

Ottoman towns in Bulgaria

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When travelling from Turkey to Bulgaria, one of the strongest impressions is that of cultural continuity. Whilst the Turkish Latin alphabet on the signposts changes to Cyrillic once you cross the border and the place names appear to be Slavic, much of the architecture and many aspects of daily life are no different from neighbouring Turkey. Although many of the restaurants serve either international or Bulgarian food, there are still many places where the cuisine appears to be Turkish or rather Ottoman in origin. In spite of this strong sense of cultural continuity, the Turkish Ottoman past of Bulgaria is generally either glossed over or portrayed as negative and alien both in tourist publications and in popular culture.

The aim of my current research, which builds on previous work looking at the archaeology of Ottoman Bulgaria, is to focus on the development of Bulgarian towns during the Ottoman period. Although there has been considerable research carried out on the development of classical (Greek and Roman-period) and medieval towns in Bulgaria, research on Ottoman towns has been much more limited. There have, on the other hand, been studies of the urban development of Bulgarian cities from the period of independence up to the present day. Although a handful of Bulgarian and international historians have begun to investigate the Ottoman era, there are considerable difficulties in doing so, partly because of the introduction of Social Realist architecture after the Second World War which reconfigured many town centres.

With a few notable exceptions, the centres and even suburbs of many modern Bulgarian towns have their origins in the Ottoman period. Following Bulgarian independence, many of the more obvious signs of Ottoman rule were either demolished or remodelled to make the towns appear more 'European'. This was an easier process than might be expected as much 19th-century Ottoman architecture was already heavily influenced by an international 'European' style. Characteristically Ottoman architecture was seen as backward and a reminder of national subjugation. The main problem was considered to be the mosques, which were both distinctively Ottoman and usually located in prominent positions within cities. Although many mosques were destroyed, others were converted to other uses. For example, sometime between 1901 and 1903 the Kara Cami in Sofia, designed by Mimar Sinan and built in 1548, was converted into the Sedmochislenitse Church by the removal of the minaret and the addition of stone crosses at each corner of the building.

One of the most important research questions to consider is the Ottoman contribution to urban development in Bulgaria following the Turkish conquests in the 14th century. For example, it is not clear whether 14th-century Bulgaria

had a highly developed urban network with significant numbers of people living in towns and cities. Some scholars, such as Machiel Kiel, have suggested that the population of late medieval Bulgaria was restricted and dispersed as a result of warfare between the Byzantines and Bulgarians, on the one hand, and as a result of plague, on the other. Certainly these two factors made the Ottoman conquest easier and there are several examples of Ottoman foundations designed to encourage urban development. One of the most famous examples is the *imaret* at the İmaret Cami at Ikhtiman between Sofia and Plovdiv. Ikhtiman is the presumed location of one of the decisive battles between the Ottomans and the Bulgarians. The battle, which took place in 1355, resulted in an Ottoman victory and the death of Prince Michail Asen (1322–1355), son of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander. The *imaret* (soup kitchen) was probably built by Mihaloğlu Mahmud Bey sometime between 1370 and 1402 as a means of reviving settlement in this depopulated area. Other Ottoman buildings at the site included two caravanserais and a bathhouse, which were probably intended to form the nucleus of the town.

Another model of urban development is provided by the city of Kyustendil in western Bulgaria. The city is located in a deep valley to the southwest of Sofia, near the Macedonian border. The city is built over an ancient one and includes the remains of the Roman spa city of Pautalia. The fate of the settlement during the medieval period is not clear and it is possible that it was largely abandoned until it was captured by the Ottomans. There are several extant Ottoman monuments in the city, including the Fetih Mehmet Paşa Cami, built in the 1400s, and the Ahmed Beğ Cami, built in the last quarter of the 16th century. Although on present evidence it is not possible to determine the degree of continuity between the medieval and Ottoman periods of the city, it is clear that archaeology is the only method likely to provide a definitive answer.



The Kara Cami in Sofia