

In Praise of Macedonian Dances

The article below was written by Dennis Boxell and John Hertz in 1990 as an introduction to the syllabus on Greek Macedonian dances. Dennis Boxell was an early ethnologist who did much to popularize Macedonian dances among American folk dancers. I include this to show the high regard that Macedonian dances occupy in the folk dance scene.

GREEK MACEDONIAN DANCES

Dennis Boxell

The ethnic region known to folklorists as Macedonia extends today into three modern States. About three-fifths of it lies in northern Greece, about one-third in southern Yugoslavia, and the rest in the southwest part of Bulgaria.

In this region, political boundaries have intersected and re-intersected ethnic communities for centuries; political events have prompted or forced people to resettle. Today towns and dances may have different names in Greek and Slavic, sometimes as similar as Kostur (Slavic) and Kastoria (Greek) for a Macedonian town in Greece, or as distinct as Levendikos (Greek) and Pousteno (Slavic) for a Macedonian dance done near Lake Prespa on both sides of the Yugoslav-Greek border. Some names are common everywhere, like "gaida" for the Macedonian bagpipe. Some prove to be of Turkish origin, since Turks ruled Greek and Slav alike for 500 years - - such as for the butchers' dance called Kasapsko (Slavic) or Hassapikos (Greek), from a Turkish word meaning "butcher".

Through the end of the 1980's, most American folkdancers saw only dances or choreographies in the style of Skopje, the capital of Yugoslav Macedonia. But this neighborhood, rich in folklore as it is, sits at the north and can hardly be characteristic of the whole. The dances described in these notes are mostly from the vicinity of Kastoria, Edessa ("Voden" in Slavic), and Florina (Lerin), in Greek Macedonia.

Macedonian dances, whatever they are called, and regardless of political arguments about whom they belong to, are among the jewels of the Balkans. The Macedonian style of movement is a rare combination of strength and grace. The Macedonian sense of rhythm is probably unique. Those who love these dances grow used to hearing them called first strange, then fascinating, then inexhaustibly delightful. May you enjoy them too.