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Balkan Research Journal Vol. 1, Issue 2 (2025):
103-105

Balkan University Press

<https://doi.org/10.69648/PDTG4595>

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www.ibupress.com



Asst. Prof. Dr. Uğur Öztürk

Bandırma On Yedi Eylül University, Türkiye

Orcid ID: 000-0003-3773-9696

Correspondence concerning this article should be
addressed to Uğur Öztürk, Email: uozturk@bandirma.edu.tr

Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia

by İsmail Güleç and Mümin Ali

Balkan University Press 2024

Book Review by:

Asst. Prof. Dr. Uğur Öztürk

The book titled *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia*, written by İsmail Güleç and Mümin Ali, is a valuable study that comprehensively covers tekkes and shrines, which are an important part of the Ottoman-Turkish cultural heritage in the Balkans. This book, published by Balkan University Press in 2024, holds the distinction of being the inaugural publication of the “Academic Studies” series.

North Macedonia is a strategic geography, located in the southeast of Europe, and became one of the ancient centers of Turkish presence after it came under Ottoman rule in 1389. The Turks, who constitute approximately 4% of the population today, continue their presence in the region not only demographically, but also through structures such as mosques, inns, baths, fountains, as well as dervish tekkes and shrines inherited from their ancestors.

These structures, beyond being merely architectural works, function as living witnesses of Muslim identity, faith, and culture. In this context, Güleç and Ali's work aims to determine the current status of tekkes and shrines in North Macedonia and to emphasize the critical role of these structures in cultural continuity.

The book provides a comprehensive geographical overview of the tekkes and shrines throughout North Macedonia. The work covers in detail the tekkes and shrines in many cities and villages, including Skopje, Bitola, Ohrid, Kichevo, Tetovo, Gostivar, Veles, Ovce Pole's villages, Chashka villages, Shtip and its villages, Strumica, Radovich, Prilep, Debar, Struga, Konche, Valandovo, Kumonovo, Kavadarci, Vinica, Center Jupa, Kochani, Resen, and Demir Kapija.

The structural composition of the book provides the reader with a systematic guide by addressing the tekkes and shrines of each city or region separately. For example, the Skopje section includes specific structures such as the Tekke of Hazinedar Rıfâi, Yahya Kemal's, Tophane Sadi, Paşa Yiğit Bey, İshak Bey, and the Tekke of Gazi Baba. This methodical organization makes the work quite useful as a reference source, allowing researchers to easily access information on specific topics. This detailed listing in the table of contents of the book reveals how comprehensive the documentation is.

This work implies a connection between tangible cultural heritage (the physical structures of the tekke and shrines) and intangible cultural heritage (related beliefs, customs, literature, and collective identity). The book positions the presence of these artifacts in the region as an indicator of the cultural richness of North Macedonia, beyond being merely historical structures, and as living examples of cultural memory and practice. This holistic perspective is an important thematic contribution that goes beyond a simple inventory study and offers a more in-depth examination of cultural continuity. The book shows that these structures are not just relics of the past, but also dynamic centers that influence the current identities of the Muslim communities in the region and transmit them to future generations.

While preparing this work, the authors used two main methodological approaches together. Firstly, they identified existing tekkes and shrines by conducting a comprehensive literature review and systematically listed them according to cities and villages. This preliminary preparation made the fieldwork more focused and efficient. In the second stage, the authors visited all cities and villages where lodges and shrines were located and recorded both their existing appearances, and the customs practiced.

This direct observation and on-site investigation provided the authors with the opportunity to collect invaluable empirical data. In the field, they observed first-hand that some shrines were not in place and that some were on the verge of disappearing. They also attempted to document the local customs and religious practices still practiced in these sacred places. This first-hand perspective adds significant originality and timeliness to the study, distinguishing it from studies based solely on archival research.

While the empirical strength and comprehensive documentation of the *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia* are indisputable, there are areas where their academic depth could be further enhanced. The book opens the door to a deeper and more open engagement with established theoretical frameworks such as heritage studies, post-Ottoman identity, or memory studies. For example, examining how these sites function as “places of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*) in a post-imperial context or how theories of cultural resilience can be applied offers the opportunity to move the contribution of the work from a superior documentary study to a more in-depth analytical study.

İsmail Gülec and Mümin Ali's book, *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia*, is an indispensable resource for scholars, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts interested in the Ottoman-Turkish heritage in North Macedonia and the wider Balkans. The book demonstrates its value as both a comprehensive inventory and a critical snapshot of a rapidly disappearing cultural landscape, emphasizing its urgency and importance. The book brings together the tangible and intangible dimensions of the multicultural presence in the region, strongly emphasizing the central role of these structures in preserving cultural identity.

The book is a call for greater awareness and determined efforts to protect historical sites. It makes recommendations for the recognition and preservation of these structures. It suggests new avenues for future research, such as more in-depth monographic studies on specific tekkes or shrines, more in-depth examination of the intangible heritage associated with these sites using ethnographic methods, or socio-anthropological studies on changing community perceptions and interactions with this heritage.

In conclusion, this work, the *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia*, is a resource that academic libraries, research institutions, and scholars in the fields of Ottoman history, Balkan studies, cultural heritage, theology, and diaspora studies can refer to.