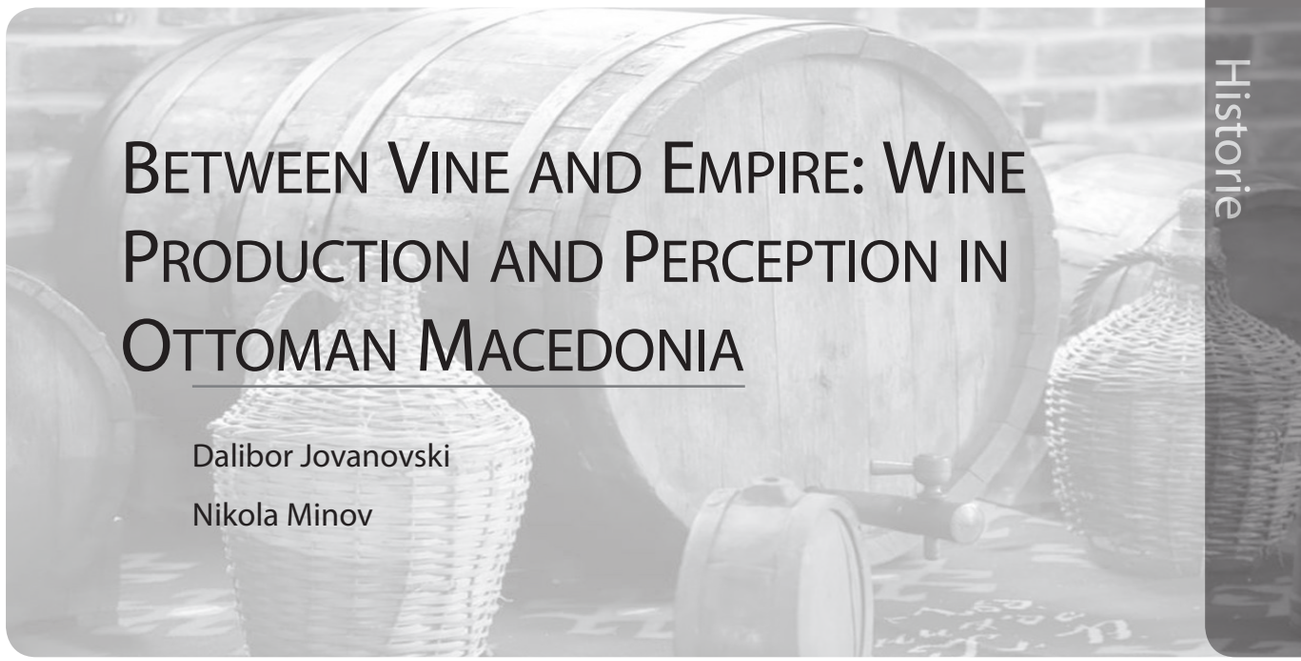

Between Vine and Empire: Wine Production and Perception in Ottoman Macedonia

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The production, consumption, and trade of wine in Ottoman Macedonia represent a paradox at the heart of a Muslim empire that legally forbade alcohol. For centuries, wine remained a visible and profitable part of the region's economy and daily life, particularly among Christian and Jewish communities. Despite Islamic legal prohibitions and repeated attempts at suppression, wine continued to circulate, publicly and privately, across towns, villages, taverns, and marketplaces. This persistence raises fundamental questions about the nature of Ottoman governance, the boundaries of religious law, and the negotiation of cultural practices in a multiconfessional society.

Wine is rarely placed at the center of studies on the Ottoman Balkans. Much of the existing literature on Ottoman viticulture tends to focus either on Anatolia or on imperial fiscal policies more broadly. Works by historians such as Faroqhi and Balta (Faroqhi 2009; Balta 2001) have provided valuable insights into taxation and agricultural registers, yet the social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of wine remain underexplored. Other authors have touched upon the subject only in passing. Georgeon (2021) and Anastassiadou (1997) devote limited attention to wine and viticulture, while Mrgić (2017), in her study of alcohol production and consumption in the Ottoman Balkans, discusses wine but does not focus on Macedonia. Within Macedonian historiography, only a few works address the issue (Zografski 1986a; Zografski 1986b), while in Greece, some attempts have been made, though these concentrate exclusively on the part of the Macedonian region within the Greek state (Anthopoulou-Kelesidou 2020; Kamīlakīs-Karamanes 2014). At the same time, the abundant testimonies of diplomats, consuls, and travelers who commented on the wine culture of Ottoman Macedonia have often been mined merely for anecdotal color rather than subjected to sustained analysis. This article seeks to bridge that gap.

The focus here is on Ottoman Macedonia between the 17th and early 20th centuries – a period marked by transformations in production, trade, taxation, and consumption.

The term "Ottoman Macedonia" refers to the present-day North Macedonia, parts of northern Greece, and the southwestern regions of Bulgaria.[1] This region stood out for its prolific vineyards, diverse religious composition, and growing integration into European commercial networks. The primary sources used in this study are consular and diplomatic reports, travelogues, Ottoman tax registers, and contemporary publications, both domestic and foreign. While these sources are rich in empirical detail, they must be approached critically, as they reflect the perspectives, prejudices, and agendas of their authors, many of whom were writing for European audiences with political or economic motives.

The article adopts a cultural-historical approach, combining elements of economic and social history. Rather than merely listing wine production centers or quoting travelers, it seeks to understand wine as a cultural object, regulated by law, shaped by geography, taxed by the state, and consumed within specific social and gendered contexts. By "perception" in the title, we refer not only to legal-religious attitudes toward wine but also to how wine was understood as a marker of identity, modernity, moral behavior, and regional pride. The central question is: How did Ottoman authorities and local actors negotiate the presence and meaning of wine in a context defined by both Islamic law and practical coexistence?

[1] In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the term *Ottoman Macedonia* carried different meanings and usages depending on the observer. As Duncan Perry has noted, attempts to fix the boundaries of Macedonia with precision are largely fruitless, since ethnic claims, together with historical, political, and diplomatic considerations, made an exact delineation impossible (Perry 1988: 12). Thus, while Greek cartographers and intellectuals regularly restricted Macedonia to the Thessaloniki and Bitola (Monastir) Vilayets – territories where they considered the Greek or Hellenicized population to be predominant – Bulgarian statisticians defined it as those territories inhabited by a Slavic-speaking population in the Thessaloniki, Bitola, and parts of the Kosovo Vilayet. In this study, we adopt the most widely accepted definition of the region: Macedonia encompassed the territory bordered by the basin of the Haliacmon River and the Aegean Sea to the south; Mount Pindus to the south-west; approximately the present Macedonian-Albanian, Macedonian-Serbian, and Macedonian-Kosovar borders to the west and north; Mounts Osogovo, Rila, and Rhodope to the east and north-east; and the Nestos River to the south-east.

WINE AND THE SHARIA: A PARADOXICAL COEXISTENCE

From the late 14th century until 1912, the territory of Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire, a Muslim state whose legal system, especially before the 19th-century reforms, was based on Sharia law and prohibited the consumption of alcohol. Nevertheless, Christians and Jews, whose religious laws permitted wine, formed a significant part of the population. Their legal and cultural traditions stood in direct contradiction to Islamic norms, which viewed the use of wine as sinful (Pullukçuoğlu Yapucu 2015: 257). The coexistence of these opposing frameworks shaped the complex reality of wine production and consumption in Ottoman Macedonia.

Ottoman authorities occasionally attempted to suppress the public consumption of alcohol, including wine, issuing frequent decrees in stern and punitive language. In 1671, Sultan Mehmed IV declared: *„I order that the use of wine by Muslims be prohibited, and that all taverns in towns and settlements with mosques be demolished"* (Sterjovski 2017: 260). Such prohibitions reveal that, despite religious restrictions, wine continued to be produced and consumed across the empire.

Although condemned as *haram* under Islamic law, wine persisted in Ottoman social and cultural life. A European diplomat living in the empire during the second half of the 17th century observed that wine was *„commonly used"* and *„publicly drunk"* without fear of scandal, even if high-ranking officials remained discreet to preserve their reputations. Non-Muslims, while allowed to drink wine privately or during religious ceremonies, were periodically prohibited from doing so in public spaces (Kia 2011: 241–242).

Some Muslims consumed wine in secret, while others expressed their appreciation more openly. Osman Naib, an Ottoman official in Bitola, wrote: *„Oh, innkeeper, do not think I will be overcome by wine. And if I am, it will not last – no human condition is permanent"* (Sterjovski 2017: 253). The janissary poet Beliğ drew comparisons between coffee and wine, suggesting that while coffee lacked wine's elegance, it nonetheless warmed the blood (Karababa, Güliz Ger 2011: 742). In a similar spirit, Manastırlı Keşfi declared a preference for forbidden wine over permitted coffee, while Şeyhi Mustafa employed poetic metaphor to lament the replacement of wine by coffee, describing it as the black raven displacing the red parrot (Minov 2022: 131).

Even within the imperial court, wine was not entirely absent. Despite the Islamic identity of the Ottoman dynasty, several sultans are known to have consumed wine, sometimes without concealment. Selim II, Murad IV, and Murad V all reportedly drank wine and other alcoholic beverages (Son-Son 2015: 989–992). During the reign of Mahmud II, although official records remain silent, contemporary accounts noted his fondness for wine and champagne (Samanci–Bilgin 2010: 339).

Already in the early period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, non-Muslim communities continued to produce, consume, and trade wine, despite Islamic prohibitions. While Muslims were barred from both consumption and production, Christians and Jews were permitted to produce wine for personal use. Monasteries and churches maintained vineyards and produced wine for liturgical purposes, and similar allowances applied to taverns catering to non-Muslim clientele. It is also noteworthy that wine was not used solely as a commodity for sale and purchase. In parts of Ottoman Macedonia, loans were extended in money, but also in grain, flour, and wine (Shapkarev 1891: 258).

Officially, both drinking and producing wine were considered sinful and offensive in Islamic tradition. Yet the actual implementation of these prohibitions varied over time. In the mid-16th century, when the Flemish diplomat Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq and the merchant Hans Dernschwam visited the aging Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, restrictions were much more strictly enforced. Public sale of wine was banned, and even foreign diplomatic missions often struggled to obtain it. Periods of severity and tolerance followed one another in cycles. In the 17th century, for example, when the hardline Kadızadeli movement gained temporary influence at the imperial court, the bans were enforced with particular rigor, in contrast to other periods when tolerance prevailed (Faroqhi 2009: 260).

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THE RISE OF WINE AS A MARKET GOOD

A significant transformation occurred in the early 19th century, as the Ottoman Empire began integrating into global economic systems. Wine, previously tolerated only in restricted private and religious contexts, increasingly became a commodity. Domestic trade expanded, and wine was incorporated into the empire's export economy. This shift led to the emergence of licensed wineries operating with official state permission.

These wineries functioned as proto-industrial establishments. Each had a private owner, a production manager, laborers, and assistants. Wine was typically stored in cellars located within the production site, with attention given to controlling temperature and light, both essential for preserving quality.

The wine trade was also formalized through professional guilds known as *şarapçı,* which included producers, tavern owners, and merchants. These guilds were organized under the supervision of officials such as the *esnaf kethüdası* (guild steward, acting as intermediary with the authorities) or *yiğitbaşı* (head of the trained craftsmen), who oversaw quality control, pricing, and professional conduct (Pullukçuoğlu Yapucu 2015: 258).

While most historical accounts emphasize that wine was produced and consumed primarily by non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, there is also evidence that some Muslims were involved in its production and trade. In his memoirs on Macedonia, Tahsin Bey, an Ottoman official and supporter of the Young Turk movement, recalls that his family owned a *çiftlik* (large land estate) within the Gevgelija *kaza* (administrative district), renowned for producing high-quality wine during his tenure as *kaymakam* (district governor) in the region (Uzer 2013: 200).

Another example comes from Bitola, where one Hacı Ibrahim Ağa reportedly operated a tavern and rented it out for wine storage. His activities were officially permitted by the governor of Rumelia (Pullukçuoğlu Yapucu 2015: 258).

Core wine-producing zones were identified across Ottoman Macedonia, notably around Veles, Tikveš, Melnik, and Naousa. By the late 19th century, these regions reportedly produced between 35,000 and 45,000 tons of wine annually. The area was known for both red and white grape varieties of solid quality, with Naousa standing out for its wines and for the establishment of the Boutari winery in 1879 (Eldem 2017: 175).

Viticulture was also practiced further north. The Skopje region produced quality wines that reached markets in Serbia as well as Austria, reflecting the wider commercial horizons of Macedonian winemaking.

Although the Ottoman Empire was a Muslim state, it gradually integrated into European and later global economic systems. By the 19th century, wine production and export had become a modest but important source of state revenue. As the inefficacy of prohibition became increasingly evident, Ottoman authorities shifted from outright bans to regulatory compromises. Initial measures included restrictions on the sale of wine and spirits near mosques, which were later lifted. Ultimately, the state opted to regulate alcohol through taxation, aligning with both Sharia principles and modernization processes.

In the early phases of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, including Macedonia, there were no specific taxes on alcohol itself. However, taxes were levied on vineyards and grape juice (*şire resmi*). In the 17th century, a new tax on intoxicating drinks, known as *müskirat resmi,* was introduced for non-Muslims, later replaced by *zecriye resmi* (prohibition tax), which effectively imposed a form of prohibition. During the Tanzimat era, *müskirat resmi* was reinstated, initially set at 20% before being reduced to 10%. As legal sales of alcoholic beverages increased, a further tax, *müskirat resmi-i beyiyesi* (alcohol tax payable to the bey's treasury), was introduced. This tax raised the license fee for alcohol retailers to 23%, while requiring them to operate at a regulated distance from mosques, madrasas, Sufi lodges, and Muslim cemeteries. Shops selling only wine were subject to half that rate. The very mention and institutionalization of these taxes implicitly affirm the existence of a well-developed wine culture and production infrastructure (Shaw 1975: 442–443; Balta 2001: 2).

Evangelia Balta has noted that in the early centuries of Ottoman rule, tax revenue from wine in Macedonian villages equaled as much as 51% of that from grain cultivation. This highlights the deep-rooted economic role of viticulture long before the emergence of wine as an export commodity (Balta 2001: 3).

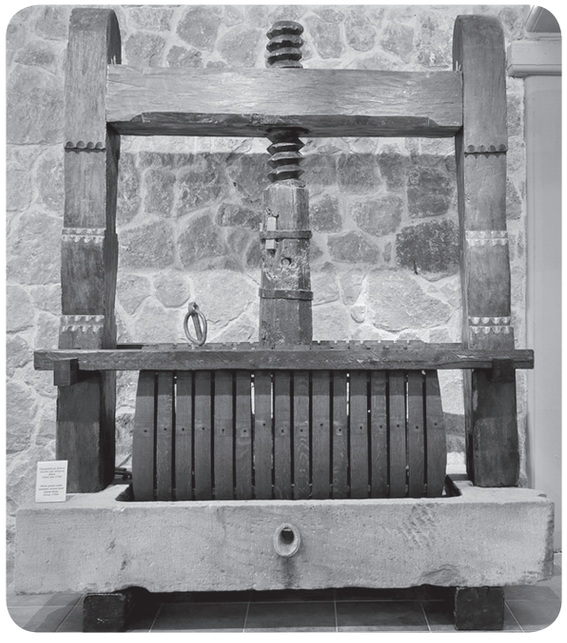
Ottoman fiscal records from Macedonia reflect the evolution of this taxation system. In early *defters* (tax registers), two types of dues related to viticulture appear: *öşr-ü bağ* (tithe on vineyards) and *öşr-ü şire* (tithe on grape juice or wine). In some cases, *spahi* (cavalry) landholders held a monopoly over wine sales for one to two months annually. During this period, the tax-paying subjects were prohibited from selling their wine, and their barrels had to be sealed. Violations incurred penalties (Turski dokumenti 1971: 14–15).

By the early 19th century, Ottoman *sijill* (court register) documents indicate the existence of detailed excise systems for wine and raki. In one 1801 directive, the authorities specified that excise revenue from villages selling wine and raki would be used to support viticulture in those communities. A 1802 record outlines the collection and distribution of alcohol excise duties in the Bitola region. Another Bitola document concerning *zecriye resmi* states that the total revenue from alcohol taxes for the year was 17,130 *kuruş* (currency in the Ottoman Empire). After deducting specific allocations, 1,750 *kuruş* for local taverns, 2,000 for traders in the *kaza*, and 1,000 for the Jewish community, the remaining 12,380 *kuruş* were distributed across approximately 3,070 *dönüms* (parcels of vineyard land, ca. 1000 m2 each), excluding Muslim-owned plots. The resulting burden was four *kuruş* per *dönüm* (Turski dokumenti 1951: 78, 114–115; Turski dokumenti 1953: 83–84).

1. Wine label from Naousa, Ottoman Macedonia (c. 1890–1912).

Multilingual export label – printed in Greek, French, and Hebrew – for wines produced in Naousa, a major wine-producing center in Ottoman Macedonia. The text indicates that authentic bottles bore the seal of the "schools of Naousa," suggesting a connection between wine production and local educational initiatives in the town Source: https://www.vaeni-naoussa.com/naoussa/history.htm).

2. Wine barrels and demijohns used in rural Macedonia (late Ottoman to early 20th century). These vessels were used for the storage, aging, and transport of wine and raki. The wooden barrels were typically housed in home cellars or taverns, while the wicker-covered demijohns protected the glass during handling and transport.
Source: https://vinski-muzej.com/?p=656.



3. Traditional grape press from the wider Drama region, eastern Macedonia (18th–19th century). Made of oak, this type of winepress was commonly used in village and monastic winemaking across Ottoman Macedonia. Its design reflects the practical methods of pre-industrial viticulture in the region.
Source: https://www.domaine-lazaridi.gr/en/wine-museum/.

Despite a general liberalization of alcohol policies in the second half of the 19th century, local Ottoman authorities occasionally reinstated bans on selling alcohol near Muslim religious institutions. The Macedonian intellectual Rajko Žinzifov recorded an order requiring shops selling wine, vodka, and strong spirits to be located at least 100 paces from mosques or else be closed. In Prilep, wine sellers were specifically instructed to comply with this rule (Zhinzifov 1877: 185).

Another recurring issue faced by grape and wine producers was the arbitrary increase of taxes by local Ottoman tax agents. In Naousa, toward the end of Ottoman rule, wine producers and traders reportedly faced duties ranging from 10 to 38 percent, depending on the quality of grapes used. Such practices likely affected the overall volume of wine production in the region (Pop Antov 2002: 255-256; Dekazos 1913: 47).

MACEDONIAN WINE THROUGH DIFFERENT EYES

Foreign accounts from the 19th century often described Ottoman wines as predominantly red, with Macedonian vintages, especially from the southwest, compared to French Cahors or Italian Radicofani wines, and considered exportable (M'Culloch 1866: 350). The predominance of red production is also explained by practical factors: white grapes demanded more labor and care, limiting large-scale cultivation (Zografski 1986b: 220). Observers frequently criticized inadequate storage and preservation, yet some praised the quality of certain Macedonian wines, noting their pleasant taste (Great Exhibition 1851: 1386). Other evaluations emphasized the character of the wines together with the favorable properties of the soil and climate, which allowed for varieties comparable to those of France and Spain (Henderson 1824: 247).

Drawing on British consular information, John MacGregor, Joint Secretary of the British Board of Trade, noted the difficulty of estimating precise wine production figures for Ottoman Macedonia, though estimates ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 tons annually. He also highlighted a place near Thessaloniki, likely Naousa, that produced up to 100 tons of high-quality wine per year. He argued that without water adulteration, this wine could have rivaled Burgundy in France, suggesting that even modest improvements in practice could make Macedonian wines more competitive (MacGregor 1844: 46).

In 1860, the British consul in Skopje, John Elijah Blunt, reported on wine production in the region, noting that in both Skopje and Kumanovo it was largely in the hands of Christian inhabitants. He remarked that the process lacked care and that the wine was poorly preserved, mostly intended for local consumption. Yet Blunt also predicted that improvements were possible, suggesting that Skopje's wine could eventually gain in quality and become an exportable commodity (Zografski 1986a: 434).

Such criticism did not go unanswered. At the same time as foreign consuls emphasized poor techniques, local intellectuals sought to disseminate modern oenological knowledge. In Thessaloniki, the bookseller Kone Samardžiev published a series of studies in his periodical *Knizhici za prochit* (1889–1891), introducing readers to the principles of viticulture, fermentation, clarification, and the treatment of wine diseases. While their direct impact on local producers is uncertain, the appearance of these texts itself reflected attempts to modernize viticultural practices in response to growing production, exports, and competition (Samardzhiev 1889a: 59–72; 1889b: 72–86; 1889c: 60–76; Samardzhiev 1891: 218–248).

A later report from the acting British consul in Bitola, George T. Ricketts, emphasized the economic burdens on producers. He noted that a 20% domestic tax on local wine made it more expensive than imported British rum, taxed at only 5%. Ricketts argued that lowering the rate would stimulate production rather than hinder it. His report also offered a telling social comparison: *"The consumer of wine in this country cannot in any way be compared to the same class of people in England. In England, it is only the wealthy who drink wine; here, it is the peasant"* (Zografski 1986a: 421).

Other reports confirmed the same pattern: abundant harvests often brought little profit because of low purchase prices and high taxation (Commercial 1867: 478).

By the mid-19th century, wine production was widespread across Ottoman Macedonia, particularly in its central and southern regions, with Austrian reports estimating 2–5 million *okka* (1 okka = 1.28 kg) annually and highlighting key centers such as Thessaloniki, Goumenissa, Naousa, Tikveš, and Veles (Zografski 1986b: 221). Consul Ferdinand Miksche reported that nearly all areas in Macedonia where grapes were grown produced sufficient wine to meet local needs. While the everyday „Bulgarian village wine"

was of lower quality and sold cheaply, the wines from Naousa and Goumenissa stood out. He estimated that Goumenissa produced around 500,000 *okka* (around 640 tons) of excellent wine annually, whose taste resembled Bordeaux and which, with better cellar care, could rival even high-end French wines. Similarly, the so-called „sun wine" of Siatista was reportedly equated with the famous Hungarian Tokaji (Zur Frage 1868: 61; Kamīlakīs-Karamanes 2014: 186).

Consular reports from France, Britain, the United States, and Italy consistently emphasized the potential of Macedonian wines, especially those from Naousa and Goumenissa. These were often compared favorably to established European varieties – Naousa's likened to Burgundy, Goumenissa's to Medoc, Roussillon, and Requena. Italian consular observations from 1887 confirm this impression, though they also noted some flawed practices. In Goumenissa, gypsum was added to the must to enhance color, and grapes were stomped in vast vats at dawn or dusk. In contrast, wine from Naousa was praised for its purity and quality, with black wine from the area exported mainly to Egypt and Constantinople, unlike most red wines from Macedonia that remained for local use. Alcohol content typically ranged from 12 to 15 percent, with some Tikveš and Melnik wines exceeding that level (Bulletin 1886: 101–102; M. K. S. 1895: 97–98).

Despite this promise, foreign observers frequently criticized outdated cultivation methods and the widespread practice of diluting wine with water. The U.S consul in Thessaloniki, Perikles Hadji-Lazaro, described rudimentary techniques – grapes were simply pressed, and the juice stored – and noted that French traders bought large quantities, refined them, and sold them on European markets as French wine (Fruit Culture 1884: 740; Diplomatic 1891: 5-6; M. K. S. 1895: 97-98).

Export figures confirm the growing importance of the trade: in 1890 alone, 230,000 gallons were shipped through Thessaloniki, primarily to France, Egypt, and Ottoman ports. Italian estimates placed annual output at 120,000 hectoliters in the Thessaloniki *vilayet,* 50,000 in Bitola, and 45,000 in Skopje. Prices ranged from 1–2 *kuruş* per *okka.* Naousa wine dominated exports, with other notable destinations including Constantinople, Egypt, and Serbia (M. K. S. 1895: 97–98).

Yet taxation and low purchase prices continued to limit profitability for growers, even in years of high yield. 19th century diplomatic, scientific, and travel accounts offered varied evaluations, often critical of local techniques. One influential treatise described Macedonian wines as harsh, blaming resin or tar preservation, though it noted that German influence had introduced improved methods on Mount Athos. Commercial production was linked to regions such as Siatista, Florina, Veles, Kastoria, Ohrid, the Serres plain, the Resen valley, and Kratovo. Despite early criticisms, some Macedonian wines gained recognition abroad as producers began to appear at international exhibitions, occasionally earning awards (Thudichum-Dupré 1872: 703).

A notable example appears in the global wine survey by Henry Vizetelly, a British journalist and wine critic, who reported that red and white wines from Thessaloniki had been sent to the 1873 Vienna International Exhibition, with some receiving commendations for merit and innovation (Vizetelly 1875: 153). An Ottoman document from the same year reveals that provincial authorities were explicitly instructed to present alcoholic beverages, including wine, at the exhibition under the motto 'Culture and Education' (Sherif-Miftar 2022: 48).

Recognition of Macedonian wines began earlier: at the 1862 exhibition, a Thessaloniki producer was awarded, while in 1876 two more were praised for their quality and flavor (International Exhibition 1862: 101; International Exhibition 1877: 291).

The increasing presence of wines from Ottoman Macedonia at international exhibitions, where they occasionally earned awards, raises a logical question: did these wines begin to compete with European varieties? Available evidence suggests they did.

Phylloxera outbreaks and droughts in Serbia led to growing reliance on Macedonian imports. In 1891, Serbia imported 241,313 gallons of Macedonian wine, far surpassing Italian imports at just 34,474 gallons. The trend persisted throughout the 1890s, with Macedonia providing the bulk of Serbian imports (Diplomatic 1893: 7; Diplomatic 1898: 6; Sini 1894: 688). By 1895, Serbian merchants were purchasing grapes directly in Tikveš, prompting Kavadarci traders to open wine cellars in Serbia, especially in Niš (Pop Antov 2002: 258).

Macedonian wine also reached Italy under the Ottoman–Italian trade agreement. Italian reports acknowledged its competitiveness, noting that fixed tariffs favored Greek and Macedonian wines and advising Italian producers to avoid volatile pricing (Commercio vinario 1897: 40). One Italian study emphasized that heavy Ottoman taxation hindered development in the sector, even though Macedonian wines posed the most serious regional challenge to Italian producers (E. O. 1894: 701). The problem of over-taxation was not new: as Rajko Žinzifov observed, by the mid-19th century, the Ottoman state had raised taxes fivefold on several goods, including wine (Zhinzifov 1877: 185).

Foreign diplomats and travellers in Ottoman Macedonia frequently recorded impressions of the region's viticulture. The British traveller and antiquarian William Martin Leake, in the 1830s, praised Naousa's wine as among the finest and abundant enough for export, while also noting the diversity of wines in Siatista (Leake 1835: 294; Matkovski 1991: 380–381). François Pouqueville and Ami Boué echoed these views, with Boué highlighting wines from Siatista, Kastoria, and Tetovo and remarking that locals often failed to appreciate their commercial potential (Matkovski 1991: 715, 723; Boué 1840: 27; Staninska-Popovska 1999: 106–107). During the Crimean War, Basil Nicolaidy stressed the empire-wide reputation of Naousa's wine, which sold at twice the price of others and contributed nearly 7% of Macedonia's revenue (Nicolaidy 1859: 282, 341; Bliatkas tou Stergiou 2009: 294).

Later observers such as the diplomat and linguist Johann Georg von Hahn, the travel writer Mary Adelaide Walker, and the archaeologist Arthur Evans likewise commended wines from Veles, Kozani, Naousa, and Skopje, while the journalist Ignatius Chirol claimed that Kozani wines were even exported to Bordeaux, rebottled, and sold as French (Matkovski 1992: 280; Walker 1864: 262; Evans 1885: 90; Chirol 1881: 57). By the turn of the century, the journalist George Frederick Abbott noted Goumenissa's mild wines and Melnik's powerful rosé, underlining both the economic centrality of viticulture and the disruptions caused by political unrest (Abbott 1903: 55, 146).

Among Balkan writers, the folklorist and publicist Stefan Verković, writing for a Russian audience, described viticulture in Pella, Goumenissa, and Naousa, noting more than 1,500 vineyards in Giannitsa and noting that Naousa wine was highly valued in Constantinople (Verkovich 1889: 40). Vasil Kanchov, a Bulgarian geographer and politician, provided one of the most detailed surveys: Skopje's wines traded to Bosnia, Serbia, and northern Albania, Melnik's dark wines aged in cellars, Kresna's white wine, which he found highly drinkable, had only the aged vintages of Naousa as a true rival in Macedonia (Kănchov 1894: 211; Kănchov 1895: 259–260; Kănchov 1970: 46). Serbian observers echoed these views. Spiridon Gopčević praised the wines of Siatista and Kozani, while Stojan Novaković considered Goumenissa's red wine the best in Macedonia and noted significant production in Gradsko and Tikveš (Gopčević 1890: 147; Novaković 1894: 82–83). Writers such as Branislav Nušić, Gustav Weigand, and Kuzman Šapkarev emphasized the ubiquity of winemaking in Ohrid households, though storage shortages were common (Nušić 1894: 92; Weigand 1895: 47; Shapkarev

1901: 28). Finally, the geographer Jovan Cvijić stressed Veles and Tikveš as important wine zones but concluded, like many before him, that Naousa produced the finest wines in Macedonia, rivaled in the empire only by Tenedos (Cvijić 1906: 317, 496).

Among local writers, Gjorče Petrov, a Macedonian revolutionary, authored one of the few native studies on Macedonia in the late 19th century, offering a rare local perspective on wine production. His work, published in Sofia, includes detailed data on viticulture, particularly in northern and central Macedonia – regions often overlooked by foreign observers focused on the Mediterranean south.

Petrov highlighted Skopje as a major wine-producing area, estimating 20,000 barrels annually, with large quantities exported to Albania, Bosnia, and Serbia. He praised the wines of villages like Nerezi and Ljubanci for their quality and drinkability. In contrast, he described Bitola's and Tetovo's wines as weak and mostly consumed by peasants. He also emphasized Tikveš as a dominant wine region and noted that in areas like Štip and Kriva Palanka, limited market access hindered viticulture's profitability (Petrov 1896: 61, 232, 593).

By the final decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the Tikveš region was increasingly recognized as a center of high-quality wine production, with exports reaching beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire. The teacher and revolutionary Hristo Pop Antov noted that Tikveš grapes contained 15–16% sugar, resulting in dense wines, famously described by the local saying: *„Tikveš wine should be carried in a cloth"* (Pop Antov 2002, 257).

Kavadarci, the region's central town, became home to the oldest winery still active in modern North Macedonia. The Velkov family, among the leading grape producers and traders in the area since the early 19th century, established the winery „Tikveš" in 1885, shortly after the construction of the Belgrade-Skopje-Thessaloniki railway. Initially modest, the winery gradually modernized with filtration equipment, pumps, and measuring instruments (Boev 2012: 11).

A significant leap occurred in the early 20th century under the leadership of Aleksandar Velkov, son of Risto Velkov, who expanded the facility into one of the largest and best-known in the region. In 1912, Aleksandar signed a cooperation agreement with the renowned Thessaloniki-based spirits company Metaxa. This partnership reflected the high reputation of Tikveš wine in Thessaloniki at the turn of the century. A merchant from Kavadarci named Jovančo Velkov, likely from the same family, was also active in the city's wine trade (Sessional Papers 1904: 236; Boev 2012: 11).

Unlike neighboring regions, Ottoman Macedonia initially spared the devastating phylloxera outbreak that ravaged European vineyards in the late 19th century. Phylloxera originated in North America and was first detected in Europe in the 1860s. It remains unclear how the pest entered the Ottoman Empire, but the earliest confirmed case in Macedonia appeared in 1898, when the disease struck the vineyards of Pylea near Thessaloniki. Over the following decades, it spread to other parts of the region, gradually undermining a once-profitable agricultural sector (Dolbee 2025: 358; Anthopoulou-Kelesidou 2020: 27).

Ottoman authorities responded with protective measures and efforts to train specialists. However, the presence or even suspicion of phylloxera also led neighboring countries to close their markets to Macedonian grapes. In 1906, despite phylloxera not yet being present everywhere in Macedonia, the Serbian government imposed heavy duties on Macedonian grape exports. The Tikveš region alone reportedly cost the state 60,000 lira in lost revenue. As the prominent Ottoman statesman Selim Melhame noted in 1907, this economic isolation was not solely about disease control but also about protecting domestic production in neighboring Balkan states (Dolbee 2025: 366–367).

Although phylloxera caused a significant decline in viticulture, particularly in key regions like Tikveš, over time vineyards were rehabilitated, and wine production gradually recovered (Zografski 1986a: 224).

TAVERNS, CAFÉS, AND RITUALS OF CONSUMPTION

Understanding where and by whom Macedonian wine was consumed provides insight into the region's social norms, religious boundaries, and evolving drinking culture.

The primary site for wine consumption in Ottoman Macedonia was the tavern. As an establishment associated with alcohol, the tavern constantly operated on the boundary between the permissible and the forbidden, or at the very least, was morally suspect in the eyes of Muslims. In the social hierarchy of Ottoman Muslim society, the tavern-keeper occupied a status comparable to that of a prostitute or a homosexual (Hattox 1996: 78). For this reason, Muslims generally avoided being seen in such places, while Christian men could freely enjoy the consumption of haram beverages without social condemnation.

It is important to emphasize men, since taverns were overwhelmingly male spaces, but not spaces open to all men. They were primarily frequented by adult non-Muslim men, at least until the 19th century. By the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, multiple accounts indicate that local Muslims also began to frequent taverns to drink alcohol. In such cases, other patrons would sometimes leave the premises to avoid potential scandals involving intoxicated Turks. On occasion, this was impossible. Boris Yanishliev, publicist and local historian, recounts a common scene from a tavern in the town of Dojran, where a certain Mehmed Bey, after becoming heavily intoxicated on wine, would ride into taverns on horseback and prevent the guests from leaving, insisting they continue drinking with him at his expense (Yanishliev 1934: 13).

Yet, wine was not confined to taverns or other public spaces. It also played a central role in domestic rituals and family celebrations, where its role was deeply symbolic. Ethnographic accounts from 19th century Macedonia describe wedding ceremonies in which an ornamented wine flask symbolized abundance and unity: carried by the groom's companions, it was shared with the bride's father and the *kum* (best man) before being refilled by the bride as a sign of her entry into the new household (Verkovich 1868: 27). Similar customs accompanied the bride's arrival at the groom's home, where wine and bread were offered as tokens of prosperity. Folk songs collected by the Miladinov brothers likewise abound with references to wine, celebrating it as a marker of conviviality and well-being (Bratya Miladinovtsi 1861). These practices demonstrate that wine functioned both as a drink of the tavern and as a central element in the symbolic and ceremonial life of Orthodox communities.

Throughout the Ottoman period, wine was the most widely consumed alcoholic beverage in Ottoman Macedonia. It was drunk in homes, taverns, and in the fields, and was easily accessible throughout the region. Consequently, there was little need for the importation of foreign wines. However, toward the end of the 19th century, a new type of establishment appeared – cafés or café-chantants, which had long been popular across Europe. These venues, similar to modern coffeehouses, offered not only local Macedonian wine but also French champagne and other imported Mediterranean wines, along with entertainment from Italian theater troupes and Austrian dancers.

Unlike the neighborhood coffeehouses, cafés were not male-exclusive spaces; women, young girls, and entire families were allowed and encouraged to attend. The earliest cafés in Macedonia emerged in Thessaloniki and Bitola and were primarily frequented by the local urban elites.

In 1896, two journalists from the *Journal de Salonique* offered a vivid description of the atmosphere in these cafés and the growing presence of foreign wines:

„The local bourgeoisie, under strong Francophone influence, has already abandoned the coffeehouses and now frequents only the cafés. Unlike the coffeehouses, where women

are not permitted, the clientele in cafés is mixed: one encounters not only couples but entire families... Whereas in Turkish coffeehouses it is rare to see a Jew or a Greek, and in Greek, Jewish, or Slavic coffeehouses one never finds a Turk, these ethno-religious boundaries dissolve in the cafés. In them, one encounters a society striving to modernize and westernize... In the grand cafés, Venetian mirrors, leather sofas, Viennese chairs, marble tables, billiards, and similar furnishings attest to an openness to Europe and a gradual embrace of European tastes and habits... Yes, they still serve Turkish coffee and offer nargileh, but they also provide herbal teas, fresh juices, turkish delight, jams, card games, newspapers and magazines, and of course, French champagne and a variety of Mediterranean wines" (Un boulevardier égaré 1896: 2; Sheridan 1896: 2).

While the elite enjoyed high-quality imported wines from France, Italy, or Spain in hotels, restaurants, and cafés, broader segments of the urban population were exposed to a different but equally significant aspect of wine culture: medicinal wine. Sold in pharmacies and promoted through newspaper advertisements, these so-called wine elixirs were alcoholic beverages fortified with iron, quinine, iodine, or tannins, and marketed as remedies for anemia, fatigue, poor appetite, and even female nervousness.

These products were all foreign imports and were clearly distinguished from domestic wines, which were never associated with therapeutic properties. Consumers understood that ordinary local wine did not heal, while the branded medicinal tonics carried the authority of modern science and industrial pharmacy.

Among the best-known examples was Vin Nourry, promoted as a pleasant-tasting tonic that could replace cod liver oil; Fer Athenstaedt, an iron-rich liqueur with a flavor reminiscent of Spanish sherry, said to be gentle on the stomach and not to stain the teeth; and the most ambitious of all, Quina-Laroche, a wine-based elixir made from three types of cinchona, yellow, red, and grey, and a winner of seven gold medals, promising to combat fevers, chlorosis, and physical debility, especially in young women. Though officially classified as medicine, these products were part of a broader consumer culture in which wine transcended its culinary role and merged with pharmacy, marketing, and the era's obsession with health through modern chemistry.[2]

4. a 5. Advertisements for medicinal wines sold in Ottoman Macedonia (1902).

Therapeutic wines such as Vin Nourry and Quina-Laroche were widely marketed in Ottoman Macedonia. Promoted as tonics against anemia, fatigue, loss of appetite, and childhood weakness, they blended wine with ingredients like iodine, quinine, or iron. These products illustrate the spread of French pharmaceutical culture and the integration of European goods into everyday life in the Balkans.
Source: *Journal de Salonique* 7 August 1902, p. 4.

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in this article illustrates that wine was not marginal but central to the agricultural and commercial structure of Ottoman Macedonia. Regions such as Naousa, Tikveš, Veles, and Goumenissa emerged as key centers of viticulture, producing large volumes of wine for both local use and export. By the 19th century, wines from Ottoman Macedonia were reaching markets in Egypt, Serbia, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and even France, sometimes relabeled and sold as European products. This process positioned the region within broader global networks and reinforced the transformation of wine from a liturgical or household good into a competitive export commodity.

Confessional distinctions were also reflected in patterns of production and consumption. Christians dominated both viticulture and tavern culture, while Muslims, though officially forbidden, often participated discreetly, especially in urban contexts. Meanwhile, the rise of cafés and medicinal wines in late Ottoman cities signalled a shift in consumer preferences, the influence of Western norms, and the penetration of industrial pharmaceutical marketing.

This case study of wine in Ottoman Macedonia underscores a broader phenomenon: the Ottoman Empire's capacity to accommodate contradictions. Far from being rigid, imperial policy evolved to tolerate, and ultimately tax, practices that violated religious law. Fiscal needs, local resistance, and the realities of a multiconfessional society shaped this pragmatism. The coexistence of prohibitionist rhetoric and licensed taverns, of sultanic decrees and export licenses, highlights the adaptive nature of Ottoman governance.

At the same time, the study's reliance on consular and travel sources imposes certain limitations. These accounts are often shaped by the expectations of their audiences and may overstate exoticism, backwardness, or modernization. Future research should incorporate more Ottoman fiscal and judicial documentation, explore microhistorical studies of wine-producing towns, and compare Macedonia's experience with that of other Ottoman regions, such as Thrace, Anatolia, or Syria.

Ultimately, wine production in Ottoman Macedonia reflected economic activity as well as broader processes of imperial transformation, religious negotiation, and regional adaptation. It was a product of the vine, but also of the empire.

[2] Starting in the late 1890s, the back page of the *Journal de Salonique* regularly featured advertisements for such medicinal wines. See, for example: *Journal de Salonique,* 10 July 1899, p. 4; *Journal de Salonique* 7 August 1902, p. 4; *Journal de Salonique* 22 September 1904, p. 4.

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ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS

Between Vine and Empire: Wine Production and Perception in Ottoman Macedonia

This article explores the production, consumption, and trade of wine in Ottoman Macedonia from the 17th to the early 20th century, analyzing a wide array of sources, including consular reports, travelogues, and scholarly writings. Despite Islamic legal prohibitions, wine remained deeply embedded in the region's economic, cultural, and social life, especially among Christian and Jewish communities. The study traces the evolution of viticulture, changes in taxation and regulation, and the rise of wine as an export commodity. It also examines patterns of consumption through the lens of religious affiliation, gender, and, to some extent, social standing. Taken together, these aspects illustrate how wine production in the region developed into a competitive sector, positioning Ottoman Macedonia as an important node in the Mediterranean wine economy, with several of its wines rivaling their European counterparts in both quality and reputation.

Viticulture, Taverns, Macedonia, Naousa, Tikveš, Diplomats