

THE URBAN CONCEPT OF MACEDONIAN CITIES WITHIN THE OTTOMAN CULTURE

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Abstract

Evliya Çelebi's travelogues are one of the main sources of literary accounts of the urban concept of medieval Macedonian cities under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Drawing conclusions from his observations this paper analyses how the cities have gradually become mutual cultural spaces to a wide range of people with differing backgrounds. Çelebi writes about these cultural spaces, in particular about the bridges and bazaars as focal points of urban life. In this context, cities can be perceived as places of tolerance where the old and the new are interwoven leading to a mutual cultural recognition between various ethnicities and religions.

Keywords: urban concept, Medieval Macedonian cities, travelogues, Evliya Çelebi, cultural recognition.

Recent advances in technology have stimulated a revival of the discipline of cultural history within the humanities, thus enabling us to reread the past, and in particular to reread the cultural phenomena of everyday life. Above all, the flourishing of cultural history is related to a broader application of cultural aspects in political sciences, geography, psychology, economy, anthropology, archaeology and culturology in general.¹ Additionally, the common ground for cultural historians could be looked through the prism of interpretation of the symbolism of cultural products and manifestations. The topic of urban history allows us to see the complexity of the urban phenomenon within the Balkans. Many of us believe that in the past, especially here on the Balkans and in Macedonia in particular, the cities lacked an urban concept, or in other words, that within "the national countries which developed after the partition of the Ottoman Empire, the new metropolises had to acquire 'a modern and European look'"². However, due to a variety of written material from the past centuries, especially the travelogues, we come across new readings and new discoveries about our past.

Looking at the urban history of Macedonian cities through the eyes of the famous traveller Evliya Çelebi we hold here today a different geographic map. The essence of his endeavour, which took place over five centuries ago, is perfectly described in the following words of R. L. Stevenson "As for me, it is not the destination I am travelling for. It is the

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¹ Piter Berk, *Osnovi kulturne istorija [What is Cultural History?]*, Beograd: CLIO 2010, p. 6.

² Marko Dogo i Armando Pitasio (ur.), *Gradovi Balkana, Gradovi Evrope [Cities of the Balkans, Cities of Europe]*, Beograd: CLIO 2018, p. 14.

journey itself. Moving forward is a great thing to do”³. Writing about cultural geography, Mike Crang says: “Travel is a spatial practice that has been at the heart of geography. In its earliest origins geography was the stuff of travelers’ tales; mixing accounts of varying degrees of heroism and veracity, it long functioned to tell people ‘back here’ what was going on ‘over there’”⁴. In this context, Çelebi’s travelogues, which are imbued with truth and fiction, enable us to cross the borders and to decrease the differences between cultural regions by making the unfamiliar familiar through framing the everyday life within a conceptualization of urban settlements.

It is noteworthy that during the Medieval period the peoples of these regions have managed to preserve their identity despite living under the Ottoman rule. Certainly, during this time they were under various influences and they gained considerable advantages and disadvantages from living under the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. These advantages could be tracked down in the growth of the Empire as this has also benefited the Medieval progress of the conquered territories.

It is remarkable how the Ottoman Empire failed “to melt away the Balkan differences into a single culture” because the Empire was not trying to disconnect the local population from its traditions. This attitude is especially prominent in the XVIth century – a period during which the peoples in this region were allowed to communicate more intensely with the rest of the world. During this period the various peoples were allowed to preserve their institutions. This was the case with the Ohrid Archbishopric which had obtained its autonomy from the Sublime Porte and had extended its diocese in broader degrees.⁵ The folkloric and religious traditions and practices were preserved thanks to the church’s autonomous character which had been additionally strengthened by the Sheriate. Official permits for renovations and construction of new and old cultural and religious buildings were granted only by the highest officials in the Ottoman Empire. It is incredible how during the later period (XVII-XVIII centuries) the Greek Patriarchy managed to overrule the Balkan orthodox churches. This was convenient for the Sublime Porte because during the period of the Empire’s decreased economic and military power it progressively approved the power of the Greek Patriarchy in order to prevent the orthodox subjects from getting closer to the aspirations of Western Christianity.

The XVIth century inhabits the most important place in the cultural memory of both Christians and Muslims. This is the reign of the Sultan Selim I and his son Suleiman who brought progress in most fields of endeavours: economic, military, cultural, diplomatic and so on. The Balkan cities flourished as well during their reign. The Ottoman Empire reached the peak of its power during the rule of

³ David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Sibley, Neil Washbourne (ur.), *Kulturna geografija: krutički rječnik ključnih pojmova [Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts]*, Zagreb 2008, p. 63.

⁴ Ibid, p. 63.

⁵ For this process see Маја Јакимовска-Тошиќ, *Македонска книжевност во XV век [Macedonian Literature in the XVth century]*, Скопје: Институт за македонска литература, 2001.

these sultans and their successor Selim II triumphed over Central Europe, the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. Their reign was not only marked by conquests but also by administrative organization of the state that began with Selim I and was continued with much greater intensity by Suleiman the Policy Maker⁶. Weaknesses are inevitable but owing to their efficient organization and accumulated wealth the Empire managed to impose itself and played an active role on the international scene. The progress of the Empire was recognized both by the Muslim Sunnite population and Western Europe which at that time was preoccupied with the Renaissance ideas and was economically weakened and religiously divided.

The rule of Suleiman is a period marked by an advancement in arts, science and literature. "At the peak of its power, this Empire was completely opposite from a national state: this was an empire that was not trying to unite everybody, although it gathered a variety of elements... There were different nations among the peoples... Many religions mixed within the Empire..."⁷ The overall progress of the Empire during the XVIth century was also due to the demographic growth which similarly took place in the Mediterranean countries. Between 1520 and 1580 the population increased 41%, which means that some of the regions even doubled their growth and the cities became bigger.⁸ This was a period of an overall growth in economy, farming, and metallurgy. The Ottomans adopted the organization, techniques and terminology from the rich tradition of metallurgy already present in the Balkans. Mantran reports that there was a production of lead and silver in Macedonia, especially in the cities of Kratovo, Prilep and Kavala; that in the XVth century Eastern Macedonia was famous for its mines containing silver, gold, lead and copper. Another important economic sector were the mints located in Skopje and Kratovo which were even depicted in the travelogues of Evliya Çelebi as hills rich in pure copper and silver. Çelebi also says that there used to be a Madrasa and a Tekke, several primary schools and public drinking fountains that were engraved with faces and ornaments some of which were even adorned with gemstones. He noted that the walls were decorated with engravings and that the local Hammam was one of the best in all Rumelia⁹.

Comparing Çelebi's information with what historians have said – that "beside the clear evidence of a developed mining tradition, there was also evidence of an economic growth in urban areas with certain types of manufacturing production"¹⁰, we may come to the conclusion that Çelebi apostrophized these

⁶ Робер Мантран, *Историја Османског Царства [History of Ottoman Empire]*, Београд: CLIO 2002, pp. 188-189.

⁷ Ibid, p. 192.

⁸ Ibid, p. 251.

⁹ Evliya Çelebi, „Odlomci o jugoslovenskim zemjama“, *Putopisi* [“Excerpts from the Countries of Yugoslavia”, *Travelogues*], preveo, uvod i komentar Hazim Šabanović, Sarajevo: Svetlost 1967, pp. 292-293.

¹⁰ Александар Стојановски, *Македонија во турското средновековие [Macedonia in the Ottoman Middle Ages]*, Скопје: Култура 1989, p. 72.

economic activities in Macedonia. Çelebi gives a detailed account of the trades and shops in the Macedonian cities that he visited. For example, he says that there used to be 350 shops in Kratovo, that there was a beautiful old bazaar where coppersmiths made lamps, lanterns, ibriks and other objects that surpassed the beauty of those that were made in Sarajevo or Kastamonu (a Black Sea coast city)¹¹.

Çelebi emphasizes his observations and impressions of the cities in Macedonia and their urban life style in terms of their value and circumstances. At times he emphasizes the magic of a certain place, the strangeness that captivated him, portraying the city's age, size, setting, surrounding scenery, landscape, or the unusual events that took place. In his travelogues he noticed that the beauty of a certain city depended not only on the level of Ottoman architectural activity but also on the creativity and lifestyle of the locals and their inventions in urban planning and sustainability. The beauty and attractiveness of a certain city can be a result of sustainable strategy and urban planning, of keeping the city clean, of maintaining its vegetation and orderliness, but this also depends on the inhabitants' mentality and environmental attitude. In essence, the criteria of a beautiful city are voluntarily just like the assessment of aesthetic values.

However, the value of the geographical position of a certain city is also related to the people who decided to settle down and build it, because the city often has the function of connecting different ethnicities, cultures and religions. Thus, the cities are viewed as places where different beliefs, opinions and traditions are mixed. The cities are dynamic communities where there is always something happening and Evliya Çelebi managed to record certain events and developments in his travelogues.

In his writings we find a variety of descriptions of urban development: in Veles the houses were built on steep hills amphitheatrically positioned towards the river; in Prilep there used to be very old buildings and the city was inhabited by very esteemed and admired people; its *varosh* (the old part of the town) embraced a thousand well-built houses with large yards and 200 shops¹². In Bitola he observed ten stone bridges, 21 districts with 3000 small and big single-story and two-story houses built out of long-lasting material with roof tiles, 9 Madrasas, 900 shops, 40 restaurants, and a magnificent Bezisten where linen, which was considered to be even more famous than that of Misir, was the most popular product. Additionally, Çelebi described 20 picnic venues throughout which echoed the beautiful sounds of the harp and tambura. He noted that there were brilliant rhetoricians and speakers and that the wealthy tradesmen and pilgrims were willing to support the construction of churches and monasteries¹³. One of the main features of the cities were the guesthouses and inns which by welcoming foreigners who introduced new trades, traditions and news, helped the locals become more open to learning about what was happening in the rest of the

¹¹ Evliya Çelebi, *Putopisi [Travelogues]*, p. 293.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 301-303.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

world. These travellers helped the locals learn about other places. Macedonia was part of the so called “eastern region” which included the Balkan countries under the Ottoman Empire and ancient Russia. Istanbul and Moscow became major centres of information and influence in terms of trade, culture and religion. The central part of Europe included mainly the Roman Empire extending towards Vienna, Prague, and Budapest – cities whose impact could be felt on the Balkans during the Late Middle Ages. The northern region, including the cities of Koln, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Riga, Königsberg, Bremen, and Amsterdam, had its own interests and connections of economic and cultural influence.

During the XVIth century the Empire not only supported road construction and maintenance but also supported the construction of religious institutions, inns, public fountains and bridges. It is during this period that Kuršumli Inn and several bridges were built in Skopje. In this context we emphasize these public places because they serve the purpose of communication points to a wide range of people with differing backgrounds. Evliya Çelebi writes about these cultural spaces, in particular about the bridges and bazaars as focal points of urban life. Certain urban spaces became specialized areas during the Ottoman period. The old bazaar differentiated from other residential areas and streets were commonly recognized as places for tradesmen, shops, crafts, and other services. Exports and imports were highly developed and even at the beginning of the XVIth century there was an impressive trade in goods and services in Kratovo. There were other markets as well that Çelebi talks about in his writings. For instance, he observed that in Resen crowds of people from the city and from the surrounding villages would come and trade every Sunday. He points out that the town was visited by various tradesmen around the world and that the locals were mainly manufacturing a certain root crop for making a natural red fabric dye which they later exported to Western Europe¹⁴. He also writes about Radoviš, the rich fields of Tikveš, the great fortress and the thousand shops with roof tiles in Strumica, and about the seraglio where judges and leaders were accommodated. According to his writings there were a hundred thousand visitors from Europe, Rumelia, Arabia, India, Syria, Iraq and other countries – “every tradesman from land and sea and from the seven climate regions of the world would come and sell many trade products at the bazaar”. Çelebi comments that there were also tradesmen selling food products, velvet, atlases, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and many other gemstones¹⁵.

To these observations we could also add Aleksandar Stojanovski’s remark that it is highly unlikely to think that the Ottoman rule brought a decline in the overall development of the Balkans. He also observes that there were considerable changes and slowing down in some development areas and in certain regions of the peninsula¹⁶.

¹⁴ Evliya Çelebi, *Putopisi [Travelogues]*, pp. 563-564.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

¹⁶ Александар Стојановски, *Македонија во турското средновековие [Macedonia in the Ottoman Middle Ages]*, p. 74.

The XVIIth century image of the Ottoman Empire began to change as a result of their constant conquests which in return caused internal tumults. This was also attributable to the social and political circumstances in Europe and the less powerful, decisive and authoritative heirs to the throne. The glory of the XVIth century began to fade. In the XVIIth century Austrians entered Macedonia again and diminished the glory of Skopje. Undeniably Skopje after the fall under the Ottoman rule began to change its appearance by adopting oriental traits while preserving its own peculiarities. Skopje used to be a beautiful city before Piccolomini ordered the city to be burned in 1689 with the intention of not leaving his enemy anything he could put to use. In a letter to the Austrian Emperor Leopold I Piccolomini wrote: "I decided, although it was not easily, to burn the town into ashes. I am sorry for the houses such as I have not seen at all in this war. The mosques are from the highest quality marble and porphyry, decorated with thousands lamps on golden plated holders, which one would devote equal attention even in Rome. I feel sorry for the nice antiquities, gardens and pleasure grounds"¹⁷.

During the XVIIth century there were less and less investments in construction. Also there was a decline in arts and literature. And it was during this period that Evliya Çelebi (1611-1683) "by using simple and vivid language reported his numerous travels within and beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire; his description of the places he visited – and even those he never visited! – is a meticulous and an imaginative master work that requires a careful study and attention"¹⁸.

Evliya Çelebi came to stay in Macedonia in the XVIIth century, i.e. after the glorious XVIth century. In addition to the previously mentioned accounts of his visits there is also a description of the town of Kumanovo about which he writes that "The place is adorned with many rivers and it's embellished with six hundred houses covered with roof tiles". He reports that there was a mosque, a Tekke, a Madrasa, an inn, a Hammam, plenty of shops and watermills, and that the climate was mild and pleasant.

Evliya Çelebi points out that the religious buildings and temples occupied a particularly important place in the cities; they were the meeting points of two worlds – the transient and the eternal. The presence of both mosques and churches is evident in Macedonian cities, many of which date back to the Byzantine period. Every human community expresses in their own way the intention to connect with the transcendental, interpreting it according to the worldview of their own religion. These buildings are places of unity, connection and division between two separate worlds – the Byzantine and the Ottoman – in terms of sermon, art, and architecture. The Ottoman architecture in Macedonia, characterized by Turkish and Ottoman symbols, as well as by visible Byzantine influences, experiences its flourishing period during the XVth -and XVIth centuries. The Ottoman prominent features come to light with the construction of

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 207.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 316.

the barrel-vaults and domes – typical elements of Ottoman architecture. During the construction, Islamic builders paid special attention to the formation and processing of the barrel-vaults, domes and porches (sofas or mattresses) and adorning elements – plastic decorations made of Muqarnas (stalactite decoration). In fact, the ornament was a prominent element in Ottoman art, just as it had been earlier used by the Jews, and thousands of years before that by some of the civilizations of Mesopotamia. Under these influences the Islamic, i.e. the Ottoman art developed the usage of abstract forms of arabesque and other geometrical and floral decorative motifs. The arabesque – that great secret of Arabic ornament – is a form of artistic decoration consisting of linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, an opulent world of fantasy and strict geometrical forms. The arabesque is a refined creation of the rising of the Islamic spirit; it has neither beginning nor end and yet it never seeks for one, for it only seeks that which the Qur'an calls the Beginning and the End; it is a tireless search towards eternity. One of the most common motives are the Islamic vault, the Crescent, and the Star of David (hexagram). The hexagram is found in Jewish, Christian and Muslim sacred buildings and is closely linked to the sun and the moon (*kamer* in Arabic); it is one of Allah's powers symbolizing death and resurrection. It is worth noting that Islamic art and the Armenian colony that was present in our region have strongly influenced the Christian sacred buildings, especially their stone decorations adorned with arabesques that can be seen on the facades of some of the churches in the northeastern part of Macedonia. These Armenian influences are also visible in the Tatar Sinan Beg Mosque in Kumanovo, especially in the processing of the tapestries with geometrical decorations made of stone and marble. Another source of information for the coexistence of these different cultures is Evliya Çelebi's description of the city of Skopje where he stayed in 1660. According to Çelebi there used to be 120 Islamic prayer homes (large and small mosques, masjids and private prayer homes), 70 elementary schools (mektebi), 20 Tekkes, several public baths (Hammams), 9 imarets (free public kitchens), several inns, houses "covered with red tiles" and etc¹⁹. He reports that Skopje was a walled city with a well-built fortress, a city gate and double walls built of carved stone that shined as if polished. "Such a refinement and craftsmanship cannot be seen in any other city"²⁰. In his description he pointed out that Skopje had been built on a hill and that it had a pentagonal shape. The city was surrounded by seventy bastions; it had three demir (iron) gates facing south-east protected by many guards. The gates and the walls were embroidered with various weapons and necessary firearm tools. The city, after all, "... lies on very high rocks and the whole field is visible from it. On the west side the River Vardar flows. On that side there is a road that leads through a cave called the "Water Tower" that is located on the bank of the river ..." ²¹. Çelebi indicates that historians had considered Skopje to be the European part of the Ottoman Empire. It was highlighted

¹⁹ Evlija Çelebi, *Putopisi [Travelogues]*, p. 281.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 280.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 281.

that there were 10060 beautiful well-built single-story and two-story houses: "These are real castles in good condition, covered with red roof tiles." Within the Sultan-Murat Mosque, Çelebi noted the most famous Madrasa in Skopje, and among the first interesting monuments that he saw was the Clock Tower: "It is located in front of the Upper City, close to the Tsar's Mosque, and it looks like a minaret. The ticking of the clock can be heard at a distance of a day journey with a terrifying sound. And the tower of that Clock Tower is very interesting"²². His depiction of the bazaar creates a memorable image of the urban concept of the city of Skopje: the Old Bazaar consisted of 2150 shops, several squares and well-built marketplaces decorated with vaults and domes. The little streets were made of cobblestones and were very clean; and each shop was decorated with hyacinths, violets, roses, lilacs and other types of flowers put in vases and pots. He points out that there lived prominent and outstanding people: "It is a nest of poets and people who are friends of the poor. Residents are particularly fond of pleasures and delights. Love and pleasure are a great benefit from their enamored hearts"²³. Çelebi also made comparisons between cities, and once again he made a remark about Skopje that "neither language nor quill could describe its beauty". As for the city population, he noted that it was composed of merchants, clerks and craftsmen, providing detailed information regarding fashion and cuisine.

Similar reports on urban living are found for other Macedonian cities such as Štip, Sveti Nikole, Struga, and Ohrid. It is reported that various merchants from all around Rumelia visited Struga in order to buy the famous Ohrid trout, and he called Lake Ohrid "the elixir of life". Çelebi narrates that Struga is a small town (*kasaba*) located on the sandy banks of the lake comprising of about 300 well-built single-story and two-story houses with opulent gardens and vineyards. He also notes that there were 40 shops, one inn, an imaret, a Madrasa, and an Hammam – a legacy of the family Ohrizade. Çelebi notes that once a year there was a ten-day fair attended by forty to fifty thousand people²⁴.

Writing about the city of Ohrid, Çelebi observed that it was a rich and highly developed trading centre like the cities of Baghdad, Cairo or Constantinople. He records detailed descriptions of the fortress, explaining that its main architect had decorated the city with various artistic embrasures and strongholds as never seen anywhere before. Çelebi also gave descriptions of several monuments in the city, among which he depicted (Hagia) St. Sophia and joyfully mentioned that it had been converted from a Christian into a Muslim temple. He further noted that there were six Christian monasteries in good condition. The description of the city of Ohrid is enriched with the portrayals of the sarays and the accounts of the two public Hammams and the seventy-five private ones, 150 shops, 7 beautiful restaurants in which an educated world gathered, and that the Christian districts were abundant with inns that served wine. There was no

²² Ibid, P. 285.

²³ Ibid, p. 287.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 550.

bezisten. Çelebi also wrote about his impressions of the people he met; about the nine types of quinces, the 24 types of plums and pears, about the apples that were exported in large boxes across the world. He described the 12 picnic venues where people would entertain, and noticed that this practice was typical only for the people of the city of Ohrid. He depicts interesting facts about their fashion, their clothes and styles²⁵.

Çelebi's travelogues represent a true testament of the food culture, the clothing culture, the trading culture, the urban culture, or in other words, the cultural history of Macedonia, of the Balkans and beyond. In fact, the perceptions of the topic of urban history reveal that some cities, like for example the city of Ohrid, were inclined to experience gradual progress due to their good social circumstances, geographical position and natural surroundings, and the individual preferences of the local population. Nevertheless, this was also due to the quirks of history. The attractiveness of the geographical position at the same time depended on the people's attitudes towards urban planning and on their vision of the functioning of the cities and the lives of their inhabitants. The richness of urban culture is perceived in the many different elements that make up the life of the city – the religious, artistic and ideological tendencies that are often deeply intertwined with various linguistic, religious and cultural orientations. Cities can be perceived as places or zones of relative freedom that could interweave through tolerance the conventional and the unconventional, the old and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar – processes that through historical assumptions could lead to a mutual cultural recognition.

We can conclude that during the Medieval period the main connecting points in these recognitions were the sacred commonplaces which determined the cultural forms of living. With the beginning of the Enlightenment²⁶ and with the increased self-awareness the city population grew bigger and that in return encouraged an increased cultural exchange and dialogue among people. Certainly, the economic and cultural development of the cities through the transmission of cultural goods and ideas enabled the cultural affirmation and connection of the cities that empowered them with a universal value.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 554-562.

²⁶ For the process of development in Macedonia see Валентина Миронска-Христовска, *Просветителството во Македонија [Enlightenment in Macedonia]*, Скопје: Институт за македонска литература, 2005.

Öz

Osmanlı Kültüründe Makedon Şehirlerinin Kent Kavramı

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu egemenliğindeki, Ortaçağ Makedonyası şehirlerinin kent kavramı için edebi temel kaynaklardan biri Evliya Çelebinin seyahatnamesidir. Seyyahin gözlemlerinden sonuçlar çıkartılan makalede, şehirlerin farklı geçmişlere sahip insanlar için nasıl ortak bir kültürel yer olduğunu analiz edilir. Çelebi, bu kültürel mekanlar hakkında, özellikle kentsel yaşamın odak noktaları olan köprüler ve pazarlar hakkında yazar. Bu bağlamda, şehirler, eski ve yeninin iç içe geçtiği, çeşitli etnik kökenlerle, dinler arasında karşılıklı kültürel bir tanıma-yol açan, bir hoşgörü yeri olarak algılanabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kent kavramı, Ortaçağ Makedon kentleri, seyahatnameler, Evliya Çelebi, kültürel tanıma.

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