping the memory of the "Macedonian" King Samuel in the Strumica region. The villages of Koleshino (from *kolya* – slaughter) and Kosturino (from *kostur* – skeleton), according to Macedonian scholarly literature and the local stories, take their names from the Battle of Kleidion's mass killings. According to Macedonian scholarly literature, the etymology of the village of Robovo (possessive form of *rob* – slave) refers to the fall of the region under Byzantine rule in 1018, but local residents associate the name with the Ottoman rule. A new village, Samoilovo (possessive form of the name Samuel), was founded in 1971 by migrants from villages in the Ograzhden Mountain. When founding the new village, the people discussed two possible variants of the name – Alexandria (after Alexander the Great) and Samoilovo (after King Samuel). In the 1980s, the King Samuel Hotel was built in the village of Bansko.

From heritagisation to museification

As a result of the archaeological research of King Samuel's fortification system in the Kleidion Gorge, the locality of Kufalnitsa (from the word *kub* – empty, hollow) gradually gained in popularity. Starting from 1915–1916 when V. Zlatarski and B. Filov began speaking of the place as the scene of the Battle of Kleidion, the locality gradually became known as Samuilova krepost (Samuel's Fortress). Before that, the locality was never referred to in the legends related to King Samuel or to the Battle of Kleidion. The culmination of the state cultural policy of construction of cultural memory and historical and cultural heritage of King Samuel and the battle was the construction of a memorial Park-Museum named "Samuel's Fortress", a branch of Petrich History Museum, in this very locality and its inauguration in 1982. This also marked the beginning of the process of museification that would "petrify" a certain purposeful interpretation of the constructed memory/heritage. The event was a part of the celebration of 1300 years of the First Bulgarian Kingdom.⁶ It aimed to erase all traces of the forced "Macedonization" and to foster patriotism and national pride. It was no accident that some of the leading men of the state were present at the inauguration and that the local people flocked to the park.

The "Samuel's Fortress" Park-Museum consists of the ruins of a watch-tower, defensive rampart, thirteen small dug-outs and a big one. Four pylons were erected,

⁶ In the 1970s, Bulgaria began preparation for the celebration of 1300 years of the establishment of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (681). The idea was to celebrate the anniversary by a series of cultural events throughout the year 1981. Historical movies were shot, various exhibitions were organised, and imposing monuments were built.

marking the ruins of the mediaeval tower and forming a place for the visitors to observe the entire park from above. An exposition hall with a memorial composition of King Samuel and his soldiers was built. The hall is situated at the foot of a hill which represents the main part of the fortification system in the Kleidion Gorge. The exposition presents the finds of the archaeological excavations. For the memorial composition, the sculptor Boris Gondov made nine bronze reliefs with images of Samuel's warriors placed on the facade of the exposition hall plus a bronze monument of King Samuel in front of the facade. The artistic interpretation of the events related to King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion in Gondov's works emphasises their tragic nature – Samuel's soldiers are represented in their suffering of blind men while the king himself, heart-broken by the sight, casts a sad glance towards the sky. At the same time, the imposing character of the memorial, typical of the socialist art, aims to create a sense of intransient grandeur and vigour. Obviously, the artistic stress was laid on the dramatic Battle of Kleidion and the blinding of the Bulgarian soldiers at the order of Emperor Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer. The theme of "Bulgar-slaying" and the self-victimisation reflected the idea of Greece, successor of the former Byzantium, as a symbol of the national and ideological enemies of socialist Bulgaria and the socialist world as a whole. The example of King Samuel represents the development of a strategy for evoking a sense of patriotism and national pride by creating a martyr's image of the Bulgarian people. On the one hand, martyrdom as a form of suffering and death on account of adherence to a certain cause suggests heroism, bravery and strong mind in front of the hardships of life, and on the other hand, it puts a halo of sanctity around the subject of martyrdom as well as around his cause. Thus, although having been through a lot of suffering, Bulgarian people managed to survive in time and history and to protect its "sacred" cause: the Bulgarian state and identity.

Until 1989, the newly-established memorial park was a scene of several celebrations of anniversaries of the Battle of Kleidion with historical re-enactments emphasising the heroic yet tragic character of the events. Having in mind that until the beginning of the 1990s the region was accessible only with the so-called open list,⁷ there were hardly many visitors of the park-museum from other parts of Bulgaria. Thus, it is obvious that it was rather created for the local people and was part of the cultural policy of the state for "re-Bulgarization" of the region and ideological propaganda.

⁷ During the socialist period, Bulgaria's regions bordering Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia belonged to the so-called border zone, which was accessible only with a special permission document (i.e. the open list), issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

New developments: the museum as heritage and bordering resource of tourism

After the political changes in the early 1990s, Bulgaria ceased its special cultural policy regarding the cultural memory of King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion. In Macedonia, this topic was also pushed aside, leaving room for the new policy of “antiquisation”.⁸ To a great extent, the Municipality of Petrich also abdicated its role as the proprietor of “Samuel’s Fortress”. The park-museum was neglected and in the course of time fell into ruins, becoming subject to vandal attacks despite being only a few kilometres from the town. The anniversary celebrations were discontinued. The only active organiser of commemorations was OMO “Ilinden” – Pirin.⁹

Although access to the region was no longer restricted, the complex did not enjoy increased tourist interest. The Municipality failed to take advantage of the constructed cultural memory and heritage and use them to create an integral vision of the development of cultural tourism in the region. They came again under the notice of the Municipality in 2007, as two complementary projects within the EU Neighbourhood Programme (PHARE/CARDS) were implemented in partnership between the municipalities of Petrich and Strumica. The Bulgarian project aimed at restoring “Samuel’s Fortress”, while in Macedonia, the Municipality of Strumica started archaeological and restoration works in the locality of Tsarevi kuli (King’s Towers), situated in the Elenitsa Mountain above the town of Strumica and believed to be part of Samuel’s fortification system. There are two noteworthy things to discuss in connection with these projects. Firstly, with these projects, the two municipalities officially recognized the existence of cultural proximity between the two border regions, their centuries-old contacts and a shared cultural and historical heritage. Through their objectives and planned activities, the projects articulated a part of this heritage, namely, King Samuel, the Battle of Kleidion and the places of memory related to them. Secondly, through the projects, Petrich and Strumica recognized the existence of a gap in the official relations between the two municipalities and the political prerequisites for it. The recognition of a shared cultural and historical heritage and of bad contacts resulting from political disagreements between the states is one of the necessary conditions for the emancipation of local and regional authorities from the policies of national states, which is set as the goal of the European instruments for cross-border cooperation. Although formally this condition appears to be fulfilled, this is only apparent. In fact, even when the idea

⁸ The politics of antiquization in North Macedonia refers to a set of cultural and political practices aimed at emphasising and appropriating ancient historical and cultural symbols and connecting the modern Macedonian identity with the ancient Macedonian heritage (Vangeli 2011).

⁹ United Macedonian Organisation “Ilinden” – Pirin, established after the political changes of 1989 as a consequence of the policy of “Macedonization” of the region of Pirin Macedonia, is an illegal Macedonian organisation in Bulgaria, whose self-declared aims are protection of the human rights, language and nationality of the Macedonian minority in the country.

for the project proposal arose, there was concern and overt disapproval among a large part of the Bulgarian team concerning the issue of how a cooperation project would be prepared and implemented when based on contested cultural and historical heritage.

Thus, although formally recognized as such by the projects, the shared cultural and historical heritage of the two regions remained problematic. An example of this is the trilingual (Bulgarian, Macedonian and English) tourist guide printed within the project. On the one hand, the analysis of the guide shows a successful attempt to avoid the controversial moments in the presentation of this heritage. The brochure includes historical, archaeological, cultural and religious objects that in one way or another refer to the historical state affiliation of the border region of Petrich and Strumica, a fact that could confront the nationalist discourses in Bulgaria and Macedonia. To avoid this, the guide mainly uses regional and neutral attributes or leaves out certain facts. At the same time, where the text fails to escape from “uncomfortable” wording, the problem is solved when the information is translated into Bulgarian and Macedonian. Although the Macedonian version does not manage to completely avoid the use of the term “Bulgarian”, in most key places it is omitted, especially when it comes to King Samuel. Thus, for example, the “First Bulgarian State” became “Samuel’s Kingdom”. On the other hand, the avoidance of controversial moments regarding the shared cultural and historical heritage stems from the lack of any general information about the border region of Petrich and Strumica as a whole. Thus, in the end, the reader would hardly be able to understand what in the historical, social, economic and cultural development of the two regions led to shared cultural and historical heritage and whether such a heritage exists at all.

In the years before the 1000th anniversary of the Battle of Kleidion, there was an apparent intensification of the cultural policies on both sides of the border. Within the frames of the project *One Thousand Years since the Battle of Samuel (1014–2014) – Sustainable Development of the Tourist Attraction “Samuel’s Fortress” in the Municipality of Petrich* funded by EU’s “Regional Development” Operational Programme, the Municipality of Petrich rehabilitated and refined the “Samuel’s Fortress” Park-Museum. On the Macedonian side, the Municipality of Strumica continued the archaeological research and the restoration works in the locality of King’s Towers. The development of a memorial park dedicated to King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion began in the locality of Pirgo (which means ‘tower’ in Greek) located in Belasitsa Mountain, above the village of Mokrievo. During excavation works, archaeologists uncovered a mediaeval tower which they, and the local people as well, related to the Battle of Kleidion. The construction works of the memorial park were financed by the Municipality of Novo selo and by local people’s donations. Many of the developments in the park were made in 2014, on the occasion of the battle’s anniversary. One of the former mayors of Novo selo made a step forward in the cross-border policies regarding King Samuel. He had an idea of a cross-border tourist route following the steps of Samuel’s blinded soldiers. However, this never happened, since the mayor lost the elections in 2013 and the new local authority did not adopt the idea.

The celebration of the battle's anniversary itself is an illustration of the extent to which the two neighbouring regions actually recognize the shared cultural and historical heritage associated with King Samuel. Although on 29 July 2014 (the anniversary of the battle) as well as in early October 2014 (when allegedly King Samuel died) official commemorations were held in both Petrich and Strumica regions, the local authorities on both sides of the border not only did not organise joint events and exchange official visits for the celebrations, but they fully adhered to the nationalist discourses of the respective states. After the anniversary celebrations, the Municipality of Petrich together with Petrich History Museum resumed the annual commemorations of the battle and King Samuel's death at the park-museum. However, "Samuel's Fortress" and the related heritage failed to become a major tourist attraction in the region, one of the reasons being the inaction of the local authorities to develop and implement an integral tourist strategy.

On the other hand, within the local community the figure of King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion have already become part of the collective memory and significant elements of local cultural and historical heritage and even markers of local identity. The National Sport Base in Petrich bears the name of King Samuel and the hotel situated within it was for a certain period of time called "Agatha" after the name of Samuel's wife. After a process of ecotourism development started with the establishment of Belasitsa Nature Park in 2007, some enterprising locals began to rethink the heritage related to King Samuel and the battle as a tourist resource. Stories about Samuel and the battle and visits to the places related to them are now among the main tourist attractions. Meanwhile, local history teachers, workers at the community cultural centres and treasure-hunters have been furthering the process of constructing the cultural memory by spreading new "historical facts", suggesting new interpretations of local toponyms and telling stories of secret tunnels and treasures from the time of King Samuel. The "Route of King Samuel's Warriors" was built. It introduces tourists to the area where the Battle of Kleidion took place and to key locations related to it. The initiative belongs to the local Young Mountaineer Association whose members, with the assistance of Belasitsa Nature Park and with the help of local enthusiasts, cleared the area through which the route passes and put up markings, information boards and benches. Since the battle's anniversary in 2014, the Young Mountaineer Association in cooperation with the Petrich History Museum has organised an annual National Tourist March "In the Footprints of King Samuel's Warriors", during which the participants (who are locals and visitors from all over the country) travel the thematic route and attend talks or re-enactments of the battle. On the initiative of the locals from Klyuch village, the construction of a monument dedicated to King Samuel began in the village, on the "Route of King Samuel's Warriors", in 2021. Due to the Ministry of Culture's disapproval of the bas-relief of Samuel, a permit for the opening of the monument has so far not been received.

Conclusion

The article provided an exploration of the complex intertwining and interplay between cultural memory, heritage construction, and museification, focusing specifically on the case study of King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion in the regions of Petrich, Bulgaria, and Strumica, North Macedonia. It elucidated how historical narratives are not static truths but rather malleable constructs shaped by various socio-political contexts and agendas. The analysis highlighted the contested nature of the cultural memory for King Samuel and the battle, particularly in the context of the complex historical and political dynamics between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The emergence of opposing national narratives, exemplified by the contrasting interpretations of King Samuel's legacy on either side of the border, underscores the instrumentalization of heritage for political purposes and the role of memory in shaping collective identities. By valorizing the historical figure of King Samuel and commemorating significant events like the Battle of Kleidion, state authorities sought to (re)assert claims to territory and historical continuity, while also fostering a sense of national pride and cohesion among citizens on both sides of the border.

The process of heritagisation, initiated through state cultural policies and archaeological research, laid the groundwork for the museification of King Samuel's legacy, culminating in the establishment of the "Samuel's Fortress" National Park-Museum. The process of museification plays a pivotal role in shaping public memory. By selecting, preserving, and presenting specific artefacts, narratives, and interpretations, museums in general give rise to certain understandings of the past. In Petrich, the "Samuel's Fortress" National Park-Museum embodies this transformative power. Therefore, the museum served as a physical manifestation of the (re)constructed cultural memory, perpetuating a particular narrative about King Samuel and the Battle of Kleidion, emphasising themes of heroism, tragedy and national pride. On the one hand, the museum plays a complex role in the town's development strategies aiming at attracting visitors, and on the other, it serves as a constant reminder of a painful historical event, raising questions about the emotional impact of such narratives.

At the same time, we highlighted the contested nature of cultural memory and heritage, particularly in the context of the complex historical and socio-political dynamics between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The contestation is evident in the deferring interpretations of Samuel's personality and the battle, in the naming of villages and landmarks, and even in the construction of opposing memorial parks on either side of the border. The emergence of two different national narratives, exemplified by the contrasting interpretations of King Samuel's legacy on either side of the border, underscores the instrumentalisation of heritage for political purposes and its role in shaping collective identities. The 1000th anniversary celebrations of the battle in 2014 highlighted the still ongoing contestations of this heritage. While both sides held official commemorations, the lack of joint events and collaboration underscores the persistent

challenges of reconciling divergent narratives. Therefore, despite the efforts to promote EU cross-border cooperation projects as a bridge over the divisions and a way towards sustainable tourism development in the cross-border region, these attempts struggle with the limitations imposed by conflicting political agendas.

While national narratives often dominate the discourse on contested heritage, it is also crucial to consider the perspectives and role of local communities, grassroots organisations and history enthusiasts in shaping cultural memory and heritage practices. The article highlighted how those who are residents of Petrich have a more nuanced understanding of the past, influenced by both official narratives and their own knowledge and views. In addition, they shape and to a certain extent contest heritage narratives beyond the confines of official pronouncements, utilising heritage and cultural memory for their own purposes. Through initiatives such as ecotourism development, historical re-enactments, and the establishment of thematic tourist routes, local stakeholders have sought to reclaim agency over the heritage and challenge dominant discourses imposed by state authorities.

Further research should explore the long-term impact of initiatives such as the “Route of King Samuel’s Warriors”, not only on tourism development but also on the dynamics of cultural memory, community engagement, and local identity formation. Analysing how political discourses in both countries evolve and influence interpretations of contested heritage sites and their museification is another point for future monitoring and investigation that can shed light on the complex interplay between national agendas and local realities in preserving and exhibiting heritage.

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