

Forgotten, Renamed, Reclaimed: Bulgaria's Ottoman Heritage beyond the Authorised Dissonance

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The study explores the presence of the Ottoman heritage in Bulgaria. Despite its exclusion from the national heritage canon, different communities engage with and valorise it. Using a scalar approach, we examine how heritage operates at various levels, revealing the dynamic interplay of dominant and vernacular discourses. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork, the paper highlights the mosaic of memories, narratives, and practices that reclaim Ottoman heritage today.

▪ **Keywords:** Ottoman heritage, dissonance, heritage scales, Bulgaria, Balkans

V raziskavi je obravnavana navzočnost osmanske dediščine v Bolgariji. Čeprav jo avtorizirani dediščinski diskurz izključuje iz nacionalnega kanona, se različne skupnosti aktivno ukvarjajo z njo in jo na novo vrednotijo. Z uporabo skalarnega pristopa avtorja preučujeta, kako dediščina deluje na različnih ravneh, in razkrivata vzajemno dinamično delovanje dominantnih in vernakularnih diskurzov. V članku je na podlagi antropološkega terenskega dela poudarjen mozaik spominov, pripovedi in praks, ki danes obnavljajo osmansko dediščino.

▪ **Ključne besede:** osmanska dediščina, disonantnost, večstopenjskost dediščine, Bolgarija, Balkan

Introduction: The Ottoman heritage beyond the authorised heritage discourse?

The exclusion of the Ottoman past from the heritage layers valorised in Southeastern Europe is a well-documented phenomenon (e.g. Todorova, 1995; Hajdarpašić, 2008; Ginio, Kaser, 2013; Lory, 2015; Kolovos, Poulos, 2021). It can be argued that the authorised heritage discourses (AHD) (Smith, 2006) of the predominantly Christian post-Ottoman Balkan nations ascribe a specific “authorised dissonance” to Ottoman heritage, thereby relegating it to a position of marginality. The Ottoman rule is predominantly viewed through the framework of what Kiel (1985: 33–35) terms “catastrophe theory”, portraying it as an era of profound destruction and lacking cultural significance. This framework invariably defines the Ottoman legacy as “undesired” (Kiel, 2005) or “rejected” (Aretov, 2008), and therefore makes it “contested” (Smith, 2006: 35–42) and “dissonant” (Tunbridge, Ashworth, 1996). It also marks the radical transformation from imperial rule to independent nation-states

with concerted efforts to erase Ottoman traces, a phenomenon frequently referred to as de-Ottomanisation (Vucinich, 1963: 114; Hartmuth, 2006; Lory, 2015). The consequences of the latter are multifaceted, impacting both material and intangible remnants of the Ottoman past. Many such remnants have faced neglect, abandonment, destruction, or transformation. The demographic changes that accompanied the decline of the Ottoman Empire further complicate this situation. The expulsion of Muslim and Turkish populations from the former Ottoman provinces in Europe raises questions about the disintegration of heritage communities. In this context, Ottoman heritage can be seen as a “heritage left without heirs”, as Kolovos (2015) has suggested in the case of Crete – an observation that resonates with many parts of the region. Or, as Lewis (2010: 161) has noted about Bulgaria’s material heritage, these are monuments “bereft of past, present, and future”.

These observations align with our previous research, and yet this is just a partial perspective to the complex presence of the Ottoman heritage in the post-Ottoman Balkans, which overlooks the immanent dissonance of every heritage construct (Tunbridge, Ashworth, 1996; Smith, 2006: 80–84). Without denying the validity of the AHD that excludes this layer from the nationally-celebrated past, we argue that Ottoman heritage is actively being reclaimed today by various communities and individuals. Focusing on the case of Bulgaria, our study draws on more-than-representational theories (Waterton, 2014) to highlight the manifold memories, narratives, and practices that valorise and care for the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, transmuting them into forms of cultural heritage deeply connected to individuals, families, and communities. Thus, this paper endeavours to transcend the limitations of a one-dimensional perspective by offering an alternative approach – one that champions the diversity and agency embedded within the heritage tapestry. In juxtaposing these competing perspectives, our objective is to underscore the dynamic and multifaceted nature of heritage-making within a seemingly homogeneous heritage canon. This approach challenges both the idea of an overpowering and exhaustive AHD and the notion of a monolithic nation as an imagined community, offering a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of Ottoman heritage in Bulgaria and the broader Balkan region.

This hypothesis is based on a decade of anthropological fieldwork that has revealed such a complex picture and invited us to rethink and “downscale” our research focus. To explore the coexistence of perceptions, we employ a scalar approach. Following Harvey (2015), we acknowledge that the Ottoman heritage operates at various interrelated scales, which interact and affect each other in the context of dynamic power relations. At the national scale – which is heavily entangled with the broader European, that is often Eurocentric and Orientalist discourse – the AHD tends to present a singular narrative of contested heritage. Shifting the focus to the subnational, local, familial, and personal scales illuminates how the dominant discourse influences everyday, intimate or locally rooted perceptions of heritage. However, this also reveals how various communities

breathe life into Ottoman heritage by imbuing it with meaning, integrating it into their own cultural fabric and sense of place, and linking it to both collective and individual identities. The following sections reflect on these assumptions to unpack the content of the different scales, while acknowledging that these are not independent, but rather mutually constitutive.

By tracing these various scales, our research underscores that Ottoman heritage is not a monolithic entity, but a dynamic mosaic shaped and continuously renegotiated by myriad voices and experiences. Additionally, it delves into the politics of scale to demonstrate the existence of a “multi-scalarity of heritage discourses” (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019: 11) related to the (post-)Ottoman past. That is, to examine the relationships between the powerful discourses that contest the Ottoman heritage and make it dissonant, and the voices contesting the authorised dissonance of Ottoman heritage. As Lähdesmäki et al. (2019: 11) have argued, “in heritage discourses and practices, micro and macro scales of heritage commonly merge and affect each other”. To explore this interplay and hierarchies, we focus on the vernacular practices and engagements with the Ottoman past emerging from socially and politically marginalised positions, while also paying attention to the hegemonic discourse created by the national state through its cultural and educational institutions. We draw on Robertson’s (2012: 1) concept of “heritage from below” to highlight that heritage is “about people, collectivity and individuals, and about their sense of inheritance from the past”.

Methodological notes

Our research commenced in 2014, focusing on the exclusion of Ottoman heritage from the Bulgarian AHD. At this stage, we analysed public debates and strong resistance – spanning political, media, and civil spheres – against legal efforts by the Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria to reclaim ownership of Ottoman mosques that had been nationalised in earlier periods. This research explored the discourses of rejection, their emotional and legal manifestations, and the counter-discourses articulated by Muslim communities (Strahilov, Karakusheva, 2015, 2018).

Since 2014, we have maintained consistent fieldwork through short-term visits to various locations in Bulgaria, alongside observations in cities in other Balkan countries such as Edirne, Istanbul, Skopje, and Athens. In 2015, our scope expanded to include grassroots practices of Ottoman heritage preservation. This downscaling shift was prompted by three independent local initiatives aimed at safeguarding Ottoman mosques in three Bulgarian towns – Razgrad, Silistra, and Gotse Delchev. We interpreted these actions as expressions of care and emotional attachment to Ottoman heritage “from below” (Strahilov, Karakusheva, 2020). In 2019, during field studies, we encountered personal recollections where crumbling mosques and (already destroyed) Ottoman

public baths in proximity intertwined. These narratives led us to broaden our research to include vernacular perspectives on Ottoman-era heritage, encompassing both religious and secular structures. We hypothesised that secular buildings, such as public baths, offer a more nuanced understanding of individual or local relationships with Ottoman heritage. Since 2021, we have been exploring this hypothesis further through a focused study on Ottoman bathhouses, examining their continuity and transformations.

This paper draws on the extensive material that has been gathered through qualitative methods. Primarily, our findings are based on the results of a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, including direct and participant observation in mosques, bathhouses, and specific events across multiple locations, visits to museums and heritage sites, and walks guided by local people. We engaged in semi-structured interviews and informal conversations that allowed us to hear and understand the views, memories, and attitudes of numerous people. These interactions involved individuals from diverse ethnic (Bulgarian, Turkish, Roma, Pomak) and religious (Christian, Sunni Muslim, Alevi, Jewish) backgrounds. Our interlocutors also represented a broad range of social profiles and professional roles, including residents living near Ottoman monuments, members of different Muslim communities, activists, officials of local and national authorities, representatives of the Bulgarian Grand Mufti's Office of the Muslim Denomination, visitors to and employees of bathhouses, museum experts, scholars, and tourists. The article is based on the perspectives of individuals whose voices are often silenced or omitted by the AHD. In addition to our ethnographic study, we conducted media analysis, including social media platforms like Facebook, and documentary research, including archival research.

National scale: Authorising Ottoman heritage dissonance

To unravel the various microscales at which the Ottoman heritage exists, it is essential to position them within the broader context where they emerge and interact. Extensive scholarship discusses the dominant discourse that contests the Ottoman heritage within Christian communities across the Balkans, despite, or perhaps precisely because of, the profound impact left by the Ottoman Empire on local populations and their cultures. Consequently, the modern nationalisms of newly established states have defined this legacy as problematic, leading to myriad attempts to disassociate from it with multiple outcomes in different national frameworks. In the context of post-Ottoman changes, the redrawing of state borders and the reciprocal exchange of populations, the religious (and sometimes secular) buildings of the former populations were often perceived as “the Other’s heritage”, leading to lasting effects on the ways they were (not) valorised and preserved (Amygdalou et al., 2022; Tarhan, 2022).

Since de-Ottomanising endeavours often coincide with the adoption of “Western” cultural models, the powerful influence of long-lasting Europeanisation for legitimising Ottoman heritage dissonance is noteworthy. The embrace of the concept of “Europe”, with its Orientalist and Balkanist implications, alongside the traumatic aspirations to be part of it, significantly shapes the conceptualisation of the Ottoman heritage in post-Ottoman Balkan nations (Bryce, Čaušević, 2019). Since Islam and Islamic heritage are in general contested in and by this “Europe” (Shatanawi et al., 2021), any association with Ottoman heritage – often uncritically interpreted as related to Islam – could be seen as problematic and risks reinforcing (self-)attributed non-Europeaness of the newly established states.

Therefore, the dissociation from the Ottoman past derives from complex nation-building processes in the 19th and 20th centuries, making it the quintessential bearer of a primordial dissonance. The respective national AHD as a powerful conceptual framework not only defines the layers of heritage deemed appropriate and nationally-celebrated, neutralising their inherent dissonances, but also renders specific heritage layers dissonant (Smith, 2006: 80–84). In our case, the Bulgarian AHD frames Ottoman heritage as fundamentally dissonant. This is particularly evident in the narrative of Sofia’s past, marked by multiple heritage layers since prehistory. As Peychev (2023) demonstrates, both Bulgarian archaeologists and architectural historians have consistently neglected or understated the Ottoman period of the city and contrasted it with idealised assumptions of Roman and mediaeval Bulgarian urban planning and practices, thus creating the stereotype of an “Oriental city”. This interpretive framework reflects the national AHD. The latter emphasises the European character of Bulgarian culture, often dismissing any Ottoman influence as unimportant or “backward”, thus epistemologically juxtaposing it with more “prestigious” Roman and Bulgarian heritages (Peychev, 2023: 50–54).

Hence, dealing with the authorised dissonance of the Ottoman heritage involves processes of erasure, purification, museumification, and reconfiguration of various elements from spheres such as language, music, architecture, everyday and ritual practices. Some of these elements – appropriated and refashioned – have been adopted as symbols of the respective national culture (Marinov, 2017; Resanovic, 2019). An important aspect of these dynamics, integrated into city planning (Yerolympo, 1993), was the physical destruction of material traces and the elimination of “shameful” Oriental silhouettes in the urban landscape. While some of the structures remained, they underwent radical symbolic transformations testifying to the changed situation and the appearance of the successor states to the Ottoman Empire as new and powerful actors.

For instance, following Sofia’s designation as the capital of Bulgaria, the former *konak* (Ottoman administration building) was converted into a royal palace. At the same time, Hünkâr Hamam (Sultan’s bath) in Plovdiv served as the Parliament building of

Eastern Rumelia¹ (Boykov, 2013: 71). The situation was similar in Greece where the first Parliament House utilised an Ottoman-era mosque in the town of Nafplio in the 1820s (Amygdalou, Kolovos, 2021). Yet, this “transition from religious to secular and from symbol of the *enemy* to symbol of the *nation*” (Amygdalou, Kolovos, 2021) is not entirely surprising, considering that these buildings are representative and monumental edifices that were otherwise lacking in the nascent nation-states. While some of these reuses were temporary, others persist to this day, housing institutions of national significance. For example, the Greek Ministry of Interior (Sector of Macedonia and Thrace) occupies the Ottoman-era *konak* in Thessaloniki (Yazıcı Metin, 2013); the National Archaeological Museum in Sofia is housed in a former mosque, where the frescoes have been obscured by white paint and the exhibition itself almost completely ignores the Ottoman period; the National Gallery of North Macedonia is situated within the premises of the former Daut Paşa Hamam in Skopje.

In certain instances, the reshaping of spaces and values is so profound that it leads to the complete obliteration of the past and the imposition of a new singular, emotionally charged historical narrative. Illustrative for this process is the Bulgarian town of Karlovo. Once established as a settlement by an Ottoman dignitary (Boykov, 2013: 278–316), it is seen nowadays solely as the birthplace of the greatest national hero of the anti-Ottoman struggles. The latter narrative led to the “neutralisation” of the local mosque as a museum, hindering the Muslim denomination’s attempts to make it functional, despite the presence of a local Muslim community. Such symbolic transformations stem from the portrayal of the Ottoman past in Bulgaria as an era of oppression and suffering, marked by religious and civilisational opposition. Narratives of dissonance have been deeply ingrained in the collective memory through the institutions of the nation-state, fostering a sense of grievance and victimhood. Additionally, the emphasis on the idea of national “liberation” is related to the depiction of the Ottoman period as a (Turkish) “yoke”, further reinforcing the negative connotations associated with Ottoman heritage.

This discourse remains powerful (Pramatarov, 2024) and is even being revived by the rising ethnonationalism. Nevertheless, different case studies contain ambivalent stances (Mattioli, 2013; Givre, Sintès, 2018; Walton, 2019) and reveal various scenarios of contrasting processes of preservation, appropriation and erasure. Furthermore, considering the *longue durée* of multiple cultural interactions among different communities, we can hypothesise that Ottoman heritage – both as material remains and still-living cultural practices – has its heirs beyond ethnoreligious boundaries.

¹ Eastern Rumelia was an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire created in 1878 that united with the Principality of Bulgaria in 1885.

The spirit of place: Memories and practices of heritagisation

Despite the various strategies of the Bulgarian state to demolish or appropriate the Ottoman-era architecture, imperial material traces remained present in urban and rural settings. Mosques, bathhouses, bridges, clock towers, administrative and residential buildings – whether used for their original functions, adapted to new purposes or abandoned – have been integrated into the post-imperial development of various settlements (e.g. Krastanova, Rautenberg, 2004). Preserved for different utilitarian or aesthetic reasons, some of them have actively participated in shaping the *genius loci*.

As tangible testimonies of not only imperial or national, but also local history, these buildings occupy an important place in public space. They are not mere remnants of the past or witnesses of political and social transitions but living entities that carry stories of coexistence, conflict, transmission, and transformation. They serve as waypoints in the daily trajectories of residents, while also playing a role in shaping social interactions. Regardless of the different attempts at geographical nationalisation and toponymic engineering, the physical space still preserves the cultural memory related to the once ruling empire. The imperial legacy persists in the names of squares (e.g. the central Cumaya square in Plovdiv named after the nearby Friday mosque), bus stops (e.g. The Mosque stop in Silistra), villages and towns named after (once or still) existing bathhouses or hot springs (e.g. Banya, Banevo, Ladzhene). Formally or informally, because of political decisions, resistant vernacular toponymy, or social practices, such names illustrate that Ottoman edifices were integrated into the social construction of place, the public image of the settlement and its inhabitants' sense of belonging.

Switching from the national to the local scale, we shift our attention away from the dominant politics that tend to disregard the Ottoman layer in the national heritage canon. Instead, we focus on those grassroots heritagisation narratives and practices that acknowledge its significance in the local history and social fabric. These are practices of care that aim not only to preserve material heritage, but also to safeguard one's own cultural identity, family and community memory. Furthermore, this care at the local scale reveals the importance of Ottoman sites in people's relationships with their places. In this regard, the impressive monumentality or the historical characteristics of the sites prove to be as valuable to our interlocutors as their social meanings. This derives from the daily interactions and living with the monuments (Fabre, 2010). From the residents' perspective, these sites are not merely tourist or historical landmarks but community places that have served a range of purposes – religious ceremonies, hygienic needs, administrative functions, or meeting points. Their social roles have both structured the space and fostered community cohesion over time. Accordingly, vernacular collective memory often recalls myriad stories centred on Ottoman-era buildings, highlighting their role as places of cohabitation where architectural and social values intersect.

Some narratives even reconstruct now-demolished Ottoman structures, repositioning them in evolving cityscapes, thus creating communal or personal mental maps of heritage.

The village of Banya, Southwestern Bulgaria, offers a compelling example through which the Ottoman heritage can be understood from such a perspective. Its very name, Banya (meaning ‘bath’), reflects the fundamental connection with hot waters, communal bathhouses and bathing traditions dating back to the Ottoman era, which has shaped the village’s identity, history, and development. Two small thermal baths from the Ottoman period remain as tangible symbols of this heritage, now functioning as tourist sites. For much of their existence, they were the only public buildings in the village and focal points of community life among Christians and Muslims. After Banya’s incorporation from the Ottoman into the Bulgarian state in 1912, the baths became municipal properties. Despite this political recontextualisation, their importance endured. The local authorities recognised the baths as valuable economic and social assets, undertaking continuous efforts to preserve and enhance them. This included “beautifying” the area with parks and integrating the baths into the village’s evolving territorial planning. The local resistance to state attempts at nationalisation during the 1920s further highlights the community’s strong identification with the baths, which continued to be seen as the heart of Banya’s economy and legacy.

The baths served as public facilities until a new, larger bathhouse was constructed in the 1950s. The latter represented a continuation of the local bathing traditions, integrating them into modern notions of hygiene. When the new bath became operational, it retained key architectural elements of the Ottoman bathing tradition, such as the combination of hot pools and *kurni* (fountains for bathing). This ensured a transition between the old and the new, allowing the transmission of bathing practices and rituals that remain alive even today. Meanwhile, the old baths continued to function for a few more decades and were later recognised as historical monuments, though they were left abandoned until restoration in 2013. In recent years, the area in front of one of them was repurposed as a stage for a folk festival, embedding the site within the village’s cultural life.

Historically, public baths (*kaplica* or *hamam*) were an integral part of the Ottoman Empire’s communal infrastructure serving essential hygienic, religious, health, and social purposes (Macaraig, 2019). The adaptation of the “old” Ottoman bath models and bathing traditions into “new” and “modern” hygienic practices and facilities occurred in parallel with the processes of demarcation of their Ottoman descent. Most Ottoman-era bathhouses in Bulgaria were transformed, redesigned, renovated, and renamed, but they are essential institutions that are central to many local narratives, especially in areas with hot mineral springs. Similar to Banya, old Ottoman baths continue to shape the local environment and community identity in Velingrad and Dolna Banya, where they remain in use, integrated into both new political contexts and modern buildings. Furthermore, even bathhouses built in later periods in Bulgaria often followed the Ottoman model to

some extent, enabling the transmission of living practices and perpetuating Ottoman heritage. Kyustendil provides a notable example in this regard: the monumental Çifte Banya, constructed in 1913, blends Ottoman traditions with local authorities' ambitions to transform the town into a "European" thermal resort.

The town of Razgrad, Northeastern Bulgaria, offers another – more contentious – perspective on Ottoman heritage inscribed into the urban fabric. At its heart stands a 17th-century mosque, intrinsically linked to the town's origins (Kiel, 1991). While much of Razgrad has been transformed over time, the mosque remains one of the few surviving Ottoman vestiges. For the local Turkish community that constitutes more than half of the region's population, the mosque holds particular significance, functioning as both a spiritual centre and a marker of cultural continuity. Its monumental architecture leaves a lasting impression on residents and visitors alike, as reflected in personal memories:

Back then, when I came in 1977, [...] I came to study here, the first thing that caught my attention was the mosque. I hadn't seen a mosque that big before – it was so different from the one in [my] village, such a huge and impressive building. (F., in her 60s, Razgrad, 26. 8. 2019)

Such individual recollections highlight the mosque's enduring presence, not just as a historical artefact, but as a representation of Razgrad, embedded in the community's sense of place. They also reflect the impact of Ottoman architecture on local understandings of inheritance, monumentality and aesthetics.

What's important is that whoever comes to the town, tourists or our friends, everyone stops to take a picture in front of the mosque. [...] The first thing they do is head to the mosque and take photos. It's a real tourist spot for us, so to speak. It should be maintained accordingly. (S., in her 60s, Razgrad, 26. 8. 2019)

These accounts include a critique of the neglect of Ottoman heritage. Despite its status as a declared cultural monument, the mosque was abandoned for decades, fenced off and rendered inaccessible. During our fieldwork in 2019, we encountered similar concerns, marked by a palpable fear that the mosque might face the same fate as other Ottoman-era buildings.

The point is to maintain it, right, and to keep it. We can't keep everything old – that's also clear. We can't just live surrounded by ruins. Naturally, whatever has served its time and purpose must give way to what comes next. But some iconic things... (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

Consequently, the demolition of such edifices or their functional transformation are perceived as dispossession – a potential erosion of still-practised or remembered customs, leading to the possible oblivion of local history. When someone shares that it is shameful for the 17th-century mosque to be abandoned, they refer to “the ways people whose lives were somehow entangled with that of the building remembered the city’s past” (Kornetis, Poulos, 2021).

I thought, for example, that the mosque was a shame. That’s the word I would use. So many years of it not being operational, so many years of nothing being done, and so many years of being abandoned... And I think so because, to me, the mosque is an emblem of the town. Without diminishing the importance of other cultural monuments [...]. (I., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

This also highlights people’s concerns that as these buildings disappear, part of their memories – encompassing individuals, places, stories and events from communal celebrations to everyday routines – may also be lost. Ottoman mosques are not solely religious sites but integral elements of the spatial and social fabric of different neighbourhoods and towns.

Furthermore, the aforementioned words of our interlocutors contain a critique towards the position of the Ottoman heritage within the AHD. This is particularly significant as it demonstrates an understanding of heritage that can conform to the boundaries of institutionally recognised cultural heritage but can also transcend and contest them. People’s sense of inheritance from the past is not entirely shaped by educational and heritage institutions and their politics of display. In fact, quite the opposite can be true – individuals’ perceptions of what merits preservation and their active involvement in practices of care may reveal counter-hegemonic perspectives.

The marginalisation of Ottoman heritage parallels the marginalisation of Muslim communities, who have faced various forms of discrimination and assimilation since the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state. This is why, for the Muslims in Razgrad, it is clear that the mosque is unlikely to ever function as a place of worship again: “*It’s absurd for those in power to accept it in the city centre!*” (F., in her 60s, Razgrad, 26. 8. 2019). Although the building was fully restored in 2024, its future purpose remains uncertain. It is anticipated that, like other mosques in Bulgaria and the Balkans, it will be transformed into a cultural centre or a museum.

The following quote from an interview demonstrates the painful understanding that the heritage politics directly reflects the fact that certain groups (in our case, people of Turkish origin and Muslim faith) are often positioned outside the body of the nation, just as the Ottoman heritage is excluded from the national heritage canon:

And the inevitable fact that there are monuments, traces, and good public benefits from Ottoman times left in Razgrad, this is also indisputable to me. Even if we don't know them. Even if we don't realise them. [...] I'm sure that there are public benefits left from Ottoman times, for which there is no interest, no memory... These things have been erased. And I was very impressed when we went to [...] the now restored, modernised museum, I was most impressed... There are these drawers, they are in the wall. [...] It is interesting for children – they open the drawer and inside there are descriptions of what remained from Roman times in Razgrad. [...] And then it dawned on me that one hundred percent there are such things remaining from Ottoman times, but no one... [...] That's why I was so impressed now by those drawers there, so many facts left. Until one day! Why? There is nothing from the Ottoman Empire there... (I., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

Such counter-voices both reclaim the Ottoman heritage and contain criticism of the heritage canon. Actually, the relationship between the AHD and the de- or re-valorisation of the Ottoman heritage is more complex. The national canon rather excludes the Ottoman heritage, and this is very clear from the fact that this heritage does not even have a proper category in the national system of chronological categorisation of historic buildings.² However, in some cases expert discourse is mobilised “from below” in defence of Ottoman heritage – for example, in Razgrad one can often hear that the local mosque is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, even though it is not.

The relationship between heritage and place is also enacted through specific practices of care of various local communities. As a form of heritage activism, different campaigns have emerged to preserve certain monuments, particularly through self-mobilisations of local Muslim communities. Often led by religious motives, these communities raise funds for repairs and restoration, transcending national and religious boundaries. In other instances, residents regularly gather to clean mosques and their surroundings, which are frequently defaced with vulgar graffiti. In many cases, those involved invoke a sense of duty to protect the heritage bequeathed to them, drawing on the Islamic understanding of the *waqf*'s legacy.

Nevertheless, these practices should not be viewed solely through a religious lens. A recent example offers an important and different perspective: the civic mobilisation in Sofia's Knyazhevo neighbourhood, where residents are actively protesting the authorities' plan to demolish the former Ottoman bathhouse located next to a mineral spring. Megan Krasteva (2024) illustrates how the bathhouse is valued by the

² Ottoman monuments are designated as either mediaeval or *vazrozhendski* (that is, related to the so-called Bulgarian Revival of the 18–19th century).



community – not only as the oldest building in the area and a significant part of local history, but also as a site intertwined with residents’ personal biographies and facing the threat of extinction. This threat has successfully mobilised local citizens, strengthening community bonds, fostering civic participation, and shaping shared visions for the neighbourhood’s future, with the Ottoman thermal heritage serving as a unifying element. During a 2024 protest, demonstrators even raised the slogan “Many institutions, a single Ottoman bath in Sofia!!!”

Interwoven family histories and personal attachments

Related to the regional and local scales are numerous family and individual attachments to the Ottoman heritage. They often manifest in memories offering alternative or complementary perspectives to the AHD. Ottoman-era mosques, for instance, appear as vehicles of personal meanings, transcending mere religious or historical designations. They encapsulate people’s memories of their past and can thus be seen as valued heritage by those who recount their own history in relation to these edifices.

Returning to the mosque in Razgrad, we can also view it through the lens of a heritage inscribed in and made meaningful by personal and collective biographies. This perspective is captured in the following narrative:

I have a very good memory of that. [...] And they asked me to take a group of children from my former school, [...] and to be like an assistant to the teacher. [...] When we entered the mosque with the children, with the said teacher – it was wonderful! That’s how I felt, I was 11 years old. [...] I had to prepare something, like information about the mosque. And I told the kids, and the teacher told the kids, that was all, you know. That’s in my memory. But I remember when I walked into the mosque, I gasped. It was very beautiful! It really was! (I., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

Ottoman heritage thus intertwines monumental imagery, religious belonging, and personal connections. This understanding is powerfully conveyed in a reflection on the individual attachment to the mosque:

For me the connection comes... At the time I’m talking about, I was a child, right... Fasting, Ramadan was observed in a way... much more strictly than now. And so, my grandmother observed Ramadan... oruç.³ And now when 7–8 o’clock comes, when it was summer time, [...]

³ The word in Turkish for religious fasting.

you're playing outside, and she's like, "Go see if the candles are lit on [the mosque] over there!" And somehow, that memory perhaps makes my attitude more special. Because I have a direct connection. Others may have just walked by. But I am connected. And so now, for me the mosque is my grandmother... [...] So my feeling towards the building is also... And it's also a kind of belonging. It affects you. (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

This nostalgic reminiscence intricately weaves personal memories and family ties with the physical presence of the religious and heritage site. Despite not strictly practising Islam, our interlocutor's recollection of her grandmother's observance of Ramadan reveals an intimate – direct – connection: *"I haven't been inside. It was just to see if it was time for dinner, right, for iftar.⁴ [...] And the building is beautiful. Uniquely beautiful!"* (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019). This surpasses spiritual traditions and religious or architectural significance, imbuing the mosque with layers of familial history and individual understandings of heritage:

The mosque, yes, in a way I do profess a religion, and it cannot be left out of the whole thing. [...] For me specifically, there's no obstacle to where I'd go and read my prayer. I can do it anywhere, and I mostly don't need a building for that. But already as some connection with my grandmother, with my great-grandmother, yes, it matters to me. (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

Such intertwining of personal narratives with architectural remnants portrays heritage not just as a historical representation, but as mundane and ritual practices embedded into familial life. The mosque, therefore, functions not as a static relic but as an elusive emotional continuum, connecting people to moments shared with their ancestors and fostering a sense of belonging. In this way, it is inscribed into a "register" of personal heritage – a collection of selected sites, objects and memories with special meanings:

When you go through your chest of drawers, you'd keep one thing from your grandmother. You can't keep her whole life... But there is one thing that... I have a watch. [...] And my whole connection, right, with those before me is this watch. (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019)

Just like the inherited watch, the mosque serves as a "reservoir of memory" (Apaydin, 2020: 17), ensuring continuity between generations and mediating a connection with

⁴ The first meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan.

ancestors. Consequently, an apprehension about the irreversible loss of heritage exists – a sentiment grounded in the belief that the disappearance of an object entails the erasure of a segment of one’s biography.

In some communities, this anxiety is amplified as discussions about heritage sites inevitably intertwine with memories about the Bulgarian state’s marginalising policies, which have often denied Muslims’ cultural and religious rights over the course of time. Although this was not our focus, reflections on heritage among ethnic Turks and Muslims frequently evoked such traumatic experiences. Stories collected during our fieldwork recall forced name changes from Turkish-Arabic to Bulgarian, periodic expulsions that disrupted regional social structures, attempts at forced Christianisation, demolition of buildings and even old Muslim cemeteries. These memories represent deep-seated family traumas, transmitted across generations and echoing a legacy of intergenerational pain (Trupia, 2022).

Furthermore, emotional connections with Ottoman heritage are not restricted to monumental buildings, as defined by the AHD, but relate to intimate places and traditional practices. The latter unveil another facet of Ottoman heritage, particularly evident among Turkish migrants from Bulgaria to Turkey due to the assimilation policies of the Bulgarian socialist state. Imamoglu and Ferad (2018) underline that family houses, fountains and other religious and secular sites function as collective memory *topoi* that affect community identities, shape current perceptions of the past, and nurture an affinity with the “ancestral land”. According to the authors, a prayer or a contemplation at a secluded *türbe* or an old fountain reach deeper layers of belonging than official monuments and commemorations.

Expanding the exploration of the Ottoman heritage at personal and familial scales requires broadening the scope to include the experiences of non-Muslim populations. The Ottoman Empire’s multiethnic and multireligious social structure created shared spaces and practices where communities of diverse backgrounds interacted, leaving a rich legacy that still resonates on individual and collective levels. The hydrothermal heritage of the village Banya offers an illustration of this phenomenon, showing how Ottoman heritage is embedded in specific local infrastructures, everyday practices and communal interactions. The memories of elder inhabitants who recall the Ottoman baths as an integral part of their daily lives provide an example of how such heritage sites are experienced in a living context, and thus inscribed into personal histories:

Author: *Have you ever used the old baths?*

– *Yes, we’ve used them. [...] Both baths were open earlier.*

– *[...] As a child, I used to bathe in the Roman one, the Bulgarian one – the upper one. I didn’t bathe in the lower one. Although, when I was little, they might have bathed me there because that’s where women used to wash [clothes].*

– *When we were living down in the Lower mahalla, [we used to bathe] in the Turkish one. Later, [we used] it together with the Roman one. Both were working.*

Author: *What was the difference between them?*

– *There wasn't any difference – it was just about which one was closer.*
– *You'd go inside, the stones were warm, water running everywhere, warm, nice. (fieldnotes, Banya, 4. 9. 2022)*

This perspective views the baths as key elements of everyday heritage, aligning with broader narratives that remember and value Ottoman contributions to local history. Here is another typical story about one of the old Ottoman baths, before they were rebranded as “Bulgarian” (“Roman”) or “Turkish”:

This was the Old Bath, we used to bathe here. There was a big spout in it. It's still there... A huge one... The pool [is] not very big, [with] a square [shape]. There are about six or seven little troughs around it. Women would sit by the troughs and each one would pour with a can. [...] And the bath is still standing, restored, it's not destroyed. So why won't they let people bathe in it anymore? [...] Otherwise, this was the Old Bath. That's how we knew it. The Old Bath. [...] But I was so keen to go for a bath, you have no idea. [...] It's that spout like... There's pure mineral water running all the time, you can imagine how pleasant it was. (M., in her 60s, Banya, 7.9.2022)

Here, the pleasure of visiting the bath – also a sensorial and gendered experience (cf. Aksit, 2011) – is intertwined with a lament over its current disuse. This highlights how heritage can feel diminished when its practical and social functions are disrupted, even if the physical structure remains intact. The renaming of the bath reflects the complexities of Ottoman heritage reinterpretations, where sites are often reframed to align with shifting political contexts or cultural conventions. Despite these changes, the interlocutor's consistent reference to it as the “Old Bath” suggests resistance to such efforts, emphasising a personal and community-based perspective that prioritises lived experience over official designations: “*We used to call it the Old Bath. Why did they rename it – Roman Bath, Turkish Bath, I don't know*” (M., in her 60s, Banya, 7. 9. 2022).

As these narratives demonstrate, bathhouses are an important example because their use shows an appreciation of Ottoman heritage that is both widespread and contrasting the AHD. As mentioned earlier, the case of Banya is not unique, but rather a common one. In some places in the Balkans, and in Bulgaria in particular, living traditions related to the Ottoman bathhouses persist thanks to facilities leveraging hot springs and despite the rise of luxury spas. They are also associated with some of

the most important moments in individuals' life, and among certain communities the bridal bathing before the wedding is still observed. Communal bathing thus transcends mere hygiene. These gatherings offer spaces for leisure, relaxation, and socialisation, fostering connections among people of various ethnicities, ages, classes, and sexual orientations. With their specific social biographies (Macaraig, 2019), bathhouses are deeply inscribed in family and personal histories. Many of our interlocutors fondly remember going to the local bathhouse with their parents or grandparents during their childhood, and later continuing this tradition with their own children. Some of them recall the weekly family visits to the bathhouse, often followed by a meal out, a fresh drink or a visit to the local market. Personal stories vividly depict these experiences, portraying a spectrum of emotions ranging from eager anticipation to a sense of duty. From today's perspective, these stories are told with nostalgia about cherished moments of familial intimacy and shared companionship.

Through such everyday practices, individuals "establish new relations with a forgotten Ottoman history and transform old relations with the city on a daily basis" (Aksit, 2011: 278). Some interlocutors highlight the inheritance of the bathing facilities and practices from Ottoman times. When they describe their "Turkish bath" as "the most beautiful" due to its comfort and intimacy, this demonstrates a form of a valorisation, or even a romanticisation, of Ottoman heritage. While people emphasise that visiting the bath is a "Turkish ritual" or talk about their experience in it with popular Bulgarianised versions of Turkish words, this also indexically alludes to the vestiges of the Ottoman multicultural ecumene.

Furthermore, fieldwork among various communities reveals different and often contradictory perceptions of the material and intangible aspects of this heritage. While some acknowledge the Ottoman origin of bathhouses and bathing customs, others tend to deny any "Oriental" connections through strategies of Romanisation or Bulgariation. In all cases, however, there are continuous processes of (re-)appropriation of baths, bathing, and thermal waters that imply heritagisation. This form of valorisation also contrasts the general contestation of the Ottoman past and challenges the national AHD through a myriad of vernacular discourses and practices. Some of the collected narratives and personal stories explicitly challenge hegemonic discourses. When discussing the remaining material traces, people often reflect on the developed water infrastructures, distribution systems, bathhouses and fountains, thus openly questioning the dominant "catastrophe theory". Others go further to include stories about the importance of hygiene and purity in the Ottoman Empire, criticising the hierarchical position of "Europe" as a universal civilisational model constructed in opposition to the supposedly backward East.

Discussion and conclusion

A recent study on “problematic cultural heritage in the context of tourism” postulates that “problematic heritage in Bulgaria boils down to two main categories” – namely Ottoman and communist heritages (Dogramadjieva, 2024: 50). This perspective reflects a broader view that ties heritage dissonance primarily to those historical heritages “that have left the deepest imprint on the region’s multilayered identity: the Byzantine, the Ottoman, and the communist/socialist” (Dragičević Šešić, Rogač Mijatović, 2014: 14). This aligns with the understanding that “significant parts of the heritage of the Balkans became ‘dissonant heritage’” due to the “stigmatization of the entire region as ‘non-European’” (Dragičević Šešić, Rogač Mijatović, 2014: 13). While we agree with the critique of the essentialist “Balkans” – “Europe” divide that shapes local notions of value, we argue that framing Ottoman (Byzantine or socialist) heritage as exclusively or intrinsically dissonant and problematic limits the research scope and constrains the understanding of heritage-making. Such an approach, while adopting critical heritage studies concepts and (nominally) challenging the AHD, inadvertently reinforces the stigmatisation of Ottoman heritage. It reiterates the already authorised dissonance ascribed to Ottoman heritage in public discourse and national historiographies, confining it to the problem of its seemingly natural dissonance – without necessarily explaining this dissonance or relating it to other heritages’ dissonances, which are instead often interpreted as unproblematic.⁵

Our paper highlighted some of the various scales at which Ottoman heritage is reclaimed, demonstrating that it exists beyond this authorised dissonance. This broadening shift toward a polyphony of memories, narratives, and practices of engagement and valorisation is what we understand as a downscaling approach. While acknowledging that the grand narrative of the nation often dismisses Ottoman heritage’s historical or representational value, it also focuses on the gaps within this narrative or the reactions against it. As Harvey (2015: 3) underlines, while the AHD is still present, “[t]he mechanisms through which such a discourse operates, however, appear to be more elusive and less structural”. The latter perspective highlights the existence of alternative and sometimes counter-hegemonic visions, where expressions of local identity, community belonging, family memory, and personal attachments intersect. These alternatives contest – whether explicitly or implicitly – the dissonance attributed to Ottoman heritage. This approach points to zones of “cultural intimacy” and transcends popular dualisms and polarities, treating – in Herzfeld’s (2016: 6) words – “‘top’ and ‘bottom’ as but two of a host of refractions of a broadly shared *cultural engagement*”.

Complicating these notions, we must emphasise that – despite their power imbalances – there is not a strict opposition between the dominant discourse and other

⁵ See also Kisić (2016) for a discussion on heritage dissonance.

perceptions of Ottoman heritage, viewing the former as purely erasing and the latter as inherently valorising. Both the examples of Razgrad and Banya for instance confirm that “[w]hile the dominating heritage discourses seek to control the meanings and practices of heritage on the scale ‘below’ it, heritage is at the same time created by the actors representing these ‘lower’ scales” (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019: 11). Just as institutions and experts sometimes mobilise the AHD to defend specific Ottoman buildings from various threats, so too can local communities or individuals advocate for the demolition of monuments or employ de-Ottomanising strategies.

In this sense, the article has several limitations. It is challenging, within the scope of an overview, to adequately capture the myriad situations, positions, and motives from which different forms of Ottoman heritage valorisation emerge. Additionally, while there are many parallels across Balkan countries, the specific national contexts and their dynamic AHDs must be taken into account. Furthermore, as the significance of Ottoman heritage extends beyond national borders, the transnational scale must also be considered. In this regard, an “upscaling” approach is needed as well.

Nevertheless, the varied scales presented here reveal a landscape of Ottoman heritage marked by a broad spectrum of intricate, often ambiguous and conflicting meanings. Despite the complexities, it is important that there are voices advocating for the recognition that *“these are Bulgarian heritages – both Roman and Byzantine, both Thracian and Ottoman”* (A., in his 30s, Gotse Delchev, 18. 8. 2019). By narrating their individual or family biographies, our interlocutors also reclaim the Ottoman past as a layer of Bulgarian history, framing it as an integral part of the national heritage: *“Heritage is that [...] which has been bequeathed and left to us from our ancestors, no matter whether it was Bulgarian, Turkish, Jewish”* (Z., in his 40s, Razgrad, 28. 8. 2019).

Following this renegotiation of the AHD, the idea of continuity between the different layers of national heritage is articulated, with Ottoman heritage emerging as an expression of *“a mixture of architectures”* and *“something that has been”*, *“layer upon layer, yes... It’s like that. There is nothing that comes out of the blue”* (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019). These reflections on heritage-making underscore its intentional selectivity, perceived as deliberate actions that shape and discipline national subjects: *“The question is what we preserve, how we preserve it, what we take from it, in what way... what we use it for: whether to build on it or use it to set things against each other”* (N., in her 40s, Razgrad, 27. 8. 2019). This consciousness among Turks and Muslims in Bulgaria cannot be separated from the construction of heritage, and is further intertwined with the relations of domination between Orthodox Christianity and Islam (Tocheva, 2023). As heritage is perceived through individual or community memories and connections, the erasure of the Ottoman heritage is not merely an abstraction but a procedure disciplining individuals or entire communities (Mattoli, 2013).

Such reflections emphasise the interconnectedness of *“Bulgarian and Turkish [...] because both ethnic groups live in Bulgaria...”* (S., in her 60s, Razgrad, 26. 8. 2019).

And further, “they live together. And we are heirs, as they say, of one culture. And we share everything with each other. In the end, we have nothing so much to divide” (F., in her 60s, Razgrad, 26. 8. 2019). Undoubtedly, these positions are heterogeneous and often internally contradictory. Nonetheless, they reveal significant layers within Bulgaria's heritage, offering insights into the cleavages within the dominant discourse and highlighting the potential for heritage-remaking. While our focus was on Muslim communities due to the intersectional implications, the research uncovered connections that transcend ethno-confessional boundaries. Shared anxieties about the fate of monuments, sadness over irreversible losses, fear of future collapses, efforts to prevent them, anger at their neglect, and frustration with the oblivion of historical sites and facts all testify to a collective attachment to the traces of the past. Underlying these entanglements, we can assume the existence of heirs to Ottoman heritage who possess the agency to reimagine and reclaim it as valuable. Their diverse perspectives contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive portrayal of heritage, emphasising its contemporary relevance and evolving nature. They also remind us that categorising a particular heritage as dissonant already reflects existing power hierarchies, affecting not only the material aspects of that heritage but also the lived experiences of its communities.

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Pozabljeno, preimenovano, ponovno pridobljeno: bolgarska osmanska dediščina onkraj avtoriziranega neskladja

V raziskavi je obravnavana kompleksna navzočnost osmanske dediščine na širšem postosmanskem balkanskem območju, s posebnim poudarkom na Bolgariji. Avtorja se zavzemata za drugačen pristop, ki spodbija pogled avtoriziranega dediščinskega diskurza, ki osmansko dediščino večkrat marginalizira in jo obravnava kot disonantno. Osmanska preteklost, ki je pogosto obravnavana kot obdobje uničenja brez kulturne vrednosti, je bila predmet zanemarjanja, brisanja ali preoblikovanja, kar je odsev širših nacionalističnih prizadevanj. V raziskavi je poudarjena alternativna perspektiva, osredinjena na glasove in prakse, ki osmansko dediščino ponovno razpirajo, si jo prisvajajo in na novo zamišljajo. Razkriva, kako posamezniki, družine in skupnosti dejavno vrednotijo domnevno zavrnjeno dediščino ter poudarjajo njeno spreminjajočo se vlogo in pomen. Z uporabo skalarne pristopa so preučena različna dojetanja dediščine na nacionalni, lokalni, družinski in osebni ravni. Medtem ko nacionalni diskurz pogosto stigmatizira osmansko dediščino, ji lokalne in vernakularne prakse vdihujejo novo življenje ter jo vključujejo v pripovedi o skupni zgodovini in pripadnosti. Politično in družbeno marginalizirane skupnosti imajo tako dejavno vlogo pri redefiniranju osmanske dediščine kot sestavnega dela nacionalne dediščine. Na podlagi antropološkega terenskega dela na več lokacijah je razvidno, da osmanska dediščina ni statična ali monolitna entiteta, temveč jo je treba obravnavati kot dinamičen mozaik na presečišču dominantnih in vernakularnih diskurzov, disonanten, izpogajan in vedno znova reinterpreteriran. V razpravi sta poudarjena večplastna in mnogoglasna narava ustvarjanja dediščine ter premislek o bolj vključujočem razumevanju osmanske dediščine v Bolgariji in na Balkanu.