Research Article

Mapping new Ottoman heritage tourism routes in North Macedonia: A supply-side approach

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Abstract

North Macedonia possesses a rich cultural heritage dating back to the Ottoman period (14th–19th century). This heritage is evident in various architectural structures such as bazaars, bridges, hammams, clock towers, and mosques. While some of these sites are actively used for tourism, many remain untapped, each offering unique historical, cultural, and architectural significance. This study explores the potential of developing Ottoman heritage tourism products in North Macedonia. The research aims to identify and establish new tourism routes in the Northeast, East, and Southeast regions, by adopting an experiential approach. Through in-depth interviews with informants experienced in tourism, the study utilizes spatial intuition to map significant sites and designs routes highlighting the richness of Ottoman heritage. The research identifies Kratovo, Shtip, and Strumica as key cities within these regions, serving as pivotal points for the proposed routes. The study reveals that informants strongly believe that Ottoman heritage tourism can attract visitors, foster cultural understanding, and contribute to local economic development. The core appeal of these routes lies in the authenticity, unique aesthetics, architectural significance, and educational value of the Ottoman heritage sites. This study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the value of Ottoman heritage and advocating the critical importance of its preservation. From a practical standpoint, the proposed routes, interconnected across three regions, cater to diverse visitor interests and might offer a unique tourism experience.

Key words: Cultural heritage, Ottoman legacy, spatial distribution, tourism itinerary

1. Introduction

The Ottoman heritage (OH) represents a unique and remarkable legacy (Goodwin 1971; Nalbantoğlu 1988; Artan 2006; Hartmuth 2008; Pavlov 2008; Freely 2011), deeply rooted in the political, cultural, social, and economic fabric of the Balkan countries, including North Macedonia (Cipan 1966; Todorova 2004; Cupcea 2012). This heritage, however, has not been without controversy. The feelings, behavior and relationship of inhabitants and policymakers towards heritage assets and relics of non-mainstream cultures is explored in the dissonance heritage literature. Scholars define dissonant heritage as a state of conflictual feelings, tension, or discord arising from the presentation of struc-

tures or symbols associated with a culture or religion belonging to other minority group within society (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Ashworth 2002, 2003; Bruce and Creighton 2006; Pavličić 2016).

The contested nature of Ottoman heritage and the opportunities for its utilization for cultural tourism development is also a subject of ongoing scholarly discussion. Scholars highlight the unfavorable situation of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans including historical factors, political connotations, and public acceptance issues (Dogramadjieva et al. 2021). Dogramadjieva (2024) further emphasizes the problematic nature of Ottoman cultural heritage in the context of tourism, explaining that the term "problematic" cultural heritage refers to a "problem to be solved" meaning "dissonant" or "contested" heritage that poses challenges. OH sites are sometimes associated with a "dark" period in national histories, leading to their unpopularity and underutilization in tourism, particularly within the Balkans (Terzić and Dogramadjieva 2022; Terzić et al. 2024). These ambivalent, and sometimes negative, perceptions and interpretations of OH are often rooted in issues such as colonialism, religious intolerance, and cultural erasure (Dogramadjieva and Terzić 2024).

The cultural wave ushered in by the Ottoman era left an indelible mark on the region's architectural features, traditions, mentalities, and languages, particularly through the exceptional blend of architectural heritage from the fifteenth and 16th centuries (Korunovski 2006). This legacy has resulted in a diverse collection of over 150 cultural assets scattered across North Macedonia, constituting the second-largest repository of cultural heritage in the country (Marinoski 2012). When considering factors such as accessibility, preservation, and historical value, approximately 80 of these OH sites have been evaluated for tourism valorization (Petrevska et al. 2020). However, environmental degradation and neglect have compromised the authenticity and cultural value of many of these sites. Currently, only 33 heritage features, including hammams, bedestens, caravanserais, mosques, bridges, aqueducts, and other facilities from the Ottoman period, are recognized for their distinctive characteristics (Pavlov et al. 2008) and attract significant attention from tourists and visitors (APSTRM 2024).

Conversely, tourism frequently leverages cultural heritage sites as a foundation for establishing and developing specific types of activities (Loulanski and Loulanski 2011; Fonseca and Ramos 2012). Drawn by the economic benefits at local, regional, and national levels, cultural heritage has been increasingly accepted as a cornerstone for creating specific tourism products (Bond et al. 2015; Dinis and Krakover 2016) and cultural heritage routes (Council of Europe 2010). By developing tailor-made routes, nations can present and preserve their cultural assets, promoting sustainable tourism that links history, cultural background, and immersive experiences (Timothy 2018; Dayoub et al. 2020).

There is a growing body of scholarly literature advocating for the enhancement of tourism development in North Macedonia through the creation of OH tourism products (Nestoroska et al. 2017; Petrevska 2017; Petrevska and Namicev 2017; Petrevska et al. 2020). This research aligns with previous studies by adopting an experiential approach, corroborating their findings while expanding the scope to identify new potential tourism routes. Earlier studies primarily focused on isolated points of interest and identified new routes without considering broader regional connectivity (Nestoroska et al. 2017; Petrevska 2017;

Petrevska and Namicev 2017; Petrevska et al. 2020). This study builds upon these works by exploring opportunities for developing sustainable tourism routes featuring OH products that connect three regions—Northeast, East, and Southeast regions in North Macedonia. In this line, the study aims to underline the value of OH in selected regions in North Macedonia arguing the critical importance in sustaining and preserving the Ottoman legacy as a foundation for developing new tourism routes to boost cultural tourism in North Macedonia.

Following the introduction, the subsequent section reviews relevant literature emphasizing the importance of preserving the authenticity and sustainable use of OH, along with considering national identity politics, nationalism, and neo-Ottomanism when interpreting and presenting the OH. The methodology section outlines the research aims and questions, along with the study method employed in this study. The results, findings, and discussions are then presented, culminating in the final section, which provides conclusions, acknowledges limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Authenticity, Ottoman heritage, cultural tourism identity

Scholars exhibit interest in cultural heritage from the Ottoman period. The monumentality and practicality of structures from the Ottoman Empire are extensively studied, with a focus on preserving authenticity, cultural identity, and contemporary utilization (Harvey 2000; Harrison 2001; Richards 2007; Alp 2009; Crouch 2010; Freely 2011; Davis 2013; Luke 2013; Wang et al. 2015).

Authenticity is critical in safeguarding legacy, promoting identity, and evaluating site appeal. It is a complex concept and a determining factor for protecting, maintaining, and sustaining cultural heritage. Academia has extensively explored its significance in cultural encounters, particularly within the context of tourism valorization.

Alp (2009) identifies a shared cultural heritage from the Ottoman era in the Balkans, to which all countries in the region have contributed, thus highlighting the diverse array of cultures involved. Davis (2013) provides insights into how Ottoman cultural elements are presented as tourist attractions. Freely (2011) notes that cultural heritage with the architectural magnificence seen in Bursa, Edirne, or Istanbul attracts a substantial flow of tourists. Harrison (2001) explores the role of authenticity in less developed countries, concluding that well-preserved and well-promoted cultural heritage significantly enhances the experience of authenticity in tourism destinations.

Richards (2007) emphasizes the concept of cultural tourism, highlighting the importance of authenticity in cultural encounters. On the other hand, Crouch (2010) argues for the linkage between the construction of cultural identity and tourism, emphasizing the importance of architectural heritage belonging to various cultures. Harvey (2000) also discusses the construction of cultural identity through the cultural heritage of a site, defining these elements as core to creating the uniqueness of a tourist destination.

Luke (2013) examines the preservation of cultural identity in the context of Islamic heritage in the Balkan region, arguing that cultural heritage and cultural identity represent symbolic cultural sovereignty in the face of a rapidly chang-

ing environment. Similarly, Bryce and Čaušević (2019) argue that Ottoman heritage is embedded in the national identities of the region.

Terzić and Dogramadjieva (2022) highlight the urgent need to preserve and utilize cultural heritage while promoting sustainable tourism development. They outline as a major challenge the limited public support for tourism utilization of OH in many Balkan countries. According to them, this situation reflects not only the divisive historical past but also current political issues. Sipos et al. (2021) similarly discuss the challenges and opportunities of developing a cultural tourism center based on OH in Hungary. Likewise, Wang et al. (2015) focus on the sociological dimensions and construction of cultural identity, emphasizing its role as a symbol for locals in tourism destinations.

In conclusion, literature highlights the dual focus on preserving authenticity and cultural identity while adapting to contemporary uses and tourism tendency. Authenticity, as a critical concept, is emphasized in protecting, maintaining, and sustaining the uniqueness of the cultural heritage which is particularly important for attracting tourists and visitors.

2.2. National identity politics, nationalism, and neo-Ottomanism

Scholars have examined the complex interplay between societal attitudes, Ottoman heritage, and tourism development in the region. They offer valuable insights into how national identity politics, nationalism, and neo-Ottomanism have shaped the interpretation and presentation of OH.

Aykaç (2022) explores these interlinkages for heritage tourism in Türkiye, particularly focusing on the role of the Turkish cooperation and coordination government's agency, TIKA, in constructing a transnational OH, both domestically and internationally. She also examines the neo-Ottoman narrative and its implications for tourism development. Moreover, Aykaç (2022) highlights how the promotion of OH abroad serves as a dual-purpose strategy for Türkiye, solidifying national identity while expanding its influence and soft power in the region through economic cooperation, political influence, and cultural exchange.

Furthermore, Luke (2013) examines cultural heritage as a tool for asserting national identity and sovereignty, particularly in the context of post-Yugoslav conflicts in the Balkans and Türkiye. She discusses several key themes, focusing on the politics of preservation and rehabilitation of cultural heritage as a source of national pride, belonging, and economic development. The author emphasizes the importance of considering the social dimensions of cultural heritage to understand its role in shaping contemporary societies. In fact, she explains that cultural heritage programs can shape claims of cultural sovereignty beyond the borders of nation-states. This raises concerns regarding the influence of modern Turkish politics on the countries of the Balkan region.

Houliston et al. (2021) provide additional insights into the role of nationalism in shaping the official tourism websites of Balkan countries. Through a multimodal analysis of textual and visual content of websites, they identify nationalistic themes and symbols that often employ subtle strategies to convey a sense of national identity and generally avoid overt expressions of nationalism. These findings are particularly useful for tourism promotion as they suggest strategies for attracting tourists in a subtle manner by reinforcing positive narratives about historical events and figures.

On the other hand, Luke (2018) examines how Americanism, Europeanism, and neo-Ottomanism, as competing ideologies, have influenced the preservation, interpretation, and presentation of cultural heritage sites in the Balkans and Türkiye. She criticizes neo-Ottomanism's potential to undermine the diversity of cultural heritage in the region by emphasizing the Ottoman Empire as a unifying force, which may downplay, marginalize and exclude non-Ottoman heritage. Luke (2013, 2018) argues for a balanced approach that recognizes the importance of preserving all forms of cultural heritage in the region, acknowledging that while neo-Ottomanism can be a force for cultural preservation, it may also undermine cultural diversity.

Although the specific motivations behind the increasing visibility of neo-Ottomanism are not explicitly stated, some insights can be interpreted. Scholars suggest that promoting cultural ties, highlighting the Ottoman Empire's historical legacy, and evoking its past glory contribute to its appeal.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Research aims and questions

The study has two primary objectives:
- To assess the tourism value of OH sites in selected regions.
- To propose the development of new OH tourism routes.

To achieve these objectives, the study employs an extensive literature review, as well as primary data analysis.

This research addresses two main clusters of research questions (designated as RQ_1 and RQ_2) and several sub-research questions (designated as RQ_{a-e}):
- RQ_1: Which OH sites are present in selected regions, particularly those with tourism potential?
- RQ_a: What are the current OH sites and their offerings?
- RQ_b: Which core elements can be utilized as tourism supply motives to enhance understanding of OH?
- RQ_c: What is the current condition of the listed heritage sites in terms of preserved cultural identity?
- RQ_2: Which effective tourism routes can be mapped to promote and sustain heritage tourism in selected regions?
- RQ_d: What are the needs for supply improvements and future challenges?
- RQ_e: What are the new routes for initiating OH routes in terms of a tailor-made itinerary with possibilities to gain national recognition?

3.2. Study method

The research employs a combined methodological approach (Sharpley 2014) integrating four stages (Fig. 1).

The first stage integrates theoretical and practical knowledge, drawing from the scholarly research approach (Van de Ven 2007). This stage involves a literature review focusing on the authenticity, cultural identity, and contemporary tourism utilization of the Ottoman cultural legacy.

The second stage is the most complex as comprises of two phases providing a structured framework for heritage site development. It applies the heri-
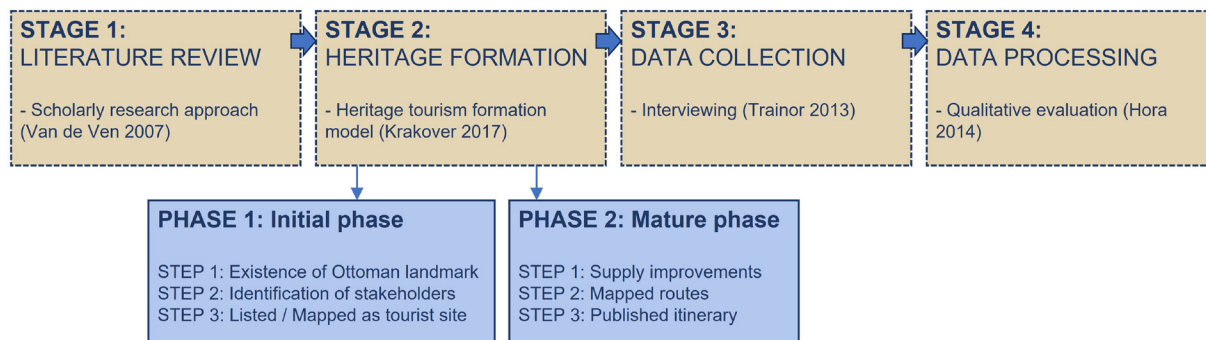
STAGE 1: LITERATURE REVIEW	STAGE 2: HERITAGE FORMATION	STAGE 3: DATA COLLECTION	STAGE 4: DATA PROCESSING
- Scholarly research approach (Van de Ven 2007)	- Heritage tourism formation model (Krakover 2017)	- Interviewing (Trainor 2013)	- Qualitative evaluation (Hora 2014)

PHASE 1: Initial phase

STEP 1: Existence of Ottoman landmark
STEP 2: Identification of stakeholders
STEP 3: Listed / Mapped as tourist site

PHASE 2: Mature phase

STEP 1: Supply improvements
STEP 2: Mapped routes
STEP 3: Published itinerary

Figure 1. Research methodology.

tage tourism formation model (Krakover 2017) with certain modifications and adjustments to fit the local characteristics of the sample. The sample encompasses the Northeast, East, and Southeast regions of North Macedonia.

The initial phase has three consecutive steps, delineated by both desk research and field evidence. Specifically:

- Step 1 involves a compilation of a comprehensive list of OH sites (Table 2) modified upon the work of Petrevska et al. (2020).
- Step 2 involves identification of informants. The target group consists of 17 tourism experienced individuals with advanced knowledge (theoretical and/or practical) on OH. These individuals included five historians of art, four conservation councilors, five tour guides, and three university professors teaching cultural tourism related subjects. Table 1 provides a summary of the interviewees. Based on their expertise, the interviewees evaluate the provided comprehensive list of OH sites (Table 2), assess and identify those with tourism potential (Table 3). This data is collected primarily through the interviewees' experience. Notably, nine respondents (historians of art and conservation councilors) had over 15 years of experience related to the topic, suggesting a strong connection to Ottoman cultural heritage.

To complement this qualitative subjective assessment, the research also employs modified criteria from Petrevska et al. (2020), considering: a) Core elements for route development: accessibility, interconnectivity, and general infrastructure; b) Assessment of uniqueness, authenticity, and cultural identity: cultural and educational value, protection status, and historical significance of the site.

- Step 3 involves mapping a summarized shortlist featuring OH sites suitable for tourism in the sampled regions (Table 4).

The mature phase of the model entails more advanced steps in heritage tourism formation:

- Step 1 involves identifying the necessity for supply improvements related to safeguarding Ottoman culture.
- In Step 2, based on spatial intuition, identified attractions are mapped (Figs 2, 4, 6).
- Step 3 culminates in the creation of an itinerary (Fig. 8) for the OH route, presenting arguments for regional and national valorization.

The third stage involves the collection of primary data through interviewing (Trainor 2013) conducted between March and April 2024.

A protocol with written instructions was designed based on the suggestions by Morse and Field (1995), as a framework for smooth flow of the interview process and easy navigation to summarize conclusions. It includes the following sections:

1. Introduction: Informing interviewees that the data is collected for research purposes, their profile will remain confidential. The research aim is explained emphasizing their important role as informants in providing valuable data.
2. Experiential judgment: Identifying OH sites in selected regions with tourism potential (Table 3).
3. Spatial intuition: Mapping sites and creating original and effective OH routes.
4. Spatial organization: Gathering data on possibilities for sustainable tourism supply in terms of space.
5. Ex-facto justification: Collecting data on challenges of the newly suggested route and assessing the potential for promoting and enhancing the visibility of OH in tourism development.
6. Interviewee data (Table 1): Many respondents are male, with an average age of 47 years. The average duration of an interview is 30 minutes.

Table 1. Summarized results on interviewees' data (*n*=17).

Item	Description
Position	5 Historians of Art, 4 Councilors for conservation, 5 tour guides, 3 university professors teaching cultural tourism-related subjects
Age	between 35−59 (average: 47 years)
Sex	5 female (29%); 12 male (71%)
Time for interviewing	25−35 min (average: 30 min)

The protocol contains easily navigable questions to encourage the free expression of personal experiences. Open-ended, clear and direct tailor-made questions allow for identifying and underscoring the emotional connection of the interviewees to the investigated topic. Particularly historians of art and councilors for conservation vigorously express statements openly demonstrating emotional detachment to OH. Their subjective assessments conveyed through way of speaking, choice of words and phrasing, repetition and sentence used, offer valuable insights into the value of the Ottoman legacy and the importance of its protection and preservation. Before collecting data, small-scale piloting was conducted. Two university professors reviewed the clarity, duration, and consistency of the questions to ensure their quality.

The final, fourth stage of the research methodology involves qualitative data processing based on expert judgment (Hora 2014). A key challenge in qualitative research is capturing diverse perspectives and subjective assessments from informants. So, detailed notes were taken during interviews, capturing repetitive sentences and phrases. By compiling these sentences, the researchers were able to generalize the respondents' attitudes. This approach, using

sentences rather than keywords, enhanced the study's credibility and trustworthiness. These stylized data were then combined and analyzed to assess and summarize findings and draw conclusions.

4. Results, findings, and discussion

Results are presented in three individual sub-chapters, aligning with the research questions, and synthesized to provide a comprehensive overview:

1. OH sites. The identified presence and potential value of the OH sites in the selected regions are discussed.

2. New OH routes. The assessment of creating new OH routes is elaborated.

3. Perception of OH tourism formation. Possibilities for integration of Ottoman legacy into tourism is investigated.

4.1. Ottoman heritage sites

Table 2 presents a comprehensive inventory of 36 total OH sites within the sampled regions (Petrevska et al. 2020). Notably, a diverse array of architectural elements is observable, including mosques, clock towers, bridges, hammams, and so forth. The Northeast region comprises 14 sites, consisting of two mosques, five bridges, six clocks/towers, and one hammam. The East region encompasses ten sites, including six mosques, one bridge, two clocks/towers, and one bedesten. Similarly, the Southeast region hosts 12 sites, featuring four mosques, one clock, four hammams, two turbes, and one public building.

All sites from Table 2 leave a distinctive imprint and enduring traces on the urban landscape of cities undergoing cultural and economic prosperity. Presently, some are integrated into contemporary urban planning schemes, while others stand as historical features (APSTRM 2024).

According to Table 2, interviewees have assessed OH sites for their tourism potential, leading to the findings presented in Table 3. These sites are generally distributed across three cities, each serving as a focal point within the respective region: Kratovo in the Northeast, Shtip in the East, and Strumica in the Southeast region.

Notably, Kratovo boasts nearly 80% of all OH in the Northeast region, while Shtip accounts for 50% in the East, and Strumica holds 31% in the Southeast. In essence, these cities demonstrate strong potential for OH tourism development, collectively encompassing over half of all identified regional Ottoman sites.

Interviewees compile a shortlist of Ottoman sites with tourism potential for the sampled regions (Table 4). They identify 19 Ottoman landmarks as core elements for tourism supply. The respondents elaborate on the rationale behind selecting 11 sites in Kratovo (Northeast region), five sites in Shtip (East region), and three sites in Strumica (Southeast region). They considered several aspects to ensure these sites could be integrated into the tourism supply. These factors were explored through guided interviews, as previously described in the research questions outlined in the methodology section. The respondents identified sites that were not only historically authentic but also logistically accessible and visually appealing. This creates a network of interconnected destinations that may contribute to the region's economic growth. At the same time, the selected sites were chosen for their strategic location and potential integration

Table 2. Comprehensive list of OH sites (modified upon Petrevska et al. (2020)).

Region	Municipality	Type and number	Description
Northeast	Kratovo	5 bridges	Grofcanski bridge (18th century), Radin bridge (19th century), Carsiski bridge (16th century), Joksirski bridge (16th century), Argulicki bridge (16th century)
		6 clocks/towers	Clock tower (16th century), Simiceva tower (16th century), Krsteva tower (16th century), Hadzi Kostova (16th century), Srez tower (16th century), Zlatkova tower (16th century)
		1 hammam	Hammam (16th century)
	Kumanovo	1 mosque	Tatar Sinan Bey-Eski Mosque (16th century)
	Kumanovo (Tabanovce)	1 mosque	Koca Mehmet Bey (16th century)
East	Berovo	1 mosque	Mehmed Bey (19th century)
	Delcevo	1 mosque	Sultan Mehmed Fatih II Mosque (15th century)
	Karbinci (Radanje)	1 mosque	Muhamed Aga Mosque (17th century)
	Kocani	1 clock/tower	Clock tower (17th century)
	Shtip	2 mosques	Husamedin Pasa Mosque (17th century), Kadin Aga Mosque (19th century)
		1 bridge	Sultan's bridge Emir Cucuk (17th century)
		1 clock tower	Clock tower (17th century)
		1 bedesten	Bedesten (16th century)
	Shtip (Dragoevo)	1 mosque	Mosque
Southeast	Gevgelija	1 hammam	Hammam (16th century)
	Dojran	1 clock/tower	Clock tower (14th century)
		1 hammam	Hammam (16th century)
	Radovis	1 mosque	Ahmed Efendi Mosque (16th century)
		1 turbe	Turbe (16th century)
	Strumica	2 mosques	Hunkar, Orta Mosque (17th century)
		1 public building	Turkish post office (19th century)
	Strumica (Banica)	1 mosque	Mahmut Bey (16th century)
		1 hammam	Hammam (16th century)
		1 turbe	Mesi Bey (16th century)
	Strumica (Bansko)	1 hammam	Hammam (16th century)

Table 3. List of OH sites with tourism potential.

Region	Municipality	Type and number	Description
Northeast	Kratovo	5 bridges	Grofcanski bridge (18th century), Radin bridge (19th century), Carsiski bridge (16th century), Joksirski bridge (16th century), Argulicki bridge (16th century)
		6 clocks/towers	Clock tower (16th century), Simiceva tower (16th century), Krsteva tower (16th century), Hadzi Kostova (16th century), Srez tower (16th century), Zlatkova tower (16th century)
		1 hammam	Hammam of Kratovo (16th century)
East	Shtip	1 bridge	Sultan's bridge Emir Cucuk (17th century)
		1 clock tower	Clock tower (17th century)
		2 mosques	Husamedin Pasa Mosque (17th century), Kadin Aga Mosque (19th century)
		1 bedesten	Bedesten (16th–17th century)
Southeast	Strumica	2 mosques	Hunkar, Orta Mosque (17th century)
		1 public building	Turkish post office (19th century)

Table 4. Summarized data on Ottoman sites with tourism potential for Northeast, East and Southeast region.

Region	Total identified sites (Table 2)	Total sites with tourism potential (Table 3)
Northeast	14 sites: 2 mosques, 5 bridges, 6 clocks/towers, 1 hammam	Kratovo, 11 sites: 5 bridges, 6 clocks/towers
East	10 sites: 6 mosques, 1 bridge, 2 clock/tower, 1 bedesten	Shtip, 5 sites: 2 mosques, 1 bridge, 1 clock/tower, 1 bedesten
Southeast	12 sites: 4 mosques, 1 clock, 4 hammams, 2 turbe, 1 public building	Strumica, 3 sites: 2 mosques, 1 public building

into existing or future tourism routes, considering factors such as accessibility and proximity to other attractions. Moreover, the interviewees prioritized sites that authentically represented OH, retaining their original character and historical significance, while also considering their current state of preservation and potential for restoration and conservation. Additionally, the sites were evaluated based on their core elements, such as aesthetic and cultural value, which are crucial for attracting tourists and enhancing their understanding of OH. The interviewees also assessed the potential for improvement and development of the sites, including opportunities for restoration and their potential contribution to the local economy. Furthermore, the selected sites are identified as elements that can encourage policymakers to invest in sustainable heritage tourism in the selected regions, thereby elevating their national recognition.

4.2. New Ottoman heritage routes

Drawing on their spatial intuition, the interviewees mapped out the identified attractions and subsequently developed well-structured tourism routes (Figs 2, 4, 6, 8). These routes, designed to optimize spatial organization and incorporate
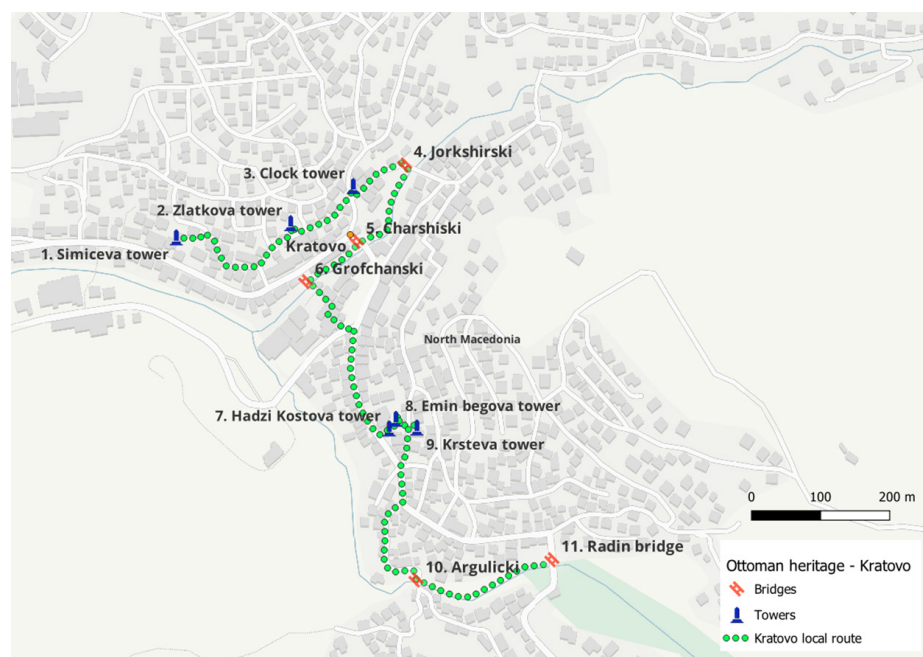

Figure 2. Tourism route for Kratovo (Northeast region).

Figure 3. Tourist attractions in the tourism route for Kratovo (Northeast region) (Donevski 2016; Wikimedia Commons 2024a). **A** Simiceva Tower—originally known as Abedin's Tower, dating back to 1370. It is one of six towers that have persisted from the medieval and Ottoman periods (Mitevski 2018) **B** Zlatkova Tower—likely dating to 1365. It is situated between the Simiceva Tower and the Clock Tower and features two ground floors (upper and lower) and two additional floors (Donevski 2016) **C** Clock Tower—probably dating to 1372. It is believed to have been constructed in the late Middle Ages (Pavlovska 2014) and was later inhabited by wealthy Turkish beys during the Ottoman period **D** Jorkshirski Bridge—one of the oldest in Kratovo. According to legend, it is named after a famous pig breed that was slaughtered to feed the masons who built it. Another legend suggests that pigs were needed to feed a monster that disrupted the construction (DMWC 2014) **E** Charshiski Bridge—also known as Tsarski Most, constructed in 1804 and renovated in 1933. It is considered one of the city's symbols and has been declared a national cultural heritage site (Milevski 2014) **F** Grofchanski Bridge—dating from the 18th century. It is one of the largest bridges, named after a wealthy family, that funded its construction. The bridge measures 30 m in length, eight meters in height, and four meters in width (DMWC 2014) **G** Hadzi Kostova Tower—it is believed to have been Karposh's house, damaged in street battles during 1689–1690 (Donevski 2016) **H** Emin Begova Tower—also known as Srezka Kula. It is located just nine meters from Krsteva Tower. It has a ground floor and two upper floors **I** Krsteva Tower—named after the Krstevi family who used it. It dates to 1371/1372 and features a modern monumental appearance, built on a two-wire foundation. Formerly having two entrances, today only the southern entrance is used (Donevski 2016) **J** Argulicki Bridge—also known as the Small Bridge. It is a stone bridge built over the Mantseva River and was listed as a national cultural heritage site in 2012 (Ministry of Culture 2012) **K** Radin Bridge—the most famous bridge in Kratovo dating to 1833. According to legend, its foundations were unstable until nine brothers decided to sacrifice their youngest wife, Rada, who was buried alive to stabilize the bridge (DMWC 2014).

necessary tourism infrastructure, represent a valuable addition to the national tourism supply. The elements of these routes in terms of significant OH sites, are briefly described in Figs 3, 5, 7.

As depicted in Fig. 2, the proposed tourism route for Kratovo interconnects 11 OH sites (detailed in Fig. 3), each holding significant potential for development. Six of these sites are towers, predominantly dating back to the medieval and Ottoman eras (Donevski 2016) and possess both aesthetic and historical value. These towers share a resemblance in terms of their appearance and construction style, typically comprising a ground floor and two additional stories. While all five bridges exhibit architectural significance, it is noteworthy that only the Argulicki bridge is officially recognized as a national cultural heritage site. The proposed route offers flexibility, allowing for its development as either a standalone tourism package exclusively for the Northeast region or as an integrated component within a broader regional tourism framework.
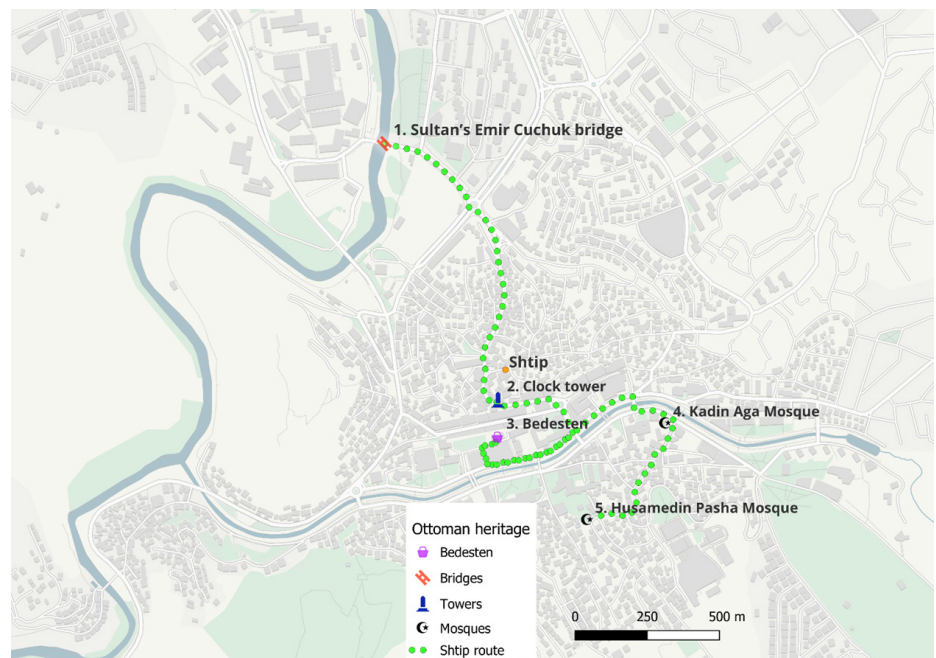

Figure 4. Tourism route for Shtip (East region).

Fig. 4 presents a proposed tourism route for Shtip, encompassing five significant OH sites situated within the East region (detailed in Fig. 5). These sites still retain their authenticity and cultural value. While a national project was initiated with the aim of conserving the Husamedin Pasa Mosque, its full implementation remains incomplete. In contrast, the Bedesten continues to be actively utilized as a venue for various events and exhibitions, ensuring its ongoing relevance. The Kadin Aga Mosque, serving as an active place of worship, maintains its vitality and continues to play a significant role in the local community. All proposed sites are readily accessible and can be integrated into a self-contained day trip itinerary for Shtip. Alternatively, they can be incorporated into a broader regional tourism route, enhancing the overall visitor experience.

Figure 5. Tourist attractions in the tourism route for Shtip (East region). **A** Sultan's Emir Cuchuk Bridge—dating back to before 1672. This impressive monument exemplifies Islamic architecture and spans the Bregalnica River along the main road leading into the city (Denkova and Celik 2015) **B** Clock Tower—situated in the city's central part and dating to 1650. In the 19th century, it was transformed into a clock tower with added room for the clock mechanism and a bell tower (Denkova and Celik 2015) **C** Bedesten—located in the city center and dating to 1662. This stone building, characterized by harmonious proportions, served as the main bazaar for luxury and precious goods (Denkova and Celik 2015) **D** Kadin Aga Mosque—the primary religious building for Muslims in Shtip, dating to the 19th century. Its original form and exterior have been altered by recent aesthetic construction work (Municipality of Shtip 2024a) **E** Husamedin Pasha Mosque— also known as the Church of Saint Elijah, as it is believed to have been built on the foundations of an ancient Christian temple. Located on a hill on the city's left side and dating from the 17th century, it holds historical significance, with the tomb of Husamedin Pasha situated nearby (Municipality of Shtip 2024b).

Fig. 6 showcases a proposed tourism route for Strumica, a city in the Southeast region. This route incorporates three significant OH sites, briefly described in Fig. 7. Strumica is a big city with strong potential to support and develop innovative tourism strategies. One such site, the Turkish Post Office stands out as a remarkably well-preserved relic from the mid-19th century. This period marked the introduction of postal services to the Ottoman Empire, largely overseen by Austrian and French administrators. While the Turkish Post Office offers a tangible connection to the past, the city's mosques require more concerted efforts for conservation and preservation. These architectural gems hold immense cultural value and could become tourist attractions. By prioritizing their restoration and maintenance, Strumica can unlock their full potential and contribute to the region's tourism industry.
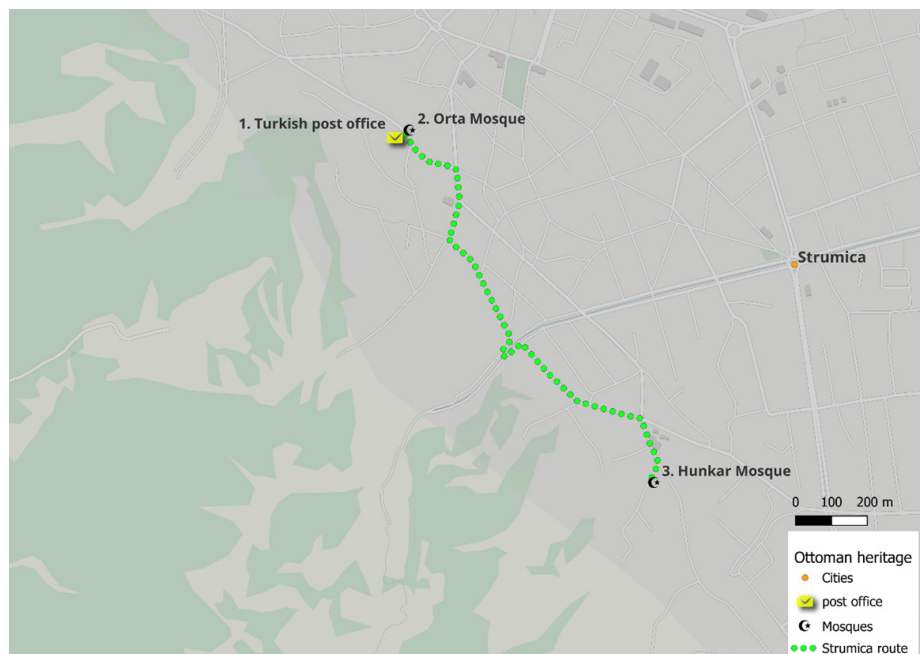
Figure 6. Tourism route for Strumica (Southeast region).

Figure 7. Tourist attractions in the tourism route for Strumica (Southeast region) (Pavlov 2008; Discoverstrumicacity 2024; Wikimedia Commons 2024b). **A** Turkish Post Office—well-preserved dating from the mid-19th century when the postal service was introduced in the Empire, primarily managed by Austrians and the French (Wikimedia Commons 2024b) **B** Orta Mosque—also known as the Orta Mosque, named for its central position between the fortress and the suburbium (Pavlov 2008). It represents a simple provincial type of single-domed mosque **C** Hunkar Mosque—the oldest mosque in Strumica. The remains exhibit the typical combination of stone and brick construction materials for its walls. The cubic domed structure of the prayer hall follows the common pattern of Ottoman Mosque architecture (Discoverstrumicacity 2024).

Drawing on spatial intuition and employing an experiential approach, respondents map the identified sites and create a new regional itinerary. The full black line in Fig. 8 indicates the suggested regional itinerary for the OH route, featuring three system heads: Kratovo, Shtip, and Strumica. The dotted black line represents the route from Skopje (the capital city) to Kratovo (the starting point of the newly tourism route). Tourists visiting North Macedonia typically arrive in Skopje and then may follow the new itinerary, beginning in Kratovo (the first system head), continuing through Shtip (the second system head), and concluding in Strumica (the final system head).
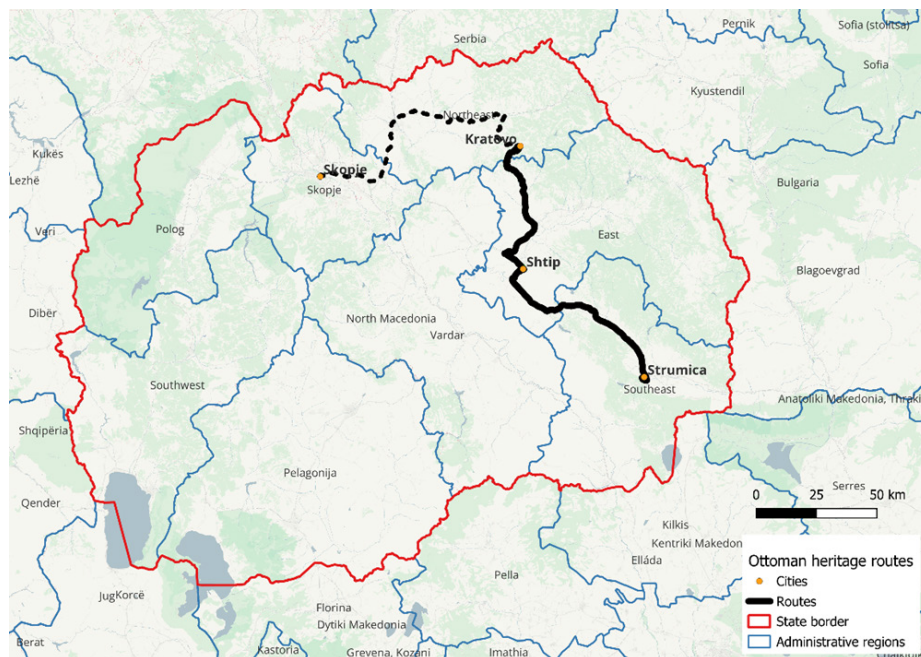
Figure 8. Regional tourism route.

4.3. Perception of Ottoman heritage tourism formation

During the research, respondents are asked to present their perception of OH tourism formation. Moreover, they evaluate the possibilities for integrating the Ottoman legacy into tourism, considering the current condition, preservation of authenticity and cultural value, and future challenges for utilizing the Ottoman legacy as a tourism resource.

Respondents acknowledge the significant deterioration of many mapped landmarks over the years. The current condition is evaluated as unsatisfactory, indicating the necessity for improvement. They warn that buildings are being demolished and left to fall into decay and ruin. Respondents also highlight concerns about the loss of authenticity and aesthetic value of the sites due to inadequate maintenance. Much attention must be paid to recognition, utilization, and maintenance of cultural heritage, as concluded by Butler et al. (2022) and Terkenli and Georgoula (2021). Some repairs, maintenance, and revitalization of certain landmarks have been carried out, such as the renovation of the floor and roof of the Bedesten in Shtip, and a conservation project for the Husamedin Pasa Mosque in Shtip by the Ministry of Culture, which was never implemented. Besides the modest allocation of funds from the Ministry of Culture, significant financing has been garnered from TIKA (2022), but so far, this has been for Ottoman heritage in few selected locations in North Macedonia.

There is a difference in the opinion of respondents regarding investments in cultural initiatives in former Ottoman territories, such as those undertaken by TIKA (2022) when restoring Ottoman-era buildings in Skopje and in several locations (Debar, Struga and Ohrid) in western parts of the country. In this regard, Aykaç (2022) and Luke (2018) draw attention to dubious geopolitical agendas of present-day Turkish policy abroad that need to be considered when advocating OH promotion in all Balkan countries, including North Macedonia. Similarly,

some respondents support such initiatives. They believe these initiatives may assist in promoting a positive image of the Ottoman Empire and its legacy, while also fostering a sense of nostalgia and connection to the past.

On the other hand, a few respondents offer a different interpretation on the same topic. They feel a dissonance with respect to the preservation of others' cultural assets by denial and defense against cultural difference. More precisely, they raise concerns about the possibility of creating a dominant discourse that overshadows non-Ottoman cultural perspectives, making it difficult to gain recognition and support for these heritages. This behavior aligns with Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (1993), which explains different stages of intercultural communication.

Additionally, respondents underline that sustaining disproportionate resource allocation to preserve and promote only OH, while neglecting other non-Ottoman forms of cultural heritage, may lead to erosion of cultural diversity over time. This kind of dissonant attitude toward investment in other cultures' assets is expected and has been discussed by Chhabra and Zhao (2015). Moreover, such sort of conflictual feelings may lead to actions against the presentation or preservation of these heritages, especially when local funds are involved (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Graham and Howard 2008).

On the other hand, many respondents, particularly tourist guides and university professors, gladly accept and embrace the presence of the Ottoman legacy. This adaptation and acceptance, where feelings of dissonance diminish or disappear, has been previously discussed by Sandri (2013) and Lehrer (2015).

Tourist guides, in particular, emphasize the importance of positively promoting Ottoman heritage sites. They suggest implementing subtle strategies to present OH in North Macedonia in a positive and appealing light. These strategies, which aim to shape visitors' perceptions, include frequently referencing historical events and figures (such as the memorial room of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the city museum in Bitola and the memorial museum in the village of Kodzadzik (Debar), the birthplace of Hafız Ahmet Efendi, Atatürk's father) and promoting traditional music, dance, and cuisine (like baklava, tulumba, and trilece). These types of suggestions include reinforcement of positive narratives to better understand various historical achievements and cultural richness of the Ottoman legacy, thus creating a trigger sense of excitement that encourages visitors to explore an OH route. This approach aligns with the findings of Houliston et al. (2021) who underpin that by understanding and applying such strategies one may better appreciate the role of tourism in constructing and shaping the perception over cultural heritage.

The same group of respondents also notes that the revival of OH is a strategy employed by Türkiye to expand its regional influence and strengthen ties with North Macedonia, a former Ottoman territory. They agree that such strategic positioning enables Türkiye to enhance its international standing.

However, respondents agree that economic interests are a key motive behind the increased visibility of neo-Ottomanism. They specifically point to the creation of new markets and the strengthening of economic ties with North Macedonia as primary drivers. Additionally, they recognize the potential of utilizing Ottoman cultural heritage to boost tourism and economic growth. They also express concerns about the potential for commercialization to lead to exploitation and commodification, raising challenges related to preserving the

physical integrity of cultural heritage sites, such as restoration work or preventive maintenance for tourism purposes. This aligns with Luke's (2013) observation that the preservation of cultural heritage is often a contested issue, with various groups vying for control over heritage sites and their interpretation.

Respondents emphasize the need for extensive design work, including relief, restoration, and structural strengthening, on the sampled cultural sites. While some buildings are in relatively good condition, they appear neglected and lack functionality. Thus, additional interventions are necessary to adequately protect these sites.

In this line, respondents with a consensus highlight the importance of legal frameworks to support the rehabilitation and preservation of cultural heritage. This refers to establishing laws and regulations to protect cultural heritage sites, such as prohibiting unauthorized construction or excavation. Half of respondents (nine out of 17) being historians of art and councilors for conservation, state that restoration and preventive maintenance work of the physical integrity of cultural heritage sites, should be included in these legal frameworks. Additionally, university professors and tour guides highlight the importance of raising public awareness about cultural heritage to foster respect and understanding. They also open the discussion on engaging local communities in managing cultural heritage sites to support and ensure their sustainable use. This aligns with Vodenska's (2018) findings on the importance of local communities in sustainable tourism development.

All respondents agree on the need for increased local, regional, and national funding, as well as international support in terms of knowledge sharing and resource allocation. They also note the potential of the identified Ottoman landmarks to offer unique cultural experiences if promoted as key attractions, aligning with the findings of Patuelli et al. (2013). Currently, the mapped sites lack adequate promotion of their authentic and cultural experience they may provide, which prevents them from being visible and visited.

Respondents also agree that landmarks possess authenticity, which is a fundamental criterion for heritage tourism and conservation. This relationship is extensively elaborated in the work of Wang et al. (2015), Katahenggam (2020), and Hassan and Ekiz (2021). Despite their authenticity and historic value, the mapped potential attractions are generally not officially recognized as protected sites. An exception is the Argulicki Bridge in Kratovo (Northeast region), which is listed as a national cultural heritage site in 2012 (Ministry of Culture 2012). Many of these buildings are currently underutilized, except for the Kadin Aga Mosque, which serves as an active religious facility, and the Bedesten, which functions as an exhibition space (both located in Shtip, East region). Additionally, there is poor, or no signage indicating how to drive or walk to these sites. Generally, they are not included in local or regional tourist maps and are rarely or never listed for tour guiding.

All respondents agree that these landmarks should be recognized as cultural heritage due to their association with a significant period in the country's history. This confirms the observation made by Sautter and Leisen (1999) that a variety of aspects, including buildings, history, religion, and folklore, are frequently preserved and revitalized at Ottoman historic sites. On the other hand, many of these identified locations possess only historical significance and may not necessarily have direct economic benefits. However, there is a strong un-

derstanding of the potential for OH sites to contribute to local and regional development if they are valued for tourism.

5. Conclusion

This research explores the potential for OH tourism by developing new tourism routes in the Northeast, East, and Southeast regions of North Macedonia. Data is collected through interviews with tourism experts who utilize their professional knowledge and spatial intuition to map attractions associated with the Ottoman legacy.

The findings reveal that the sampled regions contain numerous architectural sites dating back to the Ottoman period, each possessing significant cultural and historical value. However, these sites are currently underutilized and undervalued in tourism. The study identifies an opportunity to transform these sites into tourist attractions and connect them to comprehensive tourism itineraries.

Key conclusions from the study include:

Identification of key landmarks: The research shortlists 19 Ottoman landmarks suitable for tourism, concentrated in three cities: Kratovo (11 sites) in the Northeast region, Shtip (five sites) in the East region, and Strumica (three sites) in the Southeast region.

Development of a regional itinerary: A new regional itinerary is mapped, to integrate these OH sites into a cohesive tourism product.

Perceptions of OH tourism formation: The study summarizes perception of OH tourism development, emphasizing the sites' authenticity, aesthetics, architectural significance, historical value, and educational potential. These landmarks, rich in legends, myths, and stories, are well-suited for presentation as tourism products within a tourist route. The study also reveals slight indications of heritage dissonance, but only in the stages of denial and defense against cultural difference (Bennett 1993).

The research also highlights that the identified landmarks are often overlooked in local, regional, and national strategic tourism documents. Despite their potential, there is an urgent need to maintain, protect, and preserve the Ottoman legacy. The cultural value of these sites is of exceptional importance for both present and future generations, besides numerous identified challenges for preserving their cultural identity.

The proposed regional itinerary offers new opportunities for tourism dynamics in the sampled regions. By introducing unique experiences for specific target groups, a more proactive approach could generate multiplier effects and benefits for service providers. Respondents emphasized the necessity of government support for the conservation of the Ottoman legacy in the identified locations. They pointed to the lack of a long-term tourism development strategy and highlighted the need to create sustainable practices that acknowledge the value of these landmarks. The protection of cultural sites identified as strategically important at the local or regional level should be elevated to national significance. Respondents strongly argued that policymakers should allocate funds to preserve the Ottoman legacy, ensuring the transmission of this common historical and cultural heritage to future generations.

The study reveals a fragmented and uncoordinated tourism supply at the local and regional levels, insufficient for fully uncovering the potential of the

Ottoman legacy. The proposed thematic regional route offers a promising starting point for initiating heritage tourism development. While the concept of developing a specific tourism product based on cultural and historical heritage has been previously introduced in the East region (Center for Development of the East Planning Region of Macedonia 2015), significant progress has yet to be made. To fully realize the potential of OH tourism, national recognition of Ottoman history is crucial.

The research also indicates that the formation of heritage tourism based on the identified Ottoman landmarks is still in its early stages. However, respondents believe that it is rapidly progressing toward the maturity phase, largely due to the growing awareness of the need to protect cultural heritage. A significant challenge identified in the study is the lack of effective monitoring and control mechanisms at all levels to implement responsible policies for cultural heritage management.

This research acknowledges several limitations that present opportunities for future investigation:

The study is constrained by a relatively small number of respondents focusing exclusively on the supply side of cultural tourism. This narrow focus overlooks the perspectives of demand and the mediating factors that influence tourism dynamics.

The interview process employed a limited set of research items, which suggests that there is considerable potential for expanding the scope of inquiry. A follow-up study with broader and a more sophisticated set of questions psychologically tailored questions may provide deeper insights into the complexities of OH tourism.

Methodologically, the quantification of the interview results relied on the subjective judgment of the researcher concerning the attitude of each respondent, its mood and disposition during direct questioning. Future research may benefit from incorporating free forms of explorative conversations which may provide a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

The study maps new tourism routes for only three regions. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Ottoman legacy in North Macedonia, future research may extend its scope to include cultural sites across other regions of the country.

Despite limitations, the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the identity of the Ottoman legacy in North Macedonia and its potential for tourism development, so it also carries significant practical implications. For tourism policymakers and stakeholders, it provides critical insights, encouraging a re-evaluation of current approaches and a shift toward more effective management strategies. Additionally, the study generates conceptual models for developing OH tourism routes, enabling destination marketers to fully capitalize on the authentic, aesthetic, architectural, historical, and educational value of the mapped sites. These three regionally dispersed cities have prospects for interconnectivity and future expansion with additional OH locations. Beyond the theoretical framework of spatial distribution of routes, the study integrates a practical dimension by mapping the proposed routes. As a result, it advocates for the creation of new routes as a fundamental component of regional tourism supply. In that line, the study urges local, regional, and national authorities to foster a more proactive mindset among tourism policymakers, which can be

achieved through a strategic change in perception. This proactive stance will ensure the long-term preservation of OH and its sustainable development as a valuable tourism resource. Finally, the research highlights the importance of understanding diverse perspectives on Ottoman heritage to inform policies related to intercultural understanding. New routes may attract tourists interested in OH, contributing to economic growth in the region, along with promoting the preservation and protection of OH sites.

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Data availability

All of the data that support the findings of this study are available in the main text or Supplementary Information.