



34 YEARS AND COUNTING: THE SO FAR EXPERIENCE OF WORLD HERITAGE ASSETS IN THESSALONIKI, GREECE

ZYGOMOLAS Dimitrios ¹

¹ Dimitrios Zygomas, Deputy Director & Head of Department for the Protection of Modern Monuments and Movable Cultural Assets
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4156-7428>

Introduction

Situated in the north of Greece, Thessaloniki, the country's second largest city, is foremostly admired for its uninterrupted history of over twenty-three centuries. In solid proof of this remarkable continuity, its historic center is interspersed with a wide array of archaeological and architectural remains that date from Hellenistic to modern times. The most distinguished segment of this unique heritage is by far the city's Early Christian and Byzantine legacy. More than half of its surrounding walls, fourteen churches and one bath comprise a unique ensemble, revered in the whole of Europe as early as the 19th century¹. Not surprisingly, at the end of the 20th century, it became one of the first Greek cultural assets to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List².

Thirty-four years have passed since then, a substantial period of time that allows, on the present occasion of the 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, for a review and appraisal of the impact of the inscription. This is precisely the goal of this paper, which will be pursued through an original discussion and evaluation of the consequences of World Heritage status, on one hand for the monuments themselves, and on the other, for their urban, architectural, social and educational setting. Extensive bibliographic research and thorough on-site examination will provide the basis for this discussion, which will culminate with a didactic conclusion as to the degree to which the full potential of the inscription has been achieved or remains to be pursued.

¹ For a comprehensive timeline of Thessaloniki and a detailed presentation of its Early Christian and Byzantine monuments, see: Kourkoutidou–Nikolaid E., Tourta A., *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki*, Athens 1997.

² Decision SC-88/CONF.001/08/24-10-1988.

The background and the exact object of the inscription

The architectural remains of Thessaloniki's Early Christian and Byzantine past attracted international attention remarkably early, namely in the first centuries after the city's transition from Byzantine to Ottoman rule. This initial focus was owed to the numerous foreign travelers who visited the city after its final fall to the Ottomans (1430), taking note in their writings of its imposing fortifications and numerous churches, as the most significant elements of the cityscape.³ From the middle of the 19th century, the evolution of European attitudes towards the past and the consequent emphasis on the pursuit of detailed knowledge, gave precedence to the systematic study of the city's Early Christian and Byzantine legacy, with an unprecedented multiplication of related initiatives at the dawn of the 20th century. This outburst of interest reflected, on one hand, the overall acknowledgment of Thessaloniki as a major urban center of the Byzantine Empire, second only to Constantinople, and on the other, the equally wide recognition of its Early Christian and Byzantine vestiges as an unmatched architectural ensemble in the entire East⁴.

Scholar interest in the city's Early Christian and Byzantine monuments, and moreover, solid acknowledgment of their function as points of reference at an international level persisted to modern times⁵, coupled with the commencement of extensive conservation and enhancement works in the wake of the heavy damages inflicted to most of them by the severe earthquake that hit the city in 1978⁶. Not surprisingly, merely nine years later (1987), the Hellenic Ministry of Culture proposed their inscription on the World Heritage List, which was finalized in the 12th session of the World Heritage Committee, in 1988.

³ For a comprehensive review of the focus of 15th to 19th century travelers, see: Zygomas D., *I prostasia ton architektonikon mnimeion tou voreioelladikou chorou apo tin Othomaniki kataktisi eos ton Deftero Pagkosmio Polemo [The protection of the architectural monuments of northern Greece from the Ottoman conquest to World War II], 1361–1939*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Thessaloniki 2013, pp. 39–40, 43–47. For a detailed review in relation to the churches, see: Tambaki S., *I Thessaloniki stis perigrafes ton periigiton [Thessaloniki in the descriptions of the travelers], 12th–19th century AD*, Thessaloniki 1998, pp. 69–102, 110–153, 156–181.

⁴ As concerns the early evolution of the scientific study of the Early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki, see: Zygomas D., *I erevntiki drastiriotita gyro apo ta vyzantina mnimeia tis Thessalonikis sto gyrisma apo ton 19o ston 20o aiona: I metavasi apo tin periigitiki stin epistimoniki tekmiriosi [The research on the byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century: The transition from travelling to scientific documentation]*, [in:] *Digital proceedings of the International Conference “Thessaloniki at the eve of 1912,”* E. Hekimoglou (ed.), Thessaloniki 2015, pp. 120–140.

⁵ Most indicative are the introductory comments of an associated essay by professor Slobodan Ćurčić, in 2000. In his words, “no other city of the Early Christian world [...] can match Thessaloniki in terms of the chronological spread and the extent of the preservation of its major monuments.” See: Ćurčić S., *Some Observations and Questions Regarding Early Christian Architecture in Thessaloniki*, Thessaloniki 2000, p. 9.

⁶ For a detailed review of the conservation works initiated in the wake of the earthquake of 1978, see: Theoharidou–Tsaprali K., Mavropoulou–Tsioumi Ch., *I anastilosi ton vyzantinon kai metavyzantinon mnimeion sti Thessaloniki [The anastylosis of the byzantine and post-byzantine monuments in Thessaloniki]*, Thessaloniki 1985, pp. 47–103, 129–133, 166–175.

The exact asset inscribed on the list, under the title “Paleochristian and Byzantine Monuments of Thessalonika”, on the grounds of criteria (i), (ii), and (iv), comprised⁷:

- the city’s walls, a fortification system stretching around mostly the upper part of its historic center, at a total length of 5,818,69 meters (out of an original perimeter of roughly 8,000 meters), with an initial construction phase in the late 4th century AD and with a sizeable last post of defense, the Heptapyrgion Fortress.
- thirteen churches, scattered throughout the historic center, which reflect the evolution of religious architecture and decoration from the 4th to the 15th century, namely the churches of Rotunda, Panagia Acheiropoietos, Aghios Dimitrios, Hosios David, Aghia Sophia, Panagia Chalkeon, Aghios Panteleimon, Aghioi Apostoloi, Aghios Nikolaos Orfanos, Aghia Ekaterini, Christos Sotiras, Profitis Elias, and Metamorphosis Sotiros, in the Vlatadon Monastery.
- a public bath, located in the upper quarter of the historic center, which dates to the 13th century AD and constitutes the only secular building of the Byzantine era to have survived to our times.

The impact of the inscription

Impact directly on the monuments

Upon acquisition of World Heritage status, one would primarily expect for initiatives to be undertaken in order to secure the highest possible level of protection and enhancement for the inscribed monuments. The pursuit of such a goal requires, first and foremost, the drafting of management plans, which will define not only necessary action, but also the platform on which the involved parties will coordinate their efforts, under a clear leadership.

Such planning is still anticipated for the Early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki, whose management remains to this day the outcome of the unstructured and loosely coordinated initiatives of separate players. The latter comprise, primarily, the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, which exercises property rights and overall supervision, in addition to conducting conservation works, through its respective regional service (Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City), the Ecclesiastic Authorities, which administer the use of the churches, and the Municipalities of Thessaloniki and Neapoli-Sykies, which are responsible for conservation, signage and redesign work in the perimeter of the properties lying within their boundaries.

A positive prospect in terms of structured management is currently clearly visible, with the imminent completion of the project of the ministry “Drafting of management plans for the monuments and sites of Greece inscribed in the World Heritage List of UNESCO”. Initiated

⁷ For the descriptive features mentioned and comprehensive information on the inscribed monuments, see: Tzevreni S., *Thessaloniki, UNESCO Monuments, Early Christian and Byzantine Monuments*, bilingual leaflet (Greek-English), Thessaloniki 2013. It is worth noting that Thessaloniki encompasses a total of fourteen Byzantine churches, one of which was excluded from inscription. The latter was the church of the Taxiarchs, which had been irreparably altered by a major post-war extension, thus lacking integrity.

in 2018, primarily as a response to a pending obligation, rather than an acknowledgement of a vital prerequisite for optimum preservation, the latter is expected to define “*priorities, aims and timetables*”, along with “*short, medium and long-range planning of actions*”⁸. Though considerably delayed, the prescribed definition and structuring of necessary work for the monuments of Thessaloniki will hopefully reverse in due time the current dependence of their management on fragmentary actions.

A major issue that will nonetheless most likely remain to be resolved is the establishment of a coordination basis for the involved parties. The latter, together with the equally vital appointment of a steering group, do not appear to be included in the aims of the project, despite the fact that lack of coordination between the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the Ecclesiastical Authorities has so far had a considerable toll on the religious monuments. Leaving aside numerous incompatible interventions, one only needs to note the transformation of the courtyard of the emblematic churches of Aghios Dimitrios and Aghia Sophia in controlled parking areas by the ecclesiastic administration (Fig. 1), in full disregard of the repeated protests of the Ministry of Culture and Sports⁹.



Fig. 1 Parking area in the courtyard of the church of Aghios Dimitrios, photo by the author

⁸ For the exact aims and deliverables of the project, see the latest update of its technical description (Decision 880/23-04-2021 of the Special Secretary for the Management of Programs of the European Social Fund, of the Hellenic Ministry for Development and Investments, p. 3). According to the latter, the project’s deadline is 20 June 2022.

⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of the issue, see: *Report 127487/05-04-2022 of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City*, of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, p. 2.

As concerns the additional courses of action promoted by the “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention”, the adoption of appropriate legal and administrative measures has been certainly pursued, yet not at the anticipated scale. Under the Greek legislation for the protection of antiquities since the incorporation of Thessaloniki in the modern Greek state (1912), the city’s Early Christian and Byzantine monuments are automatically protected by its clauses, as antiquities dating prior to 1453¹⁰. Which is more, by the 1960s, all fifteen monuments were additionally listed, with separate Presidential Decrees and Ministerial Decisions, of which three defined boundaries for the respective properties and four set buffer zones, in both cases, though, verbally, and not topographically¹¹. Hence, upon inscription, the last two issues remained largely unresolved.

Although the boundaries of twelve out of the fifteen monuments had been long defined by walls or fences, it was only in 2009 that the Ministry of Culture and Sports produced maps with clearly specified limits, on the basis of geographical coordinates. The latter were ratified by the World Heritage Committee the following year (2010)¹², yet strangely enough, to this day, they have not supplemented the Acts under which the respective monuments were listed.

As regards buffer zones, since 1988, initiatives for topographical delimitation have been undertaken in the case of merely three monuments, with one of them constituting a partial clarification of an up to then verbally defined zone and the remaining two equaling genuinely

¹⁰ See (in chronological order): Law 2646/1899, *Peri Archaïotiton [Concerning the Antiquities]* (Government Gazette, hereafter abbreviated as “G.G.,” 158/A/1899), art. 1; Law 5351/1932, *Peri Archaïotiton [Concerning the Antiquities]* (G.G. 275/A/1932), arts. 1, 2; Law 3028/2002, *Gia tin prostasia ton Archaïotiton kai en genei tis Politistikis Klironomias [For the protection of the Antiquities and Cultural Heritage on the whole]* (G.G. 153/A/2002), art. 6, par. 4; Law 4858/2021, *Kyrosi Kodika nomothesias gia tin prostasia ton Archaïotiton kai en genei tis Politistikis Klironomias [Ratification of Legislation code for the protection of the Antiquities and Cultural Heritage on the whole]* (G.G. 220/A/2021), art. 6, par. 4.

¹¹ See (in chronological order): Presidential Decree of 25 May 1926 (G.G. 191/A/1926), concerning the churches of Metamorphosis Sotiros, Christos Sotiras, Profitis Elias and Aghios Nikolaos Orfanos (with buffer zone); Presidential Decree of 13 September 1927 (G.G. 203/A/1927), concerning the church of Hosios David; Ministerial Decision 9751/377/20-02-1952 (G.G. 47/B/1952), concerning the bath; Ministerial Decision 15813/19-12-1961 (G.G. 36/B/1962), concerning the walls (with buffer zone) and the churches of Rotunda (with boundaries), Aghia Sophia (with boundaries), Panagia Acheiropoietos (with boundaries and buffer zone) and Aghios Dimitrios (with buffer zone); Ministerial Decision 6533/25-05-1962 (G.G. 190/B/1962), concerning the churches of Panagia Chalkeon, Aghioi Apostoloi, Aghia Ekaterini and Aghios Panteleimon.

¹² Under Decision WHC-10/34.COM/8D/31-05-2010.

new work¹³. Moreover, up to this day, no efforts have been made to alternatively define zones of restricted building activity and use, under the relative clauses of the Greek archaeological legislation, from 2002 onwards¹⁴. Hence, at present, only six of the fifteen monuments are surrounded by buffer zones, of which merely three are accurately defined with geographical coordinates.

Another notable provision of the Greek archaeological legislation is the possibility to impose restrictions on the functions and building works assumed in each separate monument, with a view to enhancing its protection¹⁵. Though truly significant, this option can be best described as yet another field of limited action, since up to now, merely two relative Ministerial Decisions have been issued. Both of them, concerned the long-debated use of the Rotunda, with an altogether beneficial outcome for the simultaneous projection of its religious and secular character¹⁶.

On the whole, if one was to identify a field of substantial action with a direct impact on the monuments, that would certainly be the drafting and implementation of conservation and restoration projects, a task resting entirely with the services of the Ministry of Culture and Sports. As already mentioned, at the time of the inscription, the Early Christian and Byzantine legacy of Thessaloniki was already receiving extended care in the wake of the earthquake of 1978. This was actually the first major effort to be undertaken for its conservation in modern times, not to mention to be based on international conservation standards and interdisciplinary cooperation. In the 1990s, it was followed by a similarly wide initiative, in the framework of the projection of the historical identity of Thessaloniki as Cultural Capital of Europe for the year 1997¹⁷. Lastly, as of 2002, a third major circle of works is underway, with combined funding by the European Union and national resources¹⁸.

¹³ See (in chronological order): Ministerial Decision 54867/1777/17-10-2001 (G.G. 1468/B/2001), concerning part of the walls (Heptapyrgion Fortress area, new buffer zone); Ministerial Decision 47276/2881/22-08-2003 (G.G. 1348/B/2003), concerning the church of Aghia Sophia (partial clarification of previous, verbally defined buffer zone); Ministerial Decision 1835/207/20-04-2004 (G.G. 737/B/2004), concerning part of the walls (northwest segment, new buffer zone); Ministerial Decision 88470/4530/10-10-2006 (G.G. 78/AAP/2006), concerning the church of Aghioi Apostoloi and part of the walls (neighboring segment, new buffer zone).

¹⁴ See (in chronological order): Law 3028/2002, op. cit., art. 17, in conjunction with art. 13; Law 4858/2021, op. cit., art. 17A, in conjunction with art. 13.

¹⁵ See: Law 4858/2021, op. cit., art. 10, par. 7.

¹⁶ See: Ministerial Decisions 7161/255/09-02-1999 and 31748/18298/970/250/04-02-2016.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive review of the works in question, see: L. Papadopoulos (ed.), *Metaschimatismoi tou astikou topiou [Transformations of the Urban Landscape]*, Thessaloniki 2001, pp. 306–309, 311–319, 324–327.

¹⁸ For indicative listings of the so far initiated works, see: Periodic Report on the State of Conservation of World Heritage Properties in Europe, 1st cycle (2006), section II, p. 3 (par. 12); Report 127487/06-04-2022 of the Directorate of Byzantine and post-Byzantine Monuments, of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, pp. 1–2. As concerns exclusively accessibility interventions, see: Naniopoulos A., Tsalis P., *A methodology for facing the accessibility of monuments developed and realized in Thessaloniki, Greece*, [in:] *Journal of Tourism Futures*, vol. I no. 3 (2015), pp. 243, 247–249 (240–253).

The aforementioned works initially catered for urgent conservation needs in separate monuments. Yet with the progress of time, they came to address additional, crucial issues, such as energy efficiency and accessibility, as well as enhancement of surrounding space, again, though, with reference only to selected buildings. Worth noting is that, at the same time, the latter have and continue to receive flash care by the respective regional service, whenever small scale damages or alterations occur¹⁹.

On the whole, the above work constitutes a most sizable and hence admirable effort on the part of the considerably understaffed services of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, indicatively recipient of a coveted Europa Nostra award for the exemplary restoration of the church of Aghios Panteleimon, in 2000²⁰. Which is more, it has produced significant side benefits. In 1995, a major national conference was held in the wake of the hitherto completed works, while numerous books, articles and essays have been and continue to be published in the wake of the fresh observations made during restoration, thus improving constantly the historical, architectural and technical documentation of the inscribed monuments²¹.

One needs to keep in mind, though, that this admirable effort is still not pursued in relation to complete managements plans, whereas related research is not ardently linked to the projection of their outstanding universal value²². Hence considerable ground remains to be covered for an optimum outcome. Moreover, the works completed so far justify, in certain cases, notable reservations. To be more precise, the addition of a large-scale metal bridge at the south side of the Rotunda, of a passenger lift in front of Panagia Chalkeon and of a platform lift at the northwest corner of the Acheiropoietos, certainly enhanced accessibility, yet at the same time prove highly intrusive and thus incompatible. Smaller-scale interventions, such as discreet ramping around the Rotunda and equally inobtrusive use of scissor-type platform lifts, with glass sides, in the perimeter of Panagia Chalkeon and Acheiropoietos, would have produced more sympathetic results.

Much more significant is the overall inadequacy of the completed works towards ensuring a fruitful visitor experience. Although, on a world-wide scale, a rewarding engagement with the inscribed monuments is vigorously sought, with a view not only to raising awareness for their

¹⁹ Report 127487/06-04-2022 of the Directorate of Byzantine and post-Byzantine Monuments, of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, p. 1.

²⁰ For further details on the award-winning project, see: Theologidou C., Kampouri-Vamvoukou M., Steriotou J., *Exhibition Catalogue "Europa Nostra Awards 1978–2018, Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments"*, Thessaloniki 2018, p. 15.

²¹ For more details on the conference held in Thessaloniki, between 1–3 June 1995, see: E. Hadjistryphonos, K. Stylianidis (eds.), *Praktika A' Epistimonikis Synantisis: To ergo tis apokatastasis ton istorikon ktismaton sti voreia Ellada [Proceedings of 1st Scientific Meeting: The restoration work on the historic buildings in northern Greece]*, [in:] *Monument & Environment*, vol. 3 no. I (1995). As regards the bulk of the hitherto writings, see (indicatively): Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou E., Tourta A., *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki*, op. cit., pp. 217–222.

²² As already noted, in terms of the scope of related research, in: *Periodic Report on the State of Conservation of World Heritage Properties in Europe*, 2nd cycle (2014), section II, p. 8 (par. 4.5.2).

unique value and consequent validity of heritage preservation on the whole, but also to securing substantial benefits for the local tourism industry, in the case of Thessaloniki, relative care proves scarce. Nearly a third of the inscribed assets do not display upon approach the World Heritage emblem, while at more than half of the ones that do, the respective signs are placed at relatively obscure points. Which is more, no monument bears a sign with a short text highlighting its universal value and incorporation in a wider network of sites, dispersed throughout the city's historic center. Basic amenities, such as info points and toilets, as well as common facilities, like rest areas, shops, and refectories, are a rarity, as are provisions for the enjoyment of the spectacular gardens around nearly half of the inscribed monuments. Coupled with the overall absence of printed or digitally available material, guided tours, and educational programs, this grim picture renders the prospect of a memorable visitor experience truly distant²³.

Impact on the urban and architectural setting

The Early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki constitute isolated units within a densely built urban environment. Not surprisingly, surrounding open spaces are frequently limited, while solid buildings fronts rise at close distance. Under such tight conditions, their enhancement requires, on one hand sympathetic design of the surrounding communal spaces, and on the other, sensitive shaping of the perimetric facades. Both tasks rest with the local authorities, primarily the Municipality of Thessaloniki (around all fifteen monuments), and secondarily, the Municipality of Neapoli–Sykies (around part of the walls)²⁴.

With respect to the design of the surrounding communal spaces, since 1988, in absence of management plans, one notes exclusively fragmentary initiatives, undertaken at no scheduled sequence, and most importantly, without care for the implementation of common principles, which could highlight the distinctive character and unity of the inscribed assets. Which is more, the aesthetics of the completed works could be best described as neutral, and in some cases, even unattractive, thus standing far from the goal of establishing an appropriate setting for World

²³ The observations that support this conclusion were made in the course of on-site visits to all fifteen monuments between 9–16 May 2022. Worth noting, in particular, is the absence of the World Heritage emblem at the entrance of the churches of Aghios Dimitrios, Panagia Acheiropoietos, Christos Sotiras, Aghia Ekaterini, Aghioi Apostoloi and Profitis Elias. Moreover, toilets are available at merely four sites, namely the Heptapyrgion Fortress and the churches of Aghios Dimitrios, Metamorphosis Sotiros and Aghios Nikolaos Orfanos.

²⁴ To be more precise, the Municipality of Neapoli–Sykies is responsible for the area stretching outside (to the northeast) of the upper section of the walls. With the wall segment in question constituting an official boundary with the Municipality of Thessaloniki, the latter bears responsibility for the area stretching along its inner side, as well as for the areas around the remaining parts of the fortifications and the other fourteen monuments.

Heritage monuments²⁵.

An exception is witnessed merely in the latest redesign project to be completed, namely the enhancement of the outer perimeter of the eastern walls, north of Olympiados street (Fig. 2). A gentle shaping of the area, combined with an enrichment of greenery, sympathetic use of materials, and installation of simple, yet elegant features, has produced a captivating context for the imposing fortifications, not surprisingly hailed as one of the most attractive walkways of the city²⁶.



Fig. 2 View of the enhanced outer perimeter of the eastern walls, north of Olympiados street, photo by the author

²⁵ The observations that support this conclusion were made in the course of on-site visits to the surroundings of all fifteen monuments between 9–16 May 2022. Most indicative of the overall picture is the fact that even the pursuit of quality redesign, through architectural competitions, focused on the surroundings of separate monuments and not in one case around all fifteen of them. For the exact object and outcome of these competitions, see (indicatively): Pelagia Astrinidou and Giorgos Simaioforidis (eds.), *I “agnosti” poli: Diamorfoseis 10 archaiologikon choron sti Thessaloniki* [The “unknown” city: Design of 10 archaeological sites in Thessaloniki], Athens 1997, pp. 18–31, 60–71, 86–99; Vilma Hastaoglou (ed.), *Thessaloniki 1997: Panellinioi Diagonismoι Astikou Schediasmou* [Panhellenic Urban Design Competitions], Thessaloniki 1997, pp. 50–129.

²⁶ For further details on the project and its evaluation, see: Toulas G., *O yperochos neos peripatos tis polis* [The fabulous new walk of the city], [in:] *Parallaxi* (24 February 2020), <https://parallaximag.gr/yperochos-neos-peripatos-tis-polis-66214> (access: 7 May 2022).

At the same time, a second noteworthy initiative is expected to unfold in the near future. The latter concerns the redesign of urban lighting around eleven monuments that border the centrally located Egnatia street, with seven of them being part of the city's World Heritage cluster²⁷. Though worthy of praise for being the first to focus on more than a single inscribed monument, not to mention through a common design approach, the project in question still leaves a lot to be desired, considering its isolated engagement with merely one aspect of the overall deficient design of the monuments' surroundings and the exclusion of the remaining eight World Heritage assets.

A clear distance from optimum action is similarly noted in the case of a more localized, yet crucial intervention, namely the installation of signs. The latter either direct to the inscribed monuments or provide historical and descriptive information upon arrival. As concerns direction signs, the display of the World Heritage emblem next to the bilingual writing of the monuments' names was not selected by the local authorities, in disregard of a handy opportunity to highlight their dispersion in the city's historic center. On the other hand, the two players installed information signs of different design and content next to the assets located in their respective domains, a case of poor coordination on a course of action that evidently required uniformity in order for the city's Early Christian and Byzantine legacy to be best projected and appreciated. Which is more, reference to World Heritage status on the installed signs was omitted, with the mere exception of the inclusion of the World Heritage emblem at a truly obscure scale on the features added by the Municipality of Thessaloniki²⁸.

As concerns the treatment of the surrounding building fronts, comprehensive initiatives, such as the establishment of common rules for appropriate functions and repair or modification works, under the relative provisions of the Greek archaeological legislation²⁹, or the implementation of projects for aesthetic enhancement, in combination with attractive subsidy schemes, on the part of the local authorities, remain to be initiated. So far, relative care has been limited to the isolated enforcement of restrictions in each separate case of reuse or repair and modification work that is approved by the respective regional service of the Ministry of Culture and Sports³⁰. Yet with subsequent control over the implementation of the restrictions being minimal, not to mention with numerous works being conducted with no approval at all, and with the consequent aesthetic degradation being met with indifference by the surrounding residents, the overall picture proves regrettably grim and certainly not compatible with the protection of monuments of World Heritage status (Fig. 3).

²⁷ For further information on the project, see: Tasioulas T., *Enteka mnimeia tis Egnatias fotizontai kai existoroun ti makraioni poreia tis Thessalonikis* [Eleven monuments of Egnatia are lit and recite the long course of Thessaloniki], [in:] *Voria.gr* (10 February 2022), <https://www.voria.gr/article/dimos-thessalonikis-anadiknionte-11-mnimia-stin-egnatia-odo-me-ton-fotismo-tous> (access: 7 May 2022).

²⁸ The observations in relation to signage were made in the course of on-site examination of the features installed around all fifteen monuments, between 9–16 May 2022.

²⁹ See: Law 4858/2021, op. cit., art. 10, par. 8.

³⁰ As prescribed in: *Ibidem*, art. 10, par. 3.



Fig. 3 Indicative view of the immediate surroundings of the church of Aghioi Apostoloi, with evident aesthetic degradation and overall incompatibility with World Heritage status, photo by the author

Impact on the social setting

In the wake of the inscription of an ensemble as sizable as that of the Early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki in the World Heritage List, one would expect a significant increase in public awareness regarding their special value and consequent validity of heritage preservation on the whole. Moreover, since international recognition allows the inscribed assets to function as major visitor attractions, significant benefits for the local tourism industry would also be anticipated.

One needs to keep in mind, though, that such developments are not dependent merely on the act of the inscription, but also on the initiatives undertaken thereafter with a view to familiarizing the city's residents and visitors with its internationally acclaimed heritage. In Thessaloniki, until recently, these initiatives were scarce. Yet as a consequence of the systematic efforts of the local authorities to promote the city's cultural identity and tourist potential over the last decade³¹, a remarkable assemblage of related actions can now be counted.

The latter comprise, firstly, the provision of historical and descriptive information, coupled with pictures and occasionally a map, through the internet, namely on international cultural platforms and websites of regional players, such as public bodies, travel agents – advisors, news

³¹ For further details on these efforts, see: Karamitsios G., *Tourismos kai Thessaloniki ston 21o aiona* [Tourism and Thessaloniki in the 21st century], [in:] *Parallaxi* (11 November 2019), <https://parallaximag.gr/tourismos-kai-thessaloniki-ston-21o-aiona-58163> (access: 7 May 2022).

agencies, and independent researchers³². Similar information has been also made available in printed form, to be more precise in handouts and entries in international journals³³. From there on, short promotional videos have been produced and posted on the internet, guided tours, cultural events, and sporting activities have been organized in or around the monuments, and even a virtual reality mobile application has been activated, for an initial visit from a distance³⁴.

Achieved in comparatively short time, this progress is truly remarkable, yet certainly not sufficient. In absence of management plans and overall coordination, it proves an unstructured group of separate, partially overlapping actions by independent players, which cannot produce optimum momentum. Moreover, among the separate initiatives, the most crucial and extensively pursued, namely the provision of basic information through the internet, proves incomplete. Of the numerous websites focusing on the World Heritage assets, few provide the full spectrum of basic information that is necessary in order to plan a smooth visit, namely location, transfer options, contact details, times of admission, and ticket prices (in the case of the Rotunda and the Heptapyrgion Fortress), while none refers to basic amenities and accessibility arrangements³⁵.

³² See (indicatively) the following electronic sources (access to all: 8 May 2022): Google Arts and Culture platform (<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/kAXBXKPYub46LA>); Websites of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sport (http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/gh3530.jsp?obj_id=9141), the Municipality of Thessaloniki (<https://thessaloniki.gr/i-want-to-know-the-city/discover/unesco-monuments/?lang=en>), the Holy Metropolis of Thessaloniki (<http://www.imth.gr/default.aspx?lang=el-gr&loc=1&page=271>), the Thessaloniki Tourism Organization (<https://thessaloniki.travel/exploring-the-city/themed-routes/unesco-monuments-route/>), the “Thessaloniki Blog” (<https://thessalonikiblog.com/the-unesco-monuments-of-thessaloniki-day-1/>), the “Best of Thessaloniki.com” guide (<https://bestofthessaloniki.com/en/thessaloniki-a-city-of-monuments-a-mosaic-of-cultures/>), the “Thessaloniki Tourism” guide (<https://www.thessalonikitourism.gr/index.php/en/history-culture-2/unesco-en>), the “Voria.gr” newspaper (<https://www.voria.gr/article/xenagisi-sta-15-mnimeia-unesco-tis-thessalonikis>); Personal website of researcher Christos Zafeiris (<http://www.thessmemory.gr>).

³³ A bilingual handout was produced by the Municipality of Thessaloniki and the 9th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, in 2013 (<https://thessaloniki.gr/i-want-to-know-the-city/discover/unesco-monuments/?lang=en>, access: 8 May 2022, in Greek–English). Moreover, a one-page entry was included in: *World Heritage*, vol. 98 (April 2021), p. 44, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/review/98/> (access: 8 May 2022).

³⁴ As regards the initiatives mentioned, see (indicatively): the videos produced by the Cultural Society of Entrepreneurs of northern Greece (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWn01GMGZzU&t=61s>, access: 9 May 2022) and the Athens News Agency (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAmUn3eSqYo&t=64s>, access: 9 May 2022), the guided tours organized by the Thessaloniki Youth Club for UNESCO (<https://unescoyouth.gr/>, access: 9 May 2022), the annual events “Heptapyrgion Festival” (<https://kepo.gr/festival/>, access: 9 May 2022), “Thessaloniki International Monument Festival,” and “Monuments Run” (<https://www.timf.gr/>, access: 9 May 2022), and the “Thessaloniki VR–UNESCO edition” (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=gr.vertoo.thessalonikivrunesco&hl=el&gl=US>, access: 9 May 2022).

³⁵ Basic information is provided (indicatively) in the websites of: the Thessaloniki Tourism Organization, the “Thessaloniki Blog” and the “Thessaloniki Tourism” guide, op. cit.

Coupled with the already discussed deficiency of on-site provisions for a rewarding visitor experience, the largely neutral or even unattractive design of the surrounding spaces and the poor directional signage, one cannot expect significant progress to have been made since 1988 in raising public awareness. As far as the city's residents are concerned, this claim proves valid, considering, first of all, the hitherto feeble reaction of local citizen groups in relation to incidents with a clearly negative impact on the inscribed monuments³⁶. Secondly, one needs to remember the even more indicative indifference of the hundreds of residents who live around the distinguished assets for the vivid incompatibility of the main fronts of the buildings in which they reside with the neighboring World Heritage monuments.

As concerns the city's visitors, recent surveys show a clear increase in their total number since 2010, with 47% of them acknowledging its built heritage as a main reason for planning their visit³⁷. With the current rise of the trend of thematic tourism and the multiplicity of separate promotional initiatives just described, one can rightly claim that the World Heritage monuments of Thessaloniki have played their role in the increase of tourism flow to the city. Yet as long as the aforementioned deficiencies persist, an optimum benefit for the local tourism industry will remain to be achieved.

Impact on the educational setting

As the second largest city of Greece, Thessaloniki encompasses numerous schools, institutes, and colleges, along with four universities, which account for a total student population of over 250,000³⁸. The interaction of this sizable audience and the separate institutions themselves with the city's internationally acclaimed heritage, through their thematically-related educational procedures, can be described in short as a field of initially narrow action, with notable expansion in recent years.

To be more precise, even before 1988, the Early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki, in particular the churches surrounded by gardens, had repeatedly provided the setting for daily excursions by primary, elementary and secondary education students. This trend has continued to this day, at a growing pace, in an overall effort to enhance student awareness as regards the special value of the distinct assets and the consequent importance of heritage protection. Worth noting is that, in certain cases, student interaction has gone considerably further than a mere visiting experience. Through the subsequent preparation and circulation in the internet of comprehensive presentations of the inscribed monuments, and even the adoption of selected vestiges, an active contribution to

³⁶ One only needs to note the reaction of merely one group, namely the association "Friends of the Historic Center of Thessaloniki," to the recent transformation of the courtyard of the churches of Aghios Dimitrios and Aghia Sophia in controlled parking areas by the ecclesiastic authorities. For the respective protest, see: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/549172058572966/> (access: 9 May 2022).

³⁷ Karamitsios G., *Tourismos kai Thessaloniki...* [Tourism and Thessaloniki...], op. cit.

³⁸ According to the data provided by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (<https://www.minedu.gov.gr/>, access: 9 May 2022).

the preservation of the latter has been additionally sought, with an impact, primarily, in awareness raising among the wider public³⁹.

Similarly, the World Heritage monuments of Thessaloniki have provided from early on an ideal focus for higher education students studying the development of Early Christian and Byzantine architecture at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Remarkably, in the wake of their inscription, the latter, along with the consequently arising management issues, have also become objects of study in postgraduate dissertations⁴⁰. At the same time, postgraduate students are known to have organized guided tours in selected monuments, in the framework of their training in the presentation of cultural assets to the public⁴¹.

Yet of all the cases of related action in the higher education sector, the most notable is by far the realization of a research program, between 2009–2011, by the city's largest university, in cooperation with the respective regional service of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, for the improvement of accessibility in the fifteen monuments. A truly pioneering effort, which addressed a crucial, yet hitherto untouched issue, the program in question included pilot interventions in six assets, with the already outlined reservations as concerns compatibility in the Rotunda, Panagia Chalkeon and Acheiropoietos. From there on, it produced complete surveys and planning for similar improvements in the remaining nine properties⁴².

On the whole, the above initiatives, however remarkable and indicative of an improved overall picture they may seem, point to yet another record of independent actions, not ardently linked with the projection of the outstanding significance of the inscribed monuments and their added value as a unique ensemble. Considering, in addition, the absence of regular educational programs for visiting students and the lack of permanent cooperation with the administrative players, the interaction of the educational sector with the distinguished vestiges proves open to considerable further improvement.

³⁹ See (indicatively): the presentation of students of the Hellenic College of Thessaloniki (<https://hellenic-college.gr/gymnasio-lukeio/portfolio/>, access: 9 May 2022). As concerns the adoption of selected monuments, the latter was pursued in the framework of the educational program “We love our city–We adopt its monuments,” which was organized by the association “Friends of the Monuments of Thessaloniki,” between 2014–2018. Among the adopted monuments, were the walls, the Rotunda and the church of Aghioi Apostoloi. For more details, see: <https://filoimnionthessalonikis.gr/blog/category/draseis/page/3/> (access: 9 May 2022).

⁴⁰ See the unpublished postgraduate dissertations: Tsimbas T., *I anagnorisi Vyzantinon Christianikon mnimeion apo tin UNESCO os mnimeia Pagkosmias Politistikis Klironomias: I periptosi tis Thessalonikis* [The recognition of Byzantine Christian monuments by UNESCO as monuments of World Cultural Heritage: The case of Thessaloniki], Thessaloniki 2019; Chiotou E., *Diacheirisi Mnimeion Pagkosmias Politistikis Klironomias. Mia sygkritiki meleti tou Pantheon tis Romis kai tis Rotontas sti Thessaloniki* [Management of World Cultural Heritage Monuments: A comparative study of the Pantheon in Rome and the Rotunda in Thessaloniki], Thessaloniki 2021.

⁴¹ The tours in question were organized by students of the postgraduate course “Museology”, of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the University of West Macedonia, in May 2012, with a focus on the church of Panagia Chalkeon. For more details, see: Skaltsa M., Galikas S., Tsimoura M., *Erminevontas enan politistiko peripato: Odos Aristotelous, Thessaloniki* [In interpretation of a cultural walk: Aristotelous street, Thessaloniki], Thessaloniki 2012.

⁴² For more information on the program, see: Naniopoulos A., Tsalis P., *A methodology...*, op. cit., pp. 240–253.

Conclusions

Having so far examined the full spectrum of the actions assumed in the wake of the inscription of the Early Christian and Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki on the World Heritage List, one concludes that, after 34 years on the list, relative care still stands far from the anticipated level for assets of such distinguished status. Though in most cases notable and worthy of praise, the hitherto undertaken initiatives, largely separate, unstructured and poorly coordinated, amount to a disproportionately small effort in relation to the one required for the optimum preservation of the city's internationally acclaimed heritage. Which is more, for the most part, and particularly in the administrative, urban, architectural and educational context, the assumed actions do not display an ardent connection with the obvious aim of highlighting the special value of the inscribed monuments and their significance as an irreplaceable ensemble.

If the full potential of the inscription is to be achieved, an initial effort will be required in the direction of planning all explicitly necessary or potentially positive action for the preservation of the distinguished assets, in all directly and indirectly related fields. Though with considerable delay, this prospect is currently visible on the horizon, with the anticipated completion of management plans for all fifteen monuments by the Ministry of Culture and Sports. Yet along with the latter, a second major requirement that will remain to be fulfilled, given the multiplicity of players involved, is the establishment of a basis for regular and effective coordination, which will eliminate the currently encountered ambiguities in the treatment of the inscribed sites and their surroundings, and moreover, will ensure an optimum mobilization of the contributing parties. Above all, if a truly beneficial outcome is to be sought, a common understanding needs to be reached as to the fact that the celebrated monuments of Thessaloniki, as separate entities and constituents of a unique ensemble at the same time, require equal and simultaneous care, which, in the long run, will allow the city to hold pride of place among the World Heritage hubs of southeast Europe.

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