

Modern History and past development of Thessaloniki

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Abstract

Thessaloniki is a significant crossroad between Europe and the near and middle east and has had a complex and fascinating history throughout the centuries. The city was founded in 315 before Christ and has experienced various epochs. The social and urban diversity of Thessaloniki reflects the different influences of these epochs, ranging from Hellenistic ruins to Byzantine churches and Ottoman buildings, making Thessaloniki a melting pot of different cultures and influences. The influence of Greek culture and identity has persisted over time, but traces of other cultures have remained visible in the city.

This paper examines the changes in the urban structure of the city of Thessaloniki over time and analyzes the impact of events such as fires, population changes, and reforms on the city. By taking a comprehensive look at historical events and developments, a better understanding of urban development and the significance of Thessaloniki as a cultural and historical center is achieved.



Fig. 1: The white tower of Thessaloniki (Own depiction, 2023)

1. Introduction

The present study primarily concentrates on the urban history of Thessaloniki from the 19th century onwards, as these historical events directly influenced the city's development. Nevertheless, a brief exploration of the origins and foundations of the city is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between social and urban structures, as well as the societal factors involved.

The city of Thessaloniki (Saloniki) was founded in 315 BC and has always played a vital role as a connecting hub between Europe, parts of Asia, and the northern Balkans. With its early-established roads like the Via Egnatia and its harbor linking the Balkans to the maritime routes of the Eastern Mediterranean, Thessaloniki evolved into a significant center for trade, administration, and culture. Throughout successive epochs of Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman rule, the city's architecture and urban planning were influenced and shaped by these different periods (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011: 493).

2. The Influence of Ottoman Rule on the City

During the 15th century, a large number of Sephardic Jews migrated and settled in Thessaloniki, adding to the city's cosmopolitan character. The Ottoman Empire conquered Thessaloniki in 1430, and the city remained under Ottoman rule until the early 20th century (Yannopoulos et. al 2017: 469). In the 17th century, Thessaloniki emerged as the leading trade center in the Balkans. Until 1869, the city was enclosed by Byzantine walls that had preserved its spatial structure since the 7th century. Within these walls, the inhabitants lived segregated by religion and ethnic background (Yerolymbos 2018). By the early 20th century, Thessaloniki was a diverse city with a population of approximately 150,000 people. Christians, Jews, and Muslims resided in separate neighborhoods. The Turkish population primarily occupied the upper areas of the city, while the Jewish community settled near the docks and the harbor. The Christian population was concentrated along the Via Egnatia and around the cathedral. The commercial sector and the European quarter were located in the western part of the city (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011: 494).

In 1839, under Ottoman rule, reforms were implemented that would have a significant impact and bring about substantial changes in the social structures of Thessaloniki (Papadam n.d.: 5). This series of urban reforms are commonly known as the Tanzimat and as a result, these reforms had significant effects on the form and design of cities and communities within the empire (Strohmeier 2018: 22).

In 1869, the coastal walls were demolished to make way for a spacious waterfront promenade. Over the next two decades, the northern and southern walls were also removed (Yerolymbos 2018). The demolition of the coastal wall marked a turning point in the cityscape and paved the way for the emergence of new neighborhoods both to the west and east of the historical center (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011: 494). During this time, Thessaloniki developed into a modern metropolis within the empire, while still maintaining a religious and conservative atmosphere. Extensive improvements were made to the railway infrastructure and new port and industrial facilities were constructed to strengthen political relations with Western Europe (Papadam n.d.: 5).

The reforms also had an impact on the social structure of the city. The alignment of legislation with European standards and the granting of equal rights to non-Muslims attracted new population groups to the city, including administrators, entrepreneurs, traders, and employees. Despite the modernization efforts, some challenges persisted (Strohmeier 2018: 22), such as economic fluctuations, a lack of social housing, poor sanitary conditions in the city, and the emergence of slums (Yerolymbos 2018).

3. A Sequence of Devastating Catastrophes

However, the balance of power in Thessaloniki was about to shift during the Balkan Wars. In 1912, Thessaloniki was annexed by Greece during the First and Second Balkan Wars, including its strategically important port. At that time, Thessaloniki was a melting pot of various ethnic groups and religions, including Muslims, Jews, and Orthodox Christians. The capture of the city did not initially lead to significant changes in terms of population composition and administrative structures in the religious and political centers (Papadam n.d.: 7). However, a major catastrophe was about to alter the course of Thessaloniki's history in 1917.

A significant turning point in the city's history was the Great Fire on August 18, 1917. This fire destroyed large parts of the city at that time, including a significant portion of the Jewish quarters, resulting in the destruction of 45 synagogues, and devastating much of the historical housing stock, leaving more than 70,000 people homeless (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011: 495). The fire's damage also affected the city's water supply and the distribution network was severely harmed (Yannopoulos et. al 2017: 469). This catastrophe had dire effects on Thessaloniki's society and economy. Traditional Ottoman-era housing and structures were entirely destroyed. The city was thus faced with the challenge of restoring the destroyed areas (Strohmeier 2018: 124).

The renovation of Thessaloniki's historical center in the interwar period after the fire brought about comprehensive spatial and sociopolitical reforms (Yerolymbos 2018). New roads were widened to accommodate increasing traffic, and the city developed into a modern metropolis (Strohmeier 2018: 124). Between 1922 and 1930 extensive measures and large-scale infrastructure projects were implemented (Yannopoulos et. al 2017: 469). The liberal government under Eleftherios Venizelos commissioned the newly established International Town Planning Committee, led by Ernest Hébrard, a renowned French architect, to redesign the fire-affected area (Papadam n.d.: 7). The implementation of the plan differed from the original intentions, partly due to conflicting interests between the planners and property owners. After Venizelos' defeat in 1920, the initially proposed city plan was modified. Open spaces were reduced, and plots were made smaller (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011: 497). Ultimately, only the plan for Thessaloniki's historical center was realized. In this way, the rejuvenation of Thessaloniki's historic center not only reconstructed physical structures but also revitalized the urban fabric, redefining the city's social, economic, and spatial dynamics.

4. Greco-Turkish War and the "Asia Minor Disaster"

The Greco-Turkish War from 1919 to 1922 had significant implications for the development of Thessaloniki (Kampouris 2021). After the war, Greece and Turkey agreed to implement a population exchange, which led to a large-scale forced resettlement between the two countries (Strohmeier 2018). Prior to this, Thessaloniki had a history of migration. Unlike earlier voluntary migrants, refugee integration was slower and tougher (Murard 2022: 8), relying on religion, not ethnicity (Wikipedia 2023 b), causing social and spatial segregation (Strohmeier 2018). Between 1922 and 1930, approximately 130,000 refugees arrived in Thessaloniki, exacerbating the existing problem of the housing shortage that had been caused by the fire (Strand Ellingsen 2018: 6).

The refugees who arrived between 1922 and 1930 were mainly accommodated in the countryside surrounding the city (Mazonakis 2022). Over time, more than 50 colonies were established outside the city center, leading to spatial segregation. Thessaloniki rapidly expanded in all directions, encompassing more than 1,500 hectares at that time (Hastaoglou-Martinidis 2011: 499). The influx of refugees not only accelerated urbanization rates (ibid.: 501) but also contributed to higher economic growth and promoted industrialization (Murard 2022: 19).

5. The city in World War II and the post-war development era

During World War II, Thessaloniki was occupied by the Nazis in 1941. They deported almost all of the Jewish population of Thessaloniki to Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps, where they were horrifically murdered, along with other European Jews, until 1943 (Naar 2013: 9). Only 2,000 Thessaloniki Jews survived. After 1943, there was little left of the Jewish communities that had significantly shaped and influenced the city's history and development for millennia (Freund 2017).

After the war, the city and its economy began to rebuild. To address the urgent need for housing, the polykatoikia typology was introduced, which consists of

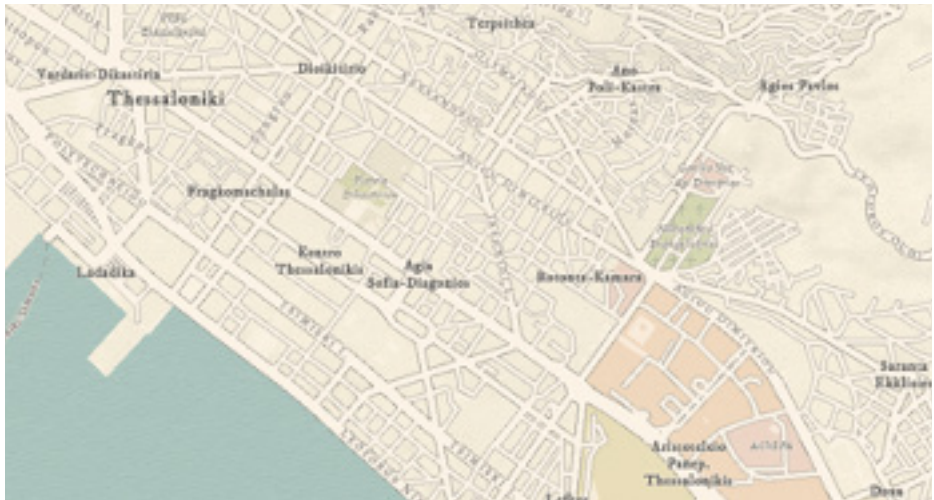


Fig. 2.: An overview of the current street network of Thessaloniki (This map is generated using ArcGIS Pro 3.1.2, GIS Professional Advanced)

large residential blocks and became a symbol of post-war architecture in Greece (Strand Ellingsen 2018: 6).

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, Thessaloniki witnessed (re)industrialization, which played a significant role in shaping its modern character. The city remained an important transportation hub in Europe, with a major airport (HCAA ELENG 2023) and a bustling train station. The port of Thessaloniki, known for its strategic significance in times of war and for trade, continued to be the largest port in the Aegean Sea, contributing to the city's economic growth and development.

6. Conclusion

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Thessaloniki's rich history spans millennia, showing its evolution from ruins to a resilient modern metropolis. Diverse architectural styles shape the city, from Hellenistic to Byzantine to Ottoman. Centuries of migration have created a multicultural base with potential for future integration.

Urban design, influenced by fires, demographics, and reforms, defines Thessaloniki. Despite changing rulers, its multicultural heritage endures. Thessaloniki fosters a harmonious blend of Greek and diverse cultures.

Thessaloniki is now a major Mediterranean city, even called the „co-capital“ (Greek: „συμπρωτεύουσα,“ symprotevousa) alongside Athens. Many historic sites are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Thessaloniki was also named as the European Capital of Culture in 1997. It's a growing tourist spot, with investments in infrastructure such as the Metro project since 2006.

In conclusion, Thessaloniki's fascinating history and complex social fabric highlight its significance by linking the past and present, providing essential insights for future solutions. While this study presents a brief summary, it draws attention to further investigation into Thessaloniki's urban history, emphasizing the importance of preserving these assets for future generations facing new challenges.



Fig. 3.: Seaside view of Thessaloniki from today (own depiction, Widowsky, A. 2023)

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