

YILLIK

Annual of Istanbul Studies

2024

6



İSTANBUL
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE

ment of a corpus of texts that elaborated on a city's connections with an idealized past, thereby reaffirming the city's outstanding position in its contemporary world.

Stephanos Efthymiadis
Open University of Cyprus
efthymiadis@ouc.ac.cy

ORCID: 0000-0002-5437-4847

CC BY 3.0

<https://doi.org/10.53979/yillik.2024.22>

Grigor Boykov, *Ottoman Plovdiv: Space, Architecture, and Population (14th-17th Centuries)*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2024. 304 pages, 15 maps, 6 plans, and 32 figures. ISBN: 9783700193647

In the evolving field of Ottoman studies, the urban history of imperial cities remains a rich ground for scholarly exploration. Grigor Boykov's monograph, *Ottoman Plovdiv: Space, Architecture, and Population (14th-17th Centuries)*, makes a significant contribution to the vibrant academic discourse on the subject, offering a detailed examination of Plovdiv, a city that has historically oscillated between the margins and the center of Ottoman urban studies. Rather than focusing on perennial scholarly favorites like the historic cities of Bursa, Edirne, or Istanbul, the present volume centers on a provincial city. Located in modern-day Bulgaria, Plovdiv (historically known as Filibe) serves as an exemplary case study for understanding the complexities of urban life under Ottoman rule, a topic that, despite attracting considerable attention, yet remains underexplored in specific regional contexts.

In addition to the introduction and epilogue, the book contains five main chapters. Each contributes to a layered understanding of Ottoman Plovdiv, providing a critical examination of

1 For instance, Florin Leonte, "Visions of Empire: Gaze, Space, and Territory in Isidore's Encomium for John VIII Palaiologos," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 71 (2017): 249–272 (on Isidore of Kiev's oration in praise of emperors Manuel II and John VIII); and the edited volume by Sofia Kotzabassi, ed., *A Companion to Intellectual Life of the Palaeologan Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2022) (with studies on Metochites's *Byzantios* and Chrysoloras's *Comparison*).

2 See *Chronicon Paschale*, vol. 1, ed. B. G. Niebuhr, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn, 1832), 544; *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD*. Vol. 7. Translated Texts for Historians, trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 35.

3 Cf. the most recent discussion of the same text by Ioannis Polemis, *Theodore Metochites: Patterns of Self-Representation in Fourteenth Century Byzantium* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2024), ch. 8.

how the interplay between architecture, population, and governance shaped the city across centuries. The first chapter, "Documentary Archaeology: Recreating Ottoman Plovdiv," discusses the sources and methods used to reconstruct the city's historical urban landscape. The author effectively utilizes cadastral maps, historical photographs, and archival documents to piece together Plovdiv's physical development. This methodological approach not only adds depth to our understanding of Ottoman urban planning but also showcases the potential of documentary archaeology in bridging gaps between historical narratives and physical evidence. The second chapter, "Regional Geography and Conquest," explores Plovdiv's geographical and strategic significance within the Ottoman Empire. The chapter details the Ottoman conquest and the initial phases of the city's administrative integration, emphasizing how geographic location influenced Plovdiv's role in the empire. This section is critical for understanding the external factors that shaped the city's early years as an Ottoman urban center, though it could benefit from a deeper analysis of pre-Ottoman influences to contrast with the changes introduced by Ottoman governance. The third chapter, "Urban Topography," compares the urban layout of Plovdiv during the Roman, medieval, and Ottoman periods. Boykov provides a detailed account of how the Ottomans reconfigured the city's structure to suit their administrative and military needs, while also incor-

porating Islamic cultural elements. The next chapter, "Ottoman Adaptations of the Urban Morphology," focuses on architectural innovations. This chapter critically assesses the introduction of new buildings and the transformation of existing ones. It examines how these changes not only reflected the Ottoman architectural aesthetic but also facilitated Plovdiv's integration into the economic and social structures of the empire. This critical engagement with architectural adaptation provides insights into the symbolic and practical roles of urban development projects. In the last chapter, "Population Geography: Dynamics, Spatial Distribution, and Density," Boykov analyzes demographic shifts and their implications for urban development. By linking population data to changes in urban density and spatial distribution, he illustrates the dynamic interplay between demographic trends and urban form. This chapter is particularly strong in demonstrating how migrations and policies affected the social and physical landscape, though more comparative data to provide additional context would have been welcome.

Boykov offers a comprehensive exploration of the urban development and demographic shifts in Plovdiv during the Ottoman era. The monograph extensively discusses how the city's spatial and architectural landscape evolved over the centuries, integrating a variety of historical data sources to provide a multifaceted view of urban life in an important

182 Ottoman provincial center. Boykov emphasizes Plovdiv's transformation from a Byzantine to an Ottoman city, detailing the architectural interventions and the introduction of Islamic urban elements. The book also delves into the socio-economic impacts of the Ottoman conquest, particularly the administrative integration of Plovdiv into the Ottoman state and the corresponding shifts in its population's composition and distribution. Detailed discussions are provided of demographic trends, population relocations, and how these affected urban growth and social structures. Critically, the author also explores the role of architecture in reflecting and shaping social hierarchies and communal life in Plovdiv. The book discusses various significant buildings and public works projects, attributing them to specific patrons and exploring their broader impacts on urban life and the city's skyline.

While Boykov's study is a monograph of a city, his interdisciplinary approach throughout the book integrates the architectural, spatial, and demographic aspects of the city into a cohesive historical narrative over centuries. In doing so, the author offers a dynamic and layered history of Ottoman Plovdiv impressive not only for its thematic and methodological depth but also for its temporal breadth, tracing the city's transformation since the Middle Ages. Thanks to this rich approach, *Ottoman Plovdiv* not only fills a crucial gap in the regional historiography of the Ottoman Empire but also proposes a methodological framework that can be applied to other cities with similar historical trajectories.

Another significance of the book is its extensive use of primary sources, including chronicles, city cadastral plans, financial records, historical photographs, *mühimme* registers, pious endowment deeds, tax registers, and travelogues. The information these sources contain on Plovdiv is rarely systematic and often contains gaps, but Boykov traces every crumb of information and analyzes it with a keen eye. The absence of certain types of primary sources, such as court records, which Boykov acknowledges, might

affect the completeness of the social and legal historical analysis. However, these limitations are effectively addressed by the author and do not significantly detract from the overall scholarly value of the work. The book offers an in-depth exploration of urban dynamics and transformation as a way of understanding the Ottoman Balkans within a broader perspective. The study also employs a comprehensive digital and geospatial analysis to reconstruct Plovdiv's historical urban environment. The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), in particular, to create a georeferenced digital model of the city is pivotal for visualizing urban transformation and spatial distribution. This innovative approach both enriches the narrative and sets a precedent for future urban history studies. Even though the use of GIS has its own limitations, including some doubts about its accuracy, the author seems to be well aware of these, and discusses the validation methods he uses.

The book should be praised for its interdisciplinary approach, methodological rigor, and innovativeness. The author also contextualizes his study within the existing literature, which he critically reviews. However, Boykov does not engage in direct comparisons with other Ottoman cities. Situating Plovdiv within the larger framework of Ottoman architectural and urban development by offering a systematic comparative analysis across multiple cities would have significantly enriched the analysis by providing a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of urban development in the Ottoman Empire, highlighting both commonalities and divergences across different urban contexts. Nevertheless, while Boykov's comparative perspective in *Ottoman Plovdiv* is more implicit and serves primarily as a contextual tool, it effectively situates Plovdiv within the larger discourse of Ottoman studies, highlighting both unique aspects of Plovdiv and common trends across the empire, and offering a nuanced view that can inform broader comparative studies in the future.

The book challenges some traditional narratives in Ottoman urban studies, particularly the notion of a uniform Ottoman urban model. By indicating

the unique aspects of Plovdiv's development, Boykov contributes to a more nuanced understanding of regional variations within the Ottoman Empire. This could encourage more localized studies of other Ottoman cities and lead to a reevaluation of existing generalizations in the field. Boykov's findings open up several avenues for future research. Scholars could explore comparative studies with other cities in the Balkans or the broader Ottoman realm to further our understanding of regional dynamics. Additionally, the role of individual architectural patrons in urban development, highlighted in the book, offers a new perspective on the interaction between state and local elites in shaping urban spaces.

Overall, *Ottoman Plovdiv* furnishes an impressively holistic representation of Ottoman Plovdiv as a living urban organism. By adopting a multidisciplinary spatiotemporal methodology, the study succeeds in distancing itself from the prevalent state-centric approach. Boykov's use of digital tools in history writing also contributes to the growing field of digital humanities, encouraging other scholars to incorporate advanced technologies in their research. The book's detailed maps and analyses of urban structures provide important information that can aid in the preservation and restoration of historical sites. This study not only deepens our understanding of Ottoman architectural and urban strategies but also enriches the historiography of Balkan urban and social structures under Ottoman rule. The work is a significant contribution to Ottoman studies, offering a model for similar historical and urban analyses. Undoubtedly, *Ottoman Plovdiv* sets the groundwork for future studies, particularly in scenarios where archival sources are scarce. It will be a useful reference for scholars interested in urban studies, architectural history, and Ottoman historiography.

Beza Topuz Demir
Marmara University,
University of Antwerp
Beza.TopuzDemir@uantwerpen.be

ORCID: 0000-0001-9270-3923

CC BY 3.0

<https://doi.org/10.53979/yillik.2024.23>