



Research Article

The Bazaars of Kosovo in the Ottoman Period: Urban identity and architectural transformation

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Abstract

The article addresses the bazaars of Kosovo as one of the most representative elements of urban organization and economic, social, and cultural life during the Ottoman period (1389–1912). Based on cultural and historical sources, architectural studies, and typological analyses, the paper aims to examine the development, structure, and function of bazaars within the framework of the general urban transformations experienced by Kosovar cities under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. In this context, bazaars are not treated solely as commercial spaces, but as multifunctional complexes that constituted the main centers of economic, social, cultural, and political activity. Initially, the article situates the bazaars within the broader context of Ottoman architectural and urban styles in the Balkans, emphasizing the interweaving of oriental elements with local building traditions. Special attention is given to the role of waqfs in the establishment and development of these spaces, as well as to the influence of craftsmanship and trade on their growth and consolidation. Subsequently, the historical development of bazaars in the main cities of Kosovo such as Gjakova, Peja, Prizren, Prishtina, Vushtrria, Kaçanik, Mitrovica, etc. is analyzed, highlighting their connection with regional trade networks and the economic development of cities. An important part of the paper is dedicated to the architectural and urban typology of bazaars. Constituent elements such as the street network, the organization of shops, building materials, and traditional techniques such as the bondruk system and the use of adobe are analyzed. Additionally, specific forms such as arastas and bezistans are addressed, which represent more specialized spaces within the bazaar structure. Furthermore, the article highlights the internal organization according to crafts and the role of guilds as regulatory institutions with broad influence on economic and social life. In conclusion, it is argued that the bazaars of Kosovo represent an important cultural and urban heritage, which testifies to a developed model of Ottoman urban organization adapted to their local context. They played a key role in shaping urban identity and continue to remain evidence of the interweaving of cultures and building traditions in the Kosovar space.

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Introduction

During the five-century Ottoman rule in Kosovo (1389–1912), a large number of buildings and architectural complexes were constructed. These constructions, in terms of character, were sacral, profane, and residential. The realizations and different types of construction belonged to the style of Ottoman architecture. However, it should be taken into account that the Ottoman Empire had a geographical extent across three different continents, therefore cultures and building

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traditions were intertwined and influenced Ottoman realizations in the peripheries of the empire (Waltenberger, 2014, p. 11). Such was also the case with constructions of the period and style in question in the territory of Kosovo.

The conquest of the territory of present day Kosovo by the Ottoman Empire brought major changes in political, social, and religious aspects, as well as in the urban and architectural sphere. Kosovar cities, like those in the Balkans, gradually began to acquire the appearance of cities of the Ottoman style of the Balkan group intertwined with local elements (Waltenberger, 2014, p. 11; F. Drançolli, p. 100; O. Drançolli, 2023, p. ix). Constructions of the Ottoman style and architecture had the mosque as the center of the complex, which included accompanying structures of various types and characters such as hammams, bazaars, imarets, mektebs, madrasas, etc. These complexes were mainly realized in cities and existing settlements, where they were adapted and integrated into the urban agglomeration of the city (Ivkovska, 2021, p. 11), and over time transformed them into cities of Ottoman style while in some cases preserving local influences (Kiel, 2012, p. 17). In addition to these, new cities or small settlements, towns, villages, and open market spaces were established and transformed into large cities (Pinon, 2008, p. 149; F. Drançolli, p. 100). In these cities, the bazaar was the center of every settlement, where all commercial, economic, social, cultural, and political life took place (Waltenberger, 2014, p. 25). Meanwhile, neighborhoods were established around the bazaar (Pašić, 2015, p. 149).



Photo 1. Peja. Long Bazaar. (IKMM)

In Kosovo, before Ottoman rule, there existed a considerable number of cities and residential localities. As was customary for the medieval period, in Kosovo life mainly developed within fortifications and around them (Shkodra, 1973, p. 29; F. Drançolli, 2001, p. 61–63). In this regard, it is worth mentioning some main cities of Kosovo (Peja, Prizren, and Vushtrria) that had continuity of life from antiquity to the present. Meanwhile, during the Ottoman period, small settlements or open market spaces such as Prishtina and Gjakova, etc., were transformed into important commercial, economic, cultural, and political cities. This transformation is mainly attributed to craftsmanship and trade, which had a significant impact on the development and flourishing of Kosovar cities, accompanied by successive constructions realized during the Ottoman period (Rizaj, 1982, p. 200–201). In this context, bazaars played a decisive role in the expansion and urbanization of cities according to the Ottoman model.

History of Old Bazaars

As mentioned above, after the Ottoman conquest, new types and styles of construction appeared in Kosovar cities. Among these constructions were also the bazaars. Bazaars were urban-architectural complexes composed of a large number of shops and other types of structures such as inns, caravanserais, etc. The constructions were public and their character was mainly economic, that is, artisanal and commercial.

Within the bazaars, as public buildings with a commercial and artisanal character, there were also arastas and bezistans. The arasta was a distinct part within the bazaar complex. It consisted of a single street with shops on both sides, which at the entrance and exit was closed with gates. Arastas could be covered or open. Meanwhile, the bezistan as

a type of building in planimetric aspect usually had a quadrangular form and was a covered space with a roof or smaller domes. These types of constructions were mainly reserved for shops with more valuable goods (Petersen, 2002, p. 24, 33).



Photo 2. Peja. Long Bazaar. (IKMM)

Shops of various types and kinds were part of mosque complexes, respectively bazaars, and among other things were realized with the help of waqfs (Rizaj, 1982, p. 177–178). Waqfs played an important role in the development of bazaars and cities in general during the Ottoman period. In the urban structure of the city with Ottoman character, intertwined with local elements, the mosque occupied a central position. Alongside it, a series of accompanying buildings such as hammams, bazaars, madrasas, inns, public kitchens, etc., constituted integral parts of urban-architectural complexes (Acun, 2002, p. 267).

The development of craftsmanship and trade influenced the increase of shops in the bazaars of Albanian cities (Shkodra, 1973, p. 67; F. Draņçolli, 2007, p. 8). In Kosovo, bazaars were built in several cities: Vushtrri, Prishtina, Peja, Prizren, Gjakova, Kaçanik, Mitrovica, and Gjilan (O. Draņçolli, 2023, p. 105). As in other parts of the Balkans, in Kosovo bazaars were built in places of previous markets or open trade areas (Krstikj & Koura, 2014, p. 1338; Pašić, 2015, p. 151–153). Unfortunately, very few of the aforementioned bazaars have survived. Various factors such as climatic conditions, natural disasters, institutional neglect, uncontrolled construction, negligence of some shop owners, as well as systematic intentional destruction during wars by Serbian security forces, have been the main reasons why only the Long Bazaar in Peja and the Grand Bazaar in Gjakova have survived to this day (O. Draņçolli, 2023, p. 109–114).



Photo 3. Peja. Long Bazaar. (IKMM)

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the Arasta Bazaar of Prizren as one of the examples of covered bazaars in Kosovo. The complex extended from the Arasta Mosque, across the covered bridge of the same name to the northeast of the Sinan Pasha Mosque (Haskuka, 1999, p. 77). It was considered among the richest in the city, with the presence of the most powerful traders and craftsmen, while for security reasons it was closed at night and guarded by guards.

Throughout its history, the bazaar suffered several damages from fires and was rebuilt several times, until its final intentional destruction at the beginning of the 20th century (Haskuka, 1999, p. 17).

The Bazaar of Prishtina, although less documented, is considered to have had continuous development since the second half of the 15th century. During the Ottoman period, it constituted one of the main cores of urban and economic development of the city, closely linked with its administrative function and position on regional trade routes. It was characterized by an organized structure of shops and artisan workshops, arranged according to guilds, with an estimated number of around 300–500 premises at its peak period (Hoxha, 2008, p. 10; Herscher, 2010, p. 30). However, the exact number of shops is unknown since in the second half of the 20th century the urban-architectural complex was completely destroyed (O. Drançolli, 2023, p. 112). It is assumed that within the Bazaar of Prishtina there existed a *bezistan*. However, to this day no evidence such as archaeological remains or contemporary documents has been found to support this assumption (O. Drançolli, 2023, p. 112).



Photo 4. Gjakova. Grand Bazaar. (IKMM)

The Long Bazaar of Peja and the Grand Bazaar of Gjakova, although looted, burned, and intentionally destroyed by Serbian security forces during the war, survived thanks to restoration efforts and still exist (O. Drançolli, 2023, p. 113–115). Of these two, the Bazaar of Gjakova, thanks to the study for the regeneration of the Old Bazaar (Redzic, Kurto, & Celic, 1979), had an easier restoration and return to its original condition. Thus, together with historical photo documentation and relevant literature, it enables us to form a general idea about the typology of bazaars in other Kosovar cities in general.

Typology of Bazaars

Bazaars, in architectural and urban terms, were characterized by a predominantly horizontal extension, with a functional organization that reflected the economic and social needs of the time. The main axis of the bazaar consisted of a central commercial street, with shops on both sides, from which narrower secondary streets branched out, creating a dense communication network (Shkodra, 1973, p. 399). These streets were usually curved and paved with cobblestones, which not only facilitated movement but also contributed to the drainage of atmospheric water. From a technical aspect, two main variants of street construction are observed. In the first variant, the central part of the street was slightly elevated, allowing water to flow towards the sides. In the second variant, the middle of the street was lower compared to the edges, channeling water flow to the central part. These solutions demonstrate an advanced level of urban management and adaptation to climatic conditions (O. Drançolli, 2023, p. 108).

Along the main and secondary streets, shops were built, which were usually ground floor or single storey, but in some cases also appeared with a mezzanine or with two floors. This typological diversity directly influenced the creation of visual dynamics and architectural plasticity, giving the bazaar a lively and diverse character (O. Drançolli, 2023, p. 108).

Beyond these elements, bazaars of the Ottoman period also had other important urban and social functions. They were often organized according to crafts, where craftsmen of the same profession were located on the same street or

neighborhood (e.g., the street of blacksmiths, saddlers, tailors), creating a specialized functional and economic structure (Shkodra, 1984, p. 169–170). These structures were led by guilds, which constituted organizations of economic and social character. In addition to regulating economic life and commercial activity, guilds exerted significant influence also in the political, social, cultural, and religious spheres (Rizaj, 1982, p. 185–186).



Photo 5. Gjakova. Grand Bazaar. Shops. (IKMM)

Also, within the bazaars there were public buildings such as inns (accommodation for traders), hammams (public baths), mosques, and madrasas, which made the bazaar a multifunctional center of urban life.

Another important feature was the use of local materials and traditional construction techniques, such as the bondruk system and the use of adobe in the upper floors, which ensured flexibility and adaptation to seismic and climatic conditions. Likewise, shops often had wide openings towards the street, enabling the display of goods and direct interaction with customers.



Photo 6. Gjakova. Grand Bazaar. (Enis Imeri)

Overall, the bazaars of the Ottoman period constituted not only economic centers but also important spaces of social, cultural, and urban interaction, playing a key role in shaping the local identity of cities in Kosovo.

In planimetric and constructive terms, shops usually had a rectangular form and were oriented with direct openings towards the street. Their closure and security were achieved through wooden shutters and metal or wooden bars. From a technical point of view, construction was based on the combination of traditional materials such as wood, stone, mortar, and adobe (Kurtovic-Folic, 1987, p. 1). Both inside and outside, shop surfaces were usually coated with lime. The interior space was characterized by simplicity and functionality, however in some cases decorative elements were encountered, mainly in the form of wooden moldings. These decorations were mostly placed on supporting columns and on the ceiling, giving the space a subtle artisanal refinement. Shops were covered with single pitched, double pitched, and in particular cases four pitched roofs, clad with traditional tiles, while the eaves were wide and pronounced (F. Drançolli, 2011, p. 154). In addition to the protective function from atmospheric conditions, they also served as space

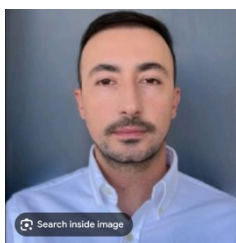
for displaying goods (Shkodra, 1984, p. 399). Over time, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries, the structural composition of these buildings has undergone certain changes as a result of interventions, adaptations, and restoration processes (Kurtovic-Folic, 1987, p. 1).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the bazaars of Kosovo represent an essential component of urban, economic, and social development during the Ottoman period. They were not merely organized spaces for trade and craftsmanship, but complex structures that integrated multiple functions, including social interaction, cultural life, and institutional organization through guilds and waqfs. Through historical and typological analysis, it is observed that bazaars developed in harmony with the local context, reflecting the interweaving of local building traditions with influences of Ottoman architecture.

The street network, the functional organization of shops, the use of traditional materials, and construction techniques such as the bondruk system demonstrate a high level of urban rationality and adaptation to environmental conditions. Likewise, specialized forms such as arastas indicate an advanced development of commercial and economic activity. Nevertheless, the destruction and transformations throughout the course of history have led to the loss of a large part of this heritage, leaving only a few examples that testify to the former importance of bazaars in Kosovar cities. In this regard, the bazaars of Kosovo remain evidence of a developed urban model, which played a key role in shaping the identity of cities and continues to hold significant cultural and historical value. Their preservation, study, revitalization, and promotion constitute an important responsibility for institutions and society in general, in order to ensure that this heritage is safeguarded and transmitted to future generations.

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Orges Fejaz Drançolli (1988), historian, art historian, and researcher of the history, culture, and art of the Ottoman period in Kosovo. He was born in Prishtina, where he completed his primary and secondary education. He completed his Bachelor's and Master's studies (field: Modern Period) at the University of Prishtina, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of History, in 2011 and 2013, respectively. In 2019, he completed his doctoral studies in art history at the University of Istanbul, Institute of Social Sciences, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of Art History. He currently works as a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of History

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