

## Preserving a Lost Legacy: The Destruction of Ottoman Cultural Heritage in Elbasan, Albania

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### Abstract

This study examines the historical, architectural, and cultural legacy of Ottoman rule in Elbasan, Albania, and highlights the city's transformation from fortified town to thriving trade hub during this period. With a focus on the partnership between the Ottoman Empire and Albania, the study explores Elbasan's Ottoman urban design, architectural features, economic activity, and social life, and what remains of it today. Analysing primary and secondary sources, the study underscores the importance of conserving Ottoman heritage, and offers insights into the challenges that face historical landmarks as a result of neglect, destruction, and modern urbanisation. It then provides recommendations for documenting, preserving, and restoring these structures to maintain their cultural identity and heritage. This interdisciplinary study deepens our understanding of the Ottoman influence on Elbasan, and its enduring impact on the city's cultural environment, while advocating for enhanced heritage awareness and collaborative conservation efforts for future generations.

**Key words:** Ottoman heritage, Elbasan architecture, historical legacy, urban transformation, cultural preservation

## Introduction

The cultural and architectural heritage of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, including Albania, offers a glimpse into the rich history and influence of this once-mighty colonial power. The post-Ottoman era saw a transformation in attitudes toward this heritage, however, which led to the neglect or destruction of its historical structures. This study explores the complex relationship between Ottoman architecture and Albania's cultural evolution, with a focus on Elbasan. It also examines the city's development during and after the Ottoman period, by assessing its architectural transformations and socio-economic impacts.

In the Balkans, Ottoman architectural design is marked by simplicity combined with monumental forms. The style features practical and systematic layouts for easy construction and distinct aesthetic principles, and reached its peak in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Cities like Edirne, Skopje, and Plovdiv showcase this evolution in specific remarkable constructions.<sup>1</sup> The Ottoman architectural legacy in the Balkans is vast, and encompasses civil and religious structures that reflect the empire's territorial expansion and cultural influence. This rich architectural heritage includes mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, tombs, public buildings, and hammams (Turkish baths).<sup>2</sup> Notably, functional structures such as caravanserais and hammams often surpassed religious edifices in scale, which highlights their practical importance. Ekrem Hakki Ayverdi's work highlights the extensiveness and diversity of such architecture, and documents nearly 20,000 buildings of various sizes constructed during the Ottoman era across the Balkans.<sup>3</sup>

During the Ottoman period, Albania saw the construction of numerous structures, including religious, social, institutional, and military buildings. The Communist regime then brought widespread destruction, and many historical monuments were demolished. Today, only a fraction of these cultural treasures remains, a fact that constitutes a significant loss for Albania's historical and cultural identity. Although cities throughout Albania faced similar challenges during the Communist era, Elbasan was particularly affected, as it was the site of industrialisation projects that included the construction of factories. This drastically altered Elbasan's urban and cultural landscape, and erased much of its historical identity.

To analyse these changes, the study uses a comprehensive methodology, which includes data collection through archival drawings, historical maps, site visits, photographic evidence, and direct observation of the remaining architecture. Using Elbasan as a case study, the research sheds light on the broader impact of

1 Machiel Kiel, *Studies on the Ottoman Architecture of the Balkans: A Legacy in Stone* (Hampshire: Variorum Gower House, 1990).

2 Raif Vırımcı, *Kosova'da Osmanlı Mimari Eserleri I* (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1999).

3 Kiel, *Studies on the Ottoman Architecture of the Balkans: A Legacy in Stone*.

urban destruction on Albanian cities and emphasises the urgent need to preserve this shared heritage for future generations.

## The Ottoman-Albanian Relationship

The Ottoman-Albanian alliance began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and strengthened over time. By 1415, the Ottomans had taken control of cities such as Kruja and Shkodra, extending their rule with the capture of Berat, Vlora, and Kanina in 1417.<sup>4</sup> In 1466, Sultan Mehmet II established the city of Elbasan as the centre of a new sanjak, which included the regions of Shpat and Cermenika.<sup>5</sup> The expansion continued, and by 1501, Durrës and other key cities in southern Albania fell under Ottoman rule. The empire further consolidated its hold with the creation of sanjaks in areas such as Ohri, Shkodra, and Dukagjin.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in 1571, the Ottoman Empire asserted full dominion over Albania,<sup>7</sup> a state of affairs that persisted for nearly four centuries, only ending in 1912 when Albania declared its independence.

## Ottoman Heritage in Albania

The Ottomans left an indelible mark on various aspects of Albanian society, culture, and urban development. In the pre-Ottoman era, Albanian cities were predominantly confined within the protective walls of fortresses, but with the establishment of Ottoman rule they began to extend beyond the confines of the castle walls, giving rise to a new kind of district known as a “varosh”.<sup>8</sup> From the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Albania was characterised by the construction of numerous structures that spanned social, cultural, commercial, religious, and educational domains. Two distinctive styles of mosques arose: early Ottoman rectangular mosques with traditional roofs and painted wooden ceilings, typified by the King Mosque in Elbasan and Sultan II Bayezid Mosque in Berat;<sup>9</sup> and monumental

4 Ilir Rruqa, “Arnavutluk’ta İslâm – Hristiyanlık Karşılaşması 1385-1600,” Doctoral Thesis (Çanakkale: Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi, 2016).

5 Machiel Kiel, *Ottoman Architecture in Albania, 1385–1912* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2012).

6 Edmond Manhasa, “The Existing Mosques Built During the Ottoman Empire Period in Albania”, Master Thesis (Istanbul: Istanbul Technical University, 2005).

7 Kiel, *Ottoman Architecture in Albania, 1385-1912*.

8 Zija Shkodra, *Qyteti Shqiptar Gjatë Rilindjes Kombëtare* (Tirana: Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, 1984).

9 Roald Hysa, *The History of Civic Mosques in Albania: The Mosques of Tirana* (Tirana: Kokonozi Mosque, 2008).

mosques, exemplified by the Mirahor Ilyas Bey Camii.<sup>10</sup> Bektashism is prevalent in Albania, as evidenced by the Sinan Pasha Tekke in Elbasan and Baba Ali Tekke in Kruje.<sup>11</sup>

Although tomb markers are relatively scarce, those that are present exhibit diverse designs, including square prism-shaped mausoleums and octagonal shrines. Commercial and communal life in Ottoman Albania was anchored by khans, bedestens, and bazaars, such as those in Görice, Akçahisar, and Shkodra.<sup>12</sup> Education was facilitated by madrasas and other schools, of which Albania had 111 and 28 respectively during the Ottoman period.<sup>13</sup>

Fortresses, such as the one in Elbasan, held historical significance as Ottoman strongholds; Ottoman hammams were present in most cities; and clock towers and fountains enhanced the architectural heritage of major Albanian urban centres.<sup>14</sup> The Ottomans also left a lasting mark on Albanian infrastructure, through the construction of numerous bridges, particularly in mountainous regions.<sup>15</sup> This diverse architecture bears witness to the enduring cultural and historical significance of Ottoman influence in Albania. According to Ayverdi's comprehensive study, more than 1,015 structures from this era have been documented, concentrated in towns that were crucial sanjak administrative centres.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1967 caused the closure and devastation of all religious buildings, and inflicted the most substantial harm upon Ottoman architectural landmarks. Hysa's evaluation<sup>17</sup> reveals that the country initially had 1,127 mosques; from 1945, however, these structures were repurposed, demolished, or replaced by educational institutions, entertainment spaces, or residential complexes.<sup>18</sup> With the advent of democracy in the country after 1990, the right to belief and manifestation was restored, and places of worship were reopened, albeit often in a structurally poor condition. In the 30 years since, some mosques have been restored, as have several hammams. The clock towers remain unaltered, and are preserved throughout Albania.

10 Aleksandër Meksi, *Xhamitë e Shqipërisë shek. 15-19* (Tirana: AIITC, 2015).

11 Sulejman Dashi, "Teqetë e Shqipërisë Aspekte të Historisë dhe të Arkitekturës", in *Perla-1*, (1999), pp. 96-108.

12 Metin Uçar, "Arnavutluk'taki Osmanlı Dönemi Mimarisinden Süsleme", Doctoral Thesis (Kastamonu: University of Kastamonu, 2013).

13 Ekrem Hakki Ayverdi, *Avrupa'da Osmanlı Mimari Eserleri Bulgaristan-Yunanistan-Arnavudluk*, Vol. IV (Istanbul: Istanbul Fetih Cemiyeti, 1979).

14 Uçar, "Arnavutluk'taki Osmanlı Dönemi Mimarisinden Süsleme".

15 Valter Shtylla, *Roads and Bridges in Albania* (Tirana: Albanian National Foundation, 1997).

16 Ayverdi, *Avrupa'da Osmanlı Mimari Eserleri Bulgaristan-Yunanistan-Arnavudluk*, 1979.

17 Hysa, *The History of Civic Mosques in Albania: The Mosques of Tirana*, 2008.

18 Ali Raza Soomro and Brunilda Basha, "Et'hem Bey Mosque, Tirana: A Sparkle of Islamic Architecture in Albania", *Science International Lahore*, 26:3 (2014), pp. 1379-1389.

## Elbasan: A Historical Overview

Elbasan's origins trace back to the relics of the ancient, fortified settlement of Skampa, which harks back to the first century BCE. The strategic locale held a commanding position along the Via Egnatia, an essential road that extended from the Appian Way, and connected the harbour of Durazzo with the Byzantine metropolis, Byzantium.<sup>19</sup>

The site was abandoned until the Ottoman Empire established a military camp there, and in 1466 Sultan Mehmet II began a process of urban reconstruction that culminated in an expansive rectangular fortress with impressive trenches and three entrance gates. The stronghold was named Ilj-basan, meaning 'dominant country'. Elbasan was a key element of Ottoman urban civilisation for four centuries, and its strategically advantageous location along commercial and military corridors contributed practically to its demographic growth and comprehensive development.

Under Ottoman administration, Elbasan evolved from a fortified town into a thriving urban centre, characterised by its well-structured urban design that reflected the empire's principles of governance, trade, and cultural influence. The city's layout, main streets, and key landmarks were integral to its function as an administrative centre and thriving trade hub, and were testaments to the impact of Ottoman architectural heritage.

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19 Roberto Benedetto Castiglia and Marco Giorgio Bevilacqua, "The Turkish Baths in Elbasan: Architecture, Geometry and Wellbeing", *Nexus Network Journal*, 10:2 (2008), pp. 307-322.



Figure 1: Via Egnatia in Shkumbini Valley  
(Ceka and Papajani, 1971)



Figure 2: Engraving of Elbasan, Hristofor Zefarović, 1742  
(Coku, 2021)

## Elbasan's Economic and Social Life

As in other Balkan countries, Ottoman rule deeply influenced Albania's urban and architectural structures and left a lasting impact on its cities. Elbasan was a crucial Ottoman trade link between Durrës, the primary commercial port, and the eastern Balkans.<sup>20</sup>

Elbasan's Ottoman urban and architectural features include houses divided by religion and ethnicity, enclosed by high walls with courtyards and gardens. The end of hostilities allowed villagers who had fled the *timars* to enter the city, which led to a population increase both inside and outside the castle walls, and necessitated a new urban structure that allowed urban planning to transform in response to the changing circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

Elbasan's neighbourhoods were self-organised centres of social life, and featured key institutions like mosques, religious schools (*mejtepi*), cemeteries, bakeries, shops, and public squares. The city's population primarily comprised

20 Shkodra, *Qyteti Shqiptar Gjatë Rilindjes Kombëtare*.

21 Zhuljeta Daja, "Zhvillimet urbane të qytetit të Elbasanit në periudha të ndryshme historike", *Revista Albanon*, 2:2 (2020), pp. 36-47.

Albanian natives with a common culture and tradition, but also included small communities with diverse origins, stemming from the Ottoman presence.<sup>22</sup> *Esnafs*, guilds of artisans, craftsmen, and merchants, played a pivotal role in Elbasan's social, economic, and urban life, as they regulated trade, nurtured specialised craftsmanship, and supported cultural traditions and community bonds.<sup>23</sup>

Education in Elbasan was shaped by religious institutions and market-driven initiatives, resulting in a diverse cultural and educational landscape. In addition to religious educational institutions, schools were established to meet market needs, often with the support of wealthy merchants and *esnafi* groups, and flourished in cities thanks to the guilds and civic communities. In 1812, for example, Elbasan's goldsmiths, potters, furriers, and other *esnafi* groups employed a teacher named Argjir to teach their children to read and write.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 3: Elbasan's bazaar on market day (Photo: [http://www.albanianhistory.net/1890\\_Berard/index.html](http://www.albanianhistory.net/1890_Berard/index.html))



Figure 4: The first year of Normal School (Photo: <https://elbasani.org/viti-i-pare-mesimor-i-normales>)

22 Shkodra, *Qyteti Shqiptar Gjatë Rilindjes Kombëtare*.

23 Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, "Identity and Language of the Roma (Gypsies) in Central and Eastern Europe", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Slavic Languages, Identities, and Borders*, John Smith (ed.) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 26-54.

24 Shkodra, *Qyteti Shqiptar Gjatë Rilindjes Kombëtare*.

To summarise: Elbasan's socio-cultural and economic development was closely tied to the presence of *Esnafs*, which regulated trade, preserved craftsmanship, and fostered cultural identity. The city's education system was influenced by religious institutions and market-driven initiatives, while its urban and architectural structures bore the imprint of centuries under Ottoman rule, with neighbourhoods organised around religious and familial affiliations.

## Data and Findings

### *The Destruction of Elbasan's Urban Design*

The Ottoman influence on Elbasan's urban design and architecture was evident in the layout of the city, whose mosques and bazaars transformed it into a bustling trade hub. Elbasan originated and grew around its castle, with residential houses nestled within its protective walls. The city gradually expanded to extend beyond these walls, and its development was facilitated by its strategic location at the crossroads of important commercial and military routes, which led to rapid population growth in the urban centre.<sup>25</sup>

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Elbasan was a bustling and diverse city, with a significant Muslim majority but also the notable presence of Christian and Jewish communities. Evliya Celebi's description from the time highlights the city's vibrant urban life, with its numerous houses, mosques, shops, imarets, and hammams contributing to its thriving economy and cultural richness. He describes Elbasan as having 18 Muslim neighbourhoods, and 10 made up of Christians and Jews, with a total of 1,500 houses, 46 mosques, 900 shops, 3 imarets and 3 hammams.<sup>26</sup> Inside the castle walls, there were 460 one- and two-storey dwellings with tiled roofs. Many such dwellings were built during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which was a time of peace in the region. Traditionally, Elbasan has been described as comprising predominantly low buildings, typically consisting of one or two floors, and often featuring expansive, lush green gardens.

Elbasan neighbourhoods were characterised by their diverse architectural styles and layouts, reflecting the city's various historical and cultural influences. In her study "Zhvillimet urbane të qytetit të Elbasanit në periudha të ndryshme historike" (Urban developments of the city of Elbasan in different historical periods), Zhuljeta Daja explains that the morphological aspects of Elbasan's urban fabric can be categorised into developmental stages: neighbourhoods; mosques;

25 Baçe, et.al., *Historia Arkitektures Shqiptare* (Tirana: Akademia e Shkencave, 1979), p. 404.

26 Kiel, *Ottoman Architecture in Albania, 1385-1912*.

churches; bazaars; plazas and civic buildings (including hans, hammams and public kitchens); and houses.<sup>27</sup>

Religious buildings, such as the mosque, were the main component of Muslim neighbourhood planning, but facilities such as bazaars, kitchens, schools and hammams were also built. These amenities and this kind of urban development were in line with the principles of Islamic city planning, which were also characteristic of the Ottoman city.

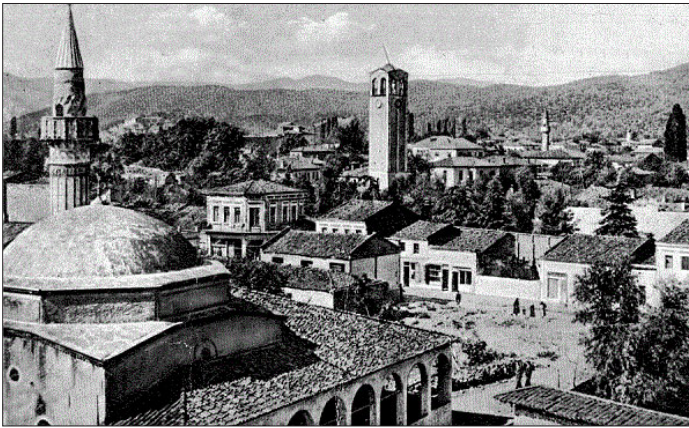


Figure 5: View of Elbasan's centre from Ballie Mosque  
(Photo: [https://archive.org/details/iaps\\_elbasan\\_postcards](https://archive.org/details/iaps_elbasan_postcards))

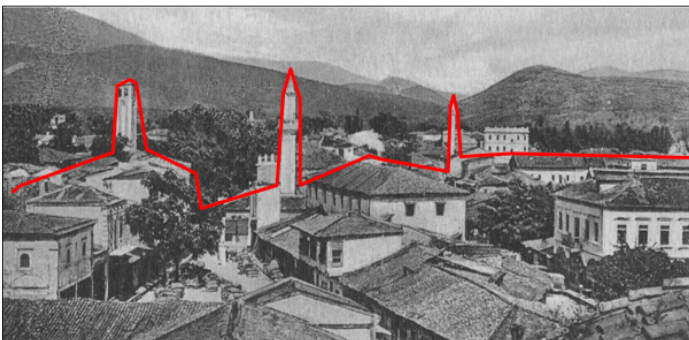


Figure 6: Elbasan's skyline in the 19th century  
(Photo: [https://archive.org/details/iaps\\_elbasan\\_postcards](https://archive.org/details/iaps_elbasan_postcards))

27 Daja, "Zhvillimet urbane të qytetit të Elbasanit në periudha të ndryshme historike", 2020, pp. 36-47.

The illustrated map in Figure 7 provides a comprehensive view of the city’s structure, and highlights the precise locations of religious institutions such as mosques, public structures, cemeteries, and major roadways.

Elbasan’s urban layout reveals a profound connection between social and spiritual aspects, exemplified by the presence of mosques, the commercial life in the bazaar, and distinct residential areas. Each neighbourhood is built around religious landmarks, whether inside the castle walls or beyond. The central bazaar is prominently featured in the heart of the city, and the road systems branching out from the castle’s flat terrain and extending beyond the city walls are clearly delineated. The cemeteries were situated outside the walls, even after the Ottomans left Albania, as evidenced in Jan and Cara Gordon’s writings when they travelled to the city in 1925. The Gordons referred to Elbasan as a “city with a real collection of coins” after seeing the bazaar with its 1,000 stores and the 80,000-inhabitant residential area.<sup>28</sup>

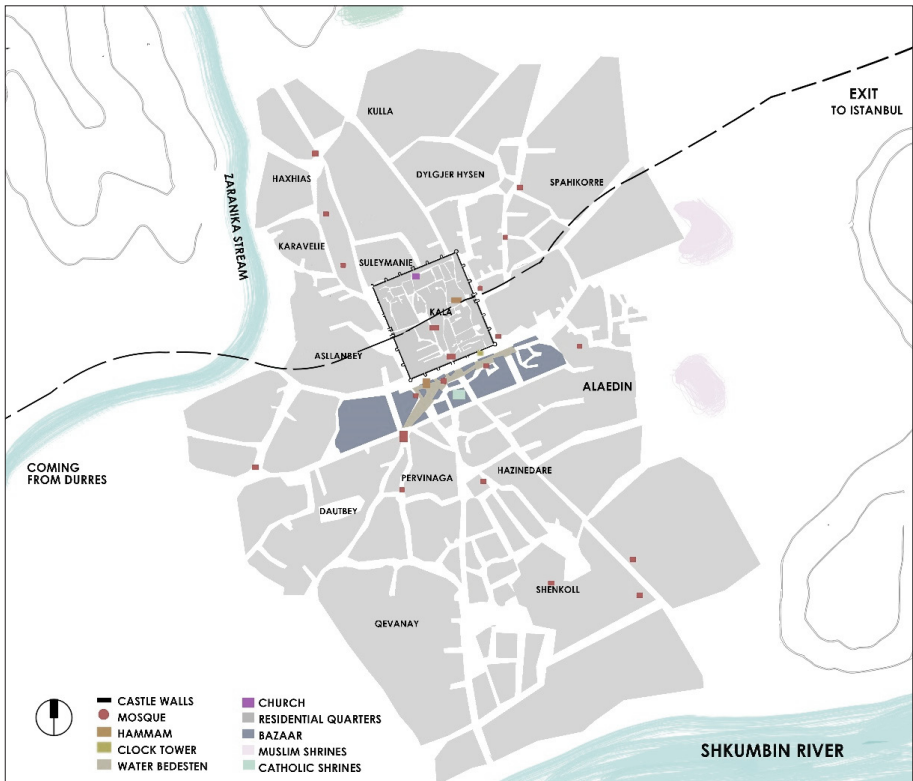


Figure 7: Elbasan in the 19th century  
(By the author, based on an original map file found in Elbasan Digital Archive)

28 Ornela Pasmaqi and Juliana Hasekiu, “The Characteristics of Urban and Architectural Development in Elbasan in the Beginning of the 20th Century”, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, (2014), pp. 5-13.

Elbasan's cityscape has undergone significant transformations over time, gradually losing much of its historical identity as a result of urban development initiatives implemented in different periods. After Albania gained independence in 1912, Elbasan retained much of its Ottoman-era structure, and its urban and cultural life closely resembled those of its Ottoman past.<sup>29</sup> During the early years of independence (1912-1924), no major architectural or urban planning changes occurred, as can be seen in aerial photographs from 1925, which capture the city's unchanged layout.<sup>30</sup>

From 1924 to 1943, modernisation (under Ahmet Zogu's rule) and Italian influence brought significant changes. Infrastructure projects, such as roads that connected Elbasan to Tirana and Durrës, were funded by Italian loans. Iconic buildings, including the town hall (1926), national cinema, and Modern Hotel, reflected Italian architectural contributions, while the economy diversified with new factories that produced oil, soap, and tobacco products, alongside those that created traditional artisanal trades<sup>31</sup>.



Figure 8: Elbasan city looking towards the bazaar from above, Edwin Jacques, 1930. (Photo: [https://archive.org/details/iaps\\_elbasan\\_postcards](https://archive.org/details/iaps_elbasan_postcards))



Figure 9: Teatri Skampa built in 1935. (Photo: <https://javanews.al/volpone-cel-sezonin-artistik-ne-teatrin-skampa/>)

Radical transformations occurred during the Communist regime (1944-1990), which had a severe impact on Ottoman architecture. Following the Soviet model, centralised urban planning focused on state-owned housing, public amenities, and industrial development. The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s led to the

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- 29 Daja, "Zhvillimet urbane të qytetit të Elbasanit në periudha të ndryshme historike" (2020), pp. 36-47.  
 30 Roberto Pierini, "The Town Over XX Century – Recovering and Improving Elbasan Fortress: An Albanian Citadel from Via Egnatia to n. 8 Trans-European Transport Network", *Pisa University Press* (2008), pp. 39-52.  
 31 Mitrojorgji, M., & Mitrojorgji, J. "Elbasani, Identiteti i Humbur i një Qyteti", *Monumentet*, 2014, Vol. 52.

demolition or repurposing of many religious and historical structures, including mosques and the central bazaar, which were replaced by landmarks like the Skampa Hotel and a sports palace. Industrialisation peaked in the 1970s with the construction of the Metallurgical Complex, transforming Elbasan into a heavily industrialised city. By the 1980s, communal housing blocks dominated the skyline, obscuring green spaces and historical urban axes.<sup>32</sup>

Today, Elbasan is one of Albania's largest cities, with a population of approximately 141,715.<sup>33</sup> Unregulated construction and rapid urban expansion since the 1990s, however, have significantly eroded its Ottoman heritage. While a few landmarks, such as the Naziresha Mosque, King Mosque, Clock Tower, and parts of the castle walls remain preserved within the historic core, most Ottoman-era structures are now fragmented relics, disconnected from the modern urban fabric. Once renowned for its gardens and a skyline defined by minarets and cypress trees, the city is now dominated by high-rise buildings and modern architectural styles.

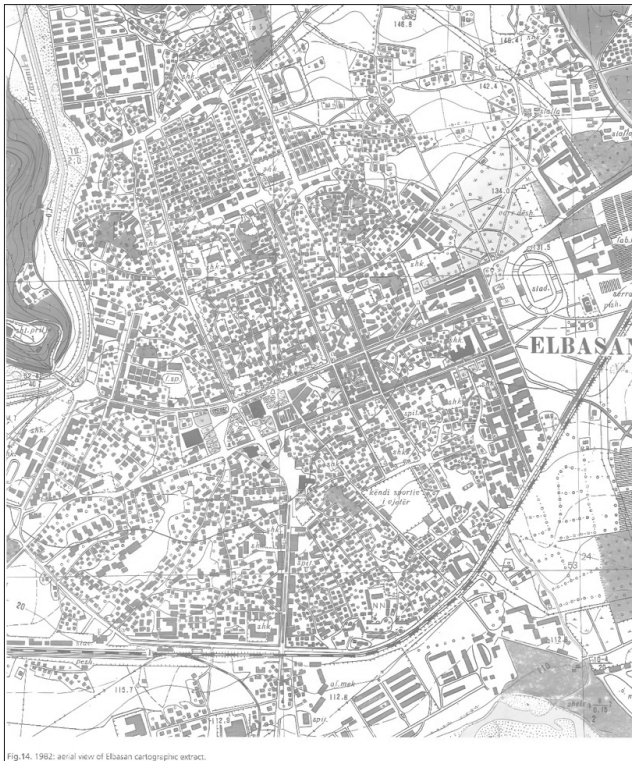


Figure: 10: An aerial view of Elbasan in 1982 (Pierini, 2008)

32 Daja, "Zhvillimet urbane të qytetit të Elbasanit në periudha të ndryshme historike" (2020), pp. 36-47.

33 AZ Nation, "Population of Elbasan 2024", <https://www.aznations.com/population/al/cities/elbasan>, accessed 15 May 2024.

This transformation has replaced its tranquil charm with dense construction, industrial dominance, and environmental challenges. Despite notable infrastructure improvements, Elbasan's fragmented historical identity highlights the urgent need for balanced urban planning that preserves its cultural heritage while accommodating modernisation.



Figure 11: The Sport Palace  
(Photo: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomorr\\_Sinani\\_Sports\\_Palace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomorr_Sinani_Sports_Palace))



Figure 12: Elbasan Metallurgical Complex  
(Photo: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/peamasher/8062528712>)

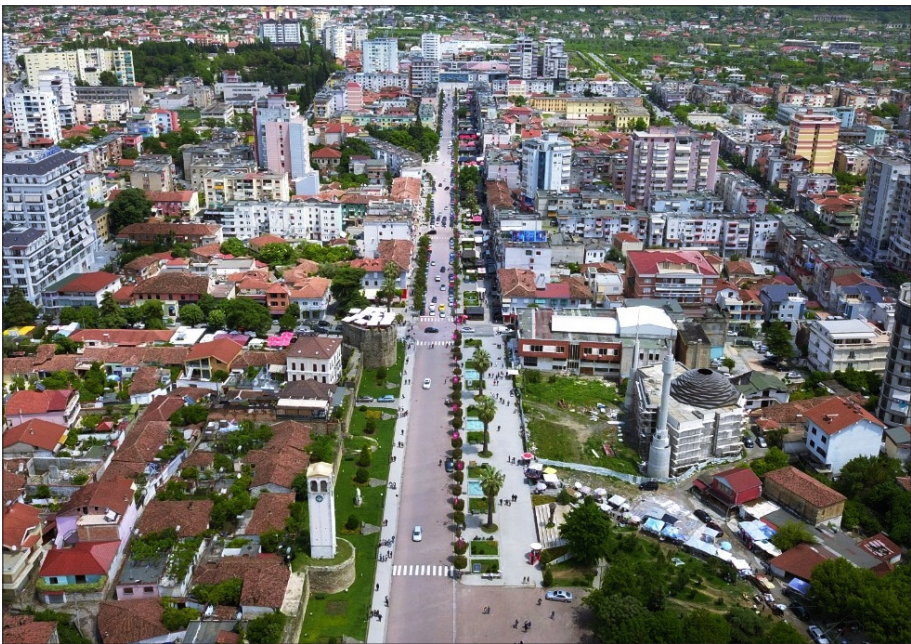


Figure 13: This view of Elbasan's centre reveals significant changes, including the absence of the former bazaar, the reconstruction of the Ballie Mosque, the removal of other mosques, and only a partial remnant of the castle wall  
(Photo: <https://elbasanikult.wordpress.com/>).

## *The Destruction of Ottoman Architectural Heritage*

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of nation-states in the Balkans brought profound changes to the perception of Ottoman heritage. In many cases, Ottoman-era structures were destroyed or neglected as new states sought to assert their identities. In Albania, where over a thousand Ottoman buildings were constructed, only a fraction of these structures survives today, with the exact number still under debate.

According to Yenişehirlioğlu,<sup>34</sup> 37 Ottoman-era buildings have been preserved in Albania. Research by Uçar,<sup>35</sup> however, identifies 117 partially or fully surviving structures, a number that may be higher, as some elements, like fountains, remain unaccounted for in Uçar's findings. Elbasan's *bedesten* fountain still exists, for example, alongside several bridges that were overlooked in previous records.

In Elbasan, Ottoman architectural production was extensive, and encompassed mosques, tekkes, fountains, hammams, and fortresses. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the city had 46 mosques, as recorded by Evliya Celebi,<sup>36</sup> while in 1930 Lef Nosi<sup>37</sup> documented 31. Since then, only two – the King Mosque (Fig. 14) and Naziresha Mosque (Fig. 15) – have retained their original forms. Others, such as the Ballie Mosque (Figs. 16 and 17) and Pasha Mosque (Figs. 18 and 19), have been newly built in modern architectural styles, with their geographical locations the only unchanged feature.

Most of Elbasan's mosques were demolished entirely. Those lost to destruction include the Tower Mosque, Sufiona Mosque, Hamam Mosque, Adil Beu Mosque, Bazaar Mosque, Aga Mosque, Idrait Mosque, Tabak Mosque, Hasan Pasha Mosque, Hazinedar Mosque, Namazgahu Mosque, Gjurma Mosque, Mushka Mosque, Çausllia Mosque, Zaranika Mosque, Bodor Skënder Mosque, Sinan Beu Mosque, Naskolli Mosque, Dylgjer Hysen Mosque, Olive Mosque, Haxhi Hasan Mosque, Sulejmania Mosque, Safi Korre Mosque, Haxhi Hafiz Mosque, Bobolla Mosque, Sejdine Mosque, and the Doorless Mosque. These mosques, once integral to the city's religious and cultural landscape, were reduced to ruins, and now exist only in memory.

34 Yenişehirlioğlu, *Ottoman Architectural Works Outside Turkey* (Ankara: T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 1989).

35 Uçar, "Arnavutluk'taki Osmanlı Dönemi Mimarisinden Süsleme".

36 Robert Elsie, *Early Albania, a Reader of Historical Texts, 11th-17th Centuries* (Wiesbaden, 2003), pp. 195-218.

37 Kiel, *Ottoman Architecture in Albania, 1385-1912*, p. 153



Figure 14: King Mosque  
(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)



Figure 15: Naziresha Mosque  
(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)



Figure 16: The original Ballie Mosque  
(Photo: <https://adsh.al/s/adsh/item/23572#lg=1&slide=0>)



Figure 17: Ballie Mosque rebuilt  
(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)



Figure 18: The original Pasha Mosque  
(Photo: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2382816198672070&set=a.1438818959738470>)

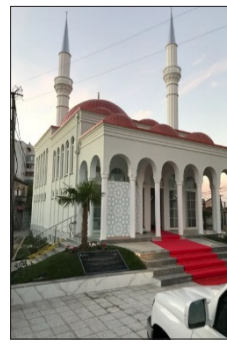


Figure 19: Pasha mosque rebuilt  
(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)



Figure 20: Aga mosque in ruins  
(Photo: <https://adsh.al/s/adsh/item/8061#lg=1&slide=1>)

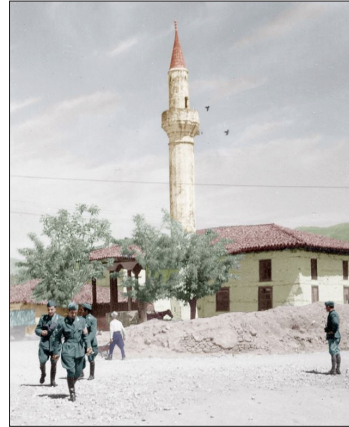


Figure 21: Tabaket Mosque in ruins  
(Photo: <https://adsh.al/s/adsh/item/8106#lg=1&slide=0>)

Many tekkes (Sufi lodges) were also demolished, including the tekke of Father Hamid, which was built in 1862. The tekke functioned until 1967, when part of it was destroyed by the monist state after the legal prohibition of religion in Albania. Since the 1990s, the building has been completely demolished, and unauthorised construction has taken place on its site. Elbasan's primary tekke, Teqja e Madhe, has been meticulously restored and is now the city's central Bektashi edifice (Fig. 22).



Figure 22: Elbasan's main tekke  
(Photo: <https://kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.org/teqe-e-madhe-e-elbasanit-sot-218-vjet-nga-themelimi/>)

In 1970, Elbasan's bazaar was demolished and replaced with the new city plaza. The bazaar was more than just a market; it was the heart of Elbasan's social and economic life, where people gathered, traded goods, and connected with one another. Its destruction marked a significant loss for the city's cultural and daily life (see Figures 23 and 24).



Figure 23: Zef Kolombi, *View of the Bazaar*

(Photo: <http://www.albanianart.net/painting/kolombi/>)



Figure 24: The bazaar site, which is now a plaza

(Photo: <https://elbasanikult.wordpress.com/>)

Of the 430 fountains documented by Elsie, only two have survived to this day. The fountain known as *pusi qe lahet vete* (the self-cleaning well) has been reconstructed by its owner, while Bezistan Water Fountains, and has been declared a monumental structure. Regrettably, all other water fountains and taps, including the Mimar Mehmet Aga fountain and the taps at the entrance of the castle (which had been reconstructed), have been demolished.



Figure 25: Bezistan Water Fountain

(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)

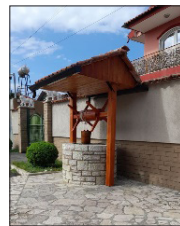


Figure 26: Pusi qe lahet vete

(Photo: B. Dylgjeri, 2023)

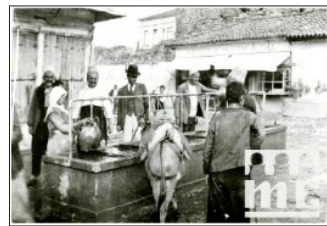


Figure 27: Tabaket tap, which has since been demolished.

(Photo: <https://adsh.al/adsh/item/17099#lg=1&slide=0>)

The destruction of bridges, *namazgahs* (prayer areas), and Muslim cemeteries has left a significant void in Elbasan's historical landscape. Among the losses were the city's caravanserai buildings, once vital to trade and travel, and which historical records confirm existed as early as 1591. As Caka notes, the hans of Elbasan had different fates over time. Isa Hafiz Kamer Han, for example, was repurposed as a public hospital in 1924, while Bayraktar Han was demolished in 1915, and Xhem Jaho Han was a storehouse between 1949 and 1950, before its eventual destruction. One particularly notable inn, Haxhi Sinan Han, uniquely functioned as a synagogue at one point, as evidenced by a six-pointed star etched on its walls. It remained a significant landmark until its demolition in 1950. Similarly, Suvariaj Han, originally a shelter for horses, was lost to demolition in 1915.<sup>38</sup> These losses highlight the substantial erosion of Elbasan's rich Ottoman-era heritage.

In addition to the demolitions, several structures in Elbasan have been left abandoned and neglected, particularly hammams. Two notable examples, the Castle Hammam and the Bazaar Hammam, remain structurally intact. Bazaar Hammam is partially utilised, while Castle hammam has been entirely abandoned, reflecting the lack of consistency in preservation efforts.

In contrast, the clock tower is a well-preserved example of Ottoman heritage. It has undergone multiple restorations over the years, and maintained its historical integrity with only minor alterations to its upper section. The clock tower continues to function today, as a rare testament to Elbasan's architectural legacy that has withstood the challenges of time and neglect.



Figure 28: Castle Hammam  
(Photo: Bajraktari, 2024)



Figure 29: Bazaar Hammam  
(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)



Figure 30: Clock tower  
(Photo: Author, 2 June 2023)

38 Eduart Caka, "Vakëfjet dhe ndikimi i tyre social në Shqipërinë e periudhës osmane", *Botimet Albanologjike*, (2021).

## Conclusion

The cultural and architectural heritage of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, including Albania, reflects a rich and vibrant history. Unfortunately, much of this heritage has been neglected or destroyed over time, as new eras brought changing priorities and attitudes. This study focused on the deep connection between Ottoman architecture and Elbasan's cultural evolution, and explored how the city grew and transformed during and after the Ottoman period.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Elbasan flourished as a thriving hub of trade, religion, and culture, and its mosques, bazaars, and vibrant social life embodied Ottoman urban planning. Over the years, however, many of these structures were lost, particularly during the Communist era, when modernisation efforts and urban development replaced historical buildings with modern ones.

Today, only fragments of Elbasan's rich Ottoman legacy remain, such as the King Mosque, Naziresha Mosque, and parts of the castle walls. The loss of these historical landmarks has significantly altered the city's identity.

Preserving what remains of Elbasan's Ottoman heritage is essential to honour its past and inspire future generations. Some important steps include:

- *Research and Documentation:* Identify and study the remaining Ottoman-era structures, and create a detailed record of their history and condition.
- *Restoration and Preservation:* Protect key buildings and restore them wherever possible to ensure they remain part of the city's landscape.
- *Creative Reuse:* Repurpose structures like public baths (hammams) to serve modern needs while preserving their historical value.
- *Collaboration:* Working together with experts, local authorities, and the community to find innovative and sustainable solutions for preserving Elbasan's heritage.

By taking these steps, Elbasan can protect its cultural identity and ensure its history is not lost. Preserving Ottoman heritage is not just about saving buildings – it is about keeping the stories and spirit of the city alive for generations to come. Through concerted effort, Elbasan can balance its progress with respect for its past, to create a city that honours both its history and its future.

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# Očuvanje izgubljenog naslijeđa: uništavanje osmanske kulturne baštine u Elbasanu, Albanija

## Sažetak

Ova studija razmatra historijsko, arhitektonsko i kulturno naslijeđe osmanske vlasti u Elbasanu, Albanija, te ističe transformaciju grada iz utvrđenog naselja u prosperitetno trgovačko središte tokom osmanskog perioda. Fokusirajući se na partnerstvo između Osmanskog carstva i Albanije, studija istražuje osmanski urbanistički dizajn Elbasana, arhitektonske karakteristike, ekonomsku aktivnost i društveni život, kao i ono što je od svega toga ostalo danas. Analizirajući primarne i sekundarne izvore, autorica naglašava značaj očuvanja osmanske baštine i nudi uvid u izazove s kojima se suočavaju historijske znamenitosti usljed nemara, uništavanja i savremene urbanizacije. Na kraju su date preporuke za dokumentiranje, očuvanje i obnovu ovih struktura s ciljem očuvanja njihovog kulturnog identiteta i naslijeđa. Ova interdisciplinarna studija produbljuje razumijevanje osmanskog utjecaja na Elbasan i njegov trajni odraz na kulturno okruženje grada, zagovarajući veću svijest o baštini i zajedničke napore na njenom očuvanju za buduće generacije.

**Ključne riječi:** osmanska baština, arhitektura Elbasana, historijsko naslijeđe, urbana transformacija, očuvanje kulture