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The contribution of Ottoman monuments to cultural tourism and local development: Digital practices

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Abstract

The Kemal Atatürk Museum in Thessaloniki is an important tool for attracting tourists and strengthening the local economy. The house-museum has become one of the main tourist attractions of Thessaloniki, with its popularity steadily increasing. In addition to its historical significance, it hosts contemporary events that highlight the cultural influence of the Ottoman era. The research questions of this study are the following: Is there cultural tourism in Thessaloniki because of the Museum? Does the Museum contribute to the local development of Thessaloniki?

Keywords: Kemal Ataturk Museum; Historical Symbol; Local Development Greece-Turkey Relations; Cultural Tourism; Varvarossa

1. Introduction

The Kemal Atatürk Museum, located in Agios Dimitrios Street in Thessaloniki, is housed in the house where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was born in 1881. The building, built at the end of the 19th century, was the residence of the Atatürk family for many years before they moved to Istanbul. The history of the family is inextricably linked to the social and political life of Thessaloniki at that time. In 1935, the house was donated by the Municipality of Thessaloniki to the Turkish Republic and since then it has been used as a museum. The importance of the museum goes beyond Atatürk's later activities and focuses on its significance as a monument that reflected the historical connection between Greece and Turkey during the Ottoman Empire period. (Agtzidis, 2015) (Alexandrou, 2002) (Amygdalou, 2014)

2. Exhibits

The exhibits at the Atatürk Museum in Thessaloniki present a unique opportunity to understand the life of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, one of the most important political leaders of the 20th century. The museum, opened in 1935, houses objects, documents and photographs that shed light on Atatürk's early life in Thessaloniki, as well as his later political career. Original furniture and personal items of his give the museum a special historical character, making it an important place for the preservation of his memory (Maniou et al., 2025)

The renovation that took place in 2012, funded by the Greek and Turkish governments, enhanced the museum experience. The renovation included the creation of contemporary multimedia depicting Atatürk's early life and the role of Thessaloniki as a city of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, it preserved the original Ottoman architecture of the building, enhancing the cultural and historical appeal of the museum. Visitors can enjoy educational programs that frame Atatürk's personal history, emphasizing the museum's connection to the wider history of the city.

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The location of the museum in the Upper City of Thessaloniki, an area famous for its numerous historical monuments, reinforces its symbolism. The area is an attraction both for the local community and for visitors from all over the world who wish to understand the city's role in the historical shaping of Atatürk's personality and, by extension, of modern Turkey.

The museum maintains a dual role: on the one hand, as a place of historical memory and on the other hand, as a symbol of Thessaloniki's cultural heritage (Maniou et al., 2025)

3. The museum as a cultural and historical symbol

The Museum today is a historic building with deep cultural and historical significance for both Thessaloniki and Turkey. The role of the museum as a reference point for Ottoman and Turkish history is extremely important. Through its exhibits, visitors have the opportunity to connect with Atatürk's history and understand his wider historical and cultural role. The museum is also an important part of the historical and cultural identity of Thessaloniki, highlighting the multicultural character of the city and its connection with the Ottoman Empire (Vakalopoulos, 1990), (Vakalopoulos, 1983).

The existence of the museum enhances the cultural heritage of Thessaloniki, keeping its history alive and strengthening the intercultural relations between Greece and Turkey. Its importance transcends the geographical and cultural boundaries of Greece, as it is a powerful symbol of the common history and ties between the two countries. It serves as a meeting point for different cultural and historical narratives. This is particularly important in a city like Thessaloniki, which has been a crossroads of cultures and nationalities throughout time. The history of Thessaloniki, as reflected through it, is an example of the dynamism and resilience of cultural identities that have developed within a context of cultural diversity. The preservation of this historic site and the continuation of its cultural mission is vital for the city and the international community, as it contributes to strengthening historical awareness and promoting peaceful coexistence while enhancing understanding and appreciation of intercultural relations. (Mazower, 2006) (Stuckey, 2019)

The Kemal Atatürk Museum presents a unique set of challenges for the promotion of cultural development in Thessaloniki. One of the most important challenges is the historical and political sensitivity surrounding the figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Greece. As the founder of modern Turkey, Atatürk's legacy is a point of pride for Turkish visitors, but can provoke mixed reactions in some segments of the Greek population due to the shared and sometimes contested history between the two nations (Tzanelli, 2012). This historical tension may complicate efforts to promote the museum purely as a tourist attraction, as it requires careful consideration of Greek-Turkish relations and local sentiments.

Another challenge concerns the wider context of the museum's promotion in a highly competitive tourist environment. Thessaloniki, with its rich cultural and historical heritage, is competing with other European cities for international attention. The Kemal Atatürk Museum, although important, must find ways to distinguish itself among numerous attractions. Moreover, limited financial resources and lack of continued investment in infrastructure could hinder the museum's potential to maximize its cultural and economic impact (Katsoni et al., 2016).

The Kemal Atatürk Museum offers important opportunities for the cultural development of Thessaloniki. One of the primary opportunities lies in its ability to promote intercultural understanding between Greece and Turkey. The museum acts as a cultural bridge between the two nations, given its historical importance and the increasing flow of Turkish visitors to Thessaloniki. By organizing bilateral cultural events, exhibitions and academic exchanges, the museum can enhance intercultural dialogue and promote peaceful relations between Greece and Turkey (Maniou et al., 2025)

4. Digital practices

Another opportunity is the integration of digital technologies to improve the visitor experience. The museum could introduce interactive exhibits, virtual reality tours and multilingual guides to appeal to a wider, more diverse audience. These technologies would not only improve accessibility but would allow for the presentation of more nuanced historical content without overwhelming visitors (Fotiadis, 2016). In addition, the use of social media and digital marketing could expand the museum's global reach, making it a key contributor to Thessaloniki's tourism economy. (Maniou et al., 2025) The Kemal Atatürk Museum today has adopted modern digital practices, such as the creation of

virtual tours and the development of digital archives, to reach a wider audience. These innovations allow the museum to transcend its geographic boundaries, offering access to its treasures globally.

The digital approach of the museum attracts the younger generation, who are familiar with new technologies. Through interactive applications and educational programmes, the museum attempts to convey the values of historical memory and cultural heritage to a new audience, thus enhancing the recognition of its historical significance.

5. Contribution to local development -cultural tourism

The Kemal Atatürk Museum is one of the main attractions for Turkish visitors to Thessaloniki, as the historical connection of the site with the founder of modern Turkey makes it an important destination for tourists from the neighbouring country.

The museum's visitor traffic contributes significantly to the local economy through the enhancement of tourism. Visitors often combine their visit to the museum with accommodation in local hotels, eating at local restaurants and shopping at local shops, boosting the local economy. By highlighting the city's Ottoman heritage and its connection to modern Turkey, the museum enhances the international visibility of Thessaloniki as a cultural destination. This cultural heritage attracts not only Turkish visitors, but also tourists from all over the world who are interested in exploring the rich history and culture of the city.(Manola, 2019). (Manola, & Papagrigoriou, 2020).The city of Thessaloniki benefits from the international recognition it receives through the Museum, while local communities are strengthened through tourism-related activity. Tourism development promotes the preservation of cultural resources and increases economic

According to figures, in 2010, the house of Kemal Atatürk was visited by about 25,000 people. In 2011, this number "jumped" to 45,000 (archaiologia.gr), while in 2014 it exceeded 120,000 visitors (inthessaloniki.com).In 2015, on the 77th anniversary of the death of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, more than 2,500-3,000 travelers (www.typosthes.gr) from Turkey visited the museum.According to data from the Turkish Consulate in Thessaloniki, in 2022 a total of 80,000 people visited the museum. This year, by November 10, more than 230,000 visitors have passed through the museum's gate.(skai.gr) In 2023, in the context of the 85th anniversary of the first president of the Turkish Republic, 5,000 Turkish citizens(voria.gr/article) visited the museum to commemorate his memory. The ceremonies were attended by representatives of 140 commercial and industrial enterprises from Izmir, as well as businessmen and members of the city's chamber of commerce, along with students and teachers from various regions of Turkey

The museum plays a crucial role in the wider cultural tourism strategy of Thessaloniki. Tourists, especially from Turkey, are attracted to the city to visit Atatürk's birthplace, while at the same time creating opportunities for increased investment in local tourism infrastructure, including hotels, restaurants and transport services. This influx of visitors may lead to the development of ancillary cultural services, such as guided tours that incorporate other Ottoman- era sites, creating a more integrated cultural tourism experience (Tzanelli, 2012)

6. Cultural diplomacy and bilateral relations

The Kemal Atatürk Museum presents a unique set of challenges for the promotion of cultural development in Thessaloniki. One of the most important challenges is the historical and political sensitivity surrounding the figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Greece. As the founder of modern Turkey, Atatürk is a point of pride for Turkish visitors, but can provoke mixed reactions in some segments of the Greek population due to the shared and sometimes contested history between the two nations (Tzanelli, 2012).

This historical tension may complicate efforts to promote the museum purely as a tourist attraction, as it requires careful consideration of Greek-Turkish relations and local sentiments.(Walton, 2016)

Another challenge concerns the wider context of the museum's promotion in a highly competitive tourist environment. Thessaloniki, with its rich cultural and historical heritage, is competing with other European cities for international attention. The Kemal Atatürk Museum, although important, must find ways to distinguish itself among numerous attractions. Moreover, limited financial resources and lack of continued investment in infrastructure could hinder the museum's potential to maximize its cultural and economic impact (Kavantzoglou, 2012)

Apart from its financial contribution, the museum plays a role in strengthening cultural diplomacy between Greece and Turkey. The cultural ties promoted through tourism at the Kemal Atatürk Museum contribute to the improvement of bilateral relations, as the museum serves as a symbol of shared history and heritage. This form of soft diplomacy allows

both nations to engage in cultural dialogue and cooperation, promoting a more positive relationship between the two countries (Paparrigopoulou, 1998). Furthermore, the collaborative cultural events and exhibitions at the museum attract scholars and cultural diplomats, further cementing Thessaloniki's role as a bridge between Greece and Turkey. (Hlepas, 2021)

In addition, balancing historical accuracy with the need to attract a broad tourist base is another challenge. Efforts to attract visitors should not weaken the complex historical narratives associated with Atatürk's legacy, which is central to the museum's identity. Simplifying museum content for the sake of increasing tourist engagement could risk alienating historically informed visitors, thus creating a delicate balance between accessibility and historical depth (Fotiadis, 2016).

Despite challenges such as navigating historical sensitivities and maintaining a balance between accessibility and historical depth - the museum holds significant opportunities for further promoting Thessaloniki as a cultural hub. With continued investment in cultural diplomacy and the integration of digital technologies, the museum can enhance its role as a centre for both cultural tourism and bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey. (Gkika, 2010) (Hatzisiosif, 2003)

Cultural entrepreneurship, such as guided tours, local businesses inspired by the Ottoman heritage, show how the museum acts as a catalyst for the economy and local development. The regeneration of surrounding areas and the development of tourism infrastructure highlight the museum's potential to promote sustainable local development. (Maniou, 2023b) (Maniou et al, 2024) (Mitoula, & Kaldis, 2018)

The Kemal Atatürk Museum functions as an important space for the promotion of peace and cooperation between Greece and Turkey and as a neutral place where cultural diplomacy activities can be developed, aiming to strengthen the peaceful coexistence of the two peoples. Through joint exhibitions, seminars and cultural exchanges it strengthens the ties between the two countries. (Kavantzoglou, 2012)

The museum's actions aim to deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices, promoting intercultural coexistence. This mission is particularly important at a time when transnational relations are often tested. The museum acts as a crucial factor for peaceful coexistence and cooperation in the region.

Thessaloniki can use the Kemal Atatürk Museum as a platform for international cultural diplomacy, strengthening relations with neighbouring destinations and making the city a central hub for regional development in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean (Maniou, 2024b) (Mitoula, & Economou, 2014)

An important historical figure of the Ottoman Empire that has not yet been exploited in Greece is Barbarossa Hayreddin Barbarossa, one of the most emblematic figures of piracy and Ottoman naval history, originally from Paleokipos in Lesbos, had a career that spanned various regions of the Mediterranean, playing a key role in the Ottoman Empire's control of the region. The creation of a museum exclusively dedicated to Barbarossa could have great tourist and cultural value, given his historical weight as a pirate and Ottoman admiral, as well as the popularity of his figure. Such a museum could include exhibits highlighting the naval technology of the time, the great naval battles in which he participated, and the role of piracy in the political and economic situation of the Mediterranean in the 16th century, and should be located in his birthplace where there is oral history and local literature linking the house and family as well as the present living descendants of Barbarossa. (Mitraras, 2019)

7. The Role of Digital Technologies in entrepreneurship training

The significance of all digital technologies in the field of education, as well as for training and education in cultural entrepreneurship, is finally emphasized. ICTs promote education for all, provide innovative ways to educate instructors effectively, enhance knowledge retention, foster teamwork, increase transparency, develop learner-centered approaches, develop new teaching strategies, and speed up learning. Additionally, offer new resources for representing knowledge and support educational initiatives and approaches through artificial intelligence, mobilization, virtualization, and new learning environments. ICTs are particularly effective and productive in entrepreneurship training; they help and enhance the evaluation, intervention, and educational processes through mobile devices, which make learning activities accessible everywhere [31–32], and through a variety of ICT applications, which are integral to education [33]. The use of AI, STEM, and robotics elevates teaching methods to new heights of flexibility, creativity, and effectiveness [34–35], and games change learning into a multimodal, amiable, and joyful experience [30]. Furthermore, integrating ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence development [37–43] enhances and accelerates educational practices and outcomes, particularly in training for new

business owners and entrepreneurs [44–50]. This puts mental skills at the center of educational procedures and policies.

8. Conclusions

The Kemal Atatürk Museum in Thessaloniki plays a multifaceted role in maintaining historical ties and promoting economic and cultural development. As a key symbol of Greek-Turkish heritage, the museum serves as a bridge between the two nations, promoting intercultural understanding and cooperation. Through tourism, the museum makes a significant contribution to the local economy of Thessaloniki, attracting a significant number of visitors, especially from Turkey. This influx has boosted the development of local businesses, ranging from hospitality services to cultural-themed businesses.

Despite its challenges - such as navigating historical sensitivities and maintaining a balance between accessibility and historical depth - the museum holds significant opportunities for the further promotion of Thessaloniki as a cultural hub. With ongoing cultural diplomacy events and the integration of digital technologies, the museum can enhance its role as a centre for both cultural tourism and bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey.

Today the Museum is a testament to the power of cultural heritage to promote not only economic but also diplomatic progress, positioning Thessaloniki as a city that embraces its multicultural past while promoting development and understanding for the future. Its maintenance and further development is expected to further strengthen the local economy and the city's cultural identity, while improving relations between Greece and Turkey. The museum is shaping the present and future of Thessaloniki, promoting it as a city with a rich Ottoman cultural heritage and international reach.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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