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# Voices in Stone: The Architectural and Epigraphic Legacy of Ottoman Greece

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## Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the surviving inscriptions on Ottoman-era buildings across Greece.* The sheer volume of extant inscriptions from the Ottoman period within the region is striking. Employing statistical methodologies, this research systematically surveys a total of 684 inscriptions associated with 343 Ottoman structures distributed throughout Greece. Upon closer examination, these inscriptions represent 1,788 distinct textual records, assessed in terms of language and content. The classification of these inscriptions is presented through two detailed tables accompanied by illustrative charts, which categorise the material according to typology, architectural function, and regional distribution. The criteria employed for this classification encompass linguistic composition, thematic content, patronage, stylistic characteristics, and geographical context. Furthermore, the analysis offers statistically substantiated insights into the distribution and attributes of the inscriptions, shedding light on broader historical and cultural patterns. The paper concludes by proposing a structured methodological framework for the cataloguing and scholarly documentation of Ottoman building inscriptions across Greece.

## Keywords

Inscription,
Ottoman,
Balkan,
Greece,
Epigraphy.

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## 1. Introduction

Historical sources indicate that the first Ottoman foothold in what is now Greece occurred when Didymoteicho fell to the Turks in 1361 CE. Over the subsequent three to five centuries, large swaths of Thrace, Macedonia and Thessaly remained within the Ottoman sphere. During this long period the imperial administration oversaw the construction of countless mosques, markets, fountains, fortifications and other public structures, leaving behind a distinctive architectural legacy throughout the Hellenic landscape. Many of these monuments have since vanished through neglect or redevelopment, yet the surviving fabric still represents one of the most varied and intact collections of Ottoman architecture in the Balkans (Ameen 2019b).

Calligraphy and epigraphic ornamentation have always been integral to Islamic art. Buildings across the Ottoman world were routinely adorned with stone or marble inscriptions that invoked God, quoted Qur'anic verses, commemorated founders or recorded endowments. Greece's remaining Ottoman monuments preserve a particularly rich and diverse epigraphic corpus. For the purpose of analysis the inscriptions fall into three broad groups: (1) those carved onto buildings; (2) funerary epitaphs on tombstones; and (3) inscriptions on movable objects such as jewellery, weapons and coins. The third category has attracted little scholarly attention and is represented mainly by artefacts housed in museums like the Numismatic and Benaki Museums in Athens, the Arslan Pasha Mosque Museum in Ioannina and the historical museums of Iraklion and Drama (Figures 1-3). Numerous Ottoman cemeteries with hundreds of stones survive on the islands (Anastasopoulos et al. 2016) and in northern Greece (Yapar 2007, pp. 32–200), although they remain unevenly documented (Figure 4). For the present study, however, focus is placed on architectural inscriptions because they provide the clearest evidence of public patronage, religious function and artistic style.

During fieldwork the author recorded 684 inscriptions affixed to 343 buildings. The corpus actually comprises 1 788 discrete textual elements because many tablets combine Qur'anic quotations, invocations and foundation statements in different languages (Ameen 2019c). The resulting inventory forms the largest and most diverse catalogue of Ottoman inscriptions known in any part of the Balkan Peninsula.

**Figure 1:** A group of Ottoman swords exhibited in the museum inside the Arslan Pasha Mosque of Ioannina (on the left, © A. Ameen 2008) **Figure 2**: Ottoman numismatics exhibited in the Historical Museum at Iraklion (on the right, © A. Ameen 2016)

## 2. Methods

This research employed a two-phase quantitative–descriptive methodology. First, the team systematically gathered and codified inscription data through site visits, photography, and the study of archival materials and travel accounts. When physical access was impossible, documentation was supplemented with museum records, conservation files and published architectural surveys. Second, the inscriptions were analysed using a multi-parameter

framework that included building type, inscription genre, dating (Hijri, Rumi and Gregorian), material, language and location. A novel alphanumeric Corpus Identification code was devised to uniquely identify each inscription and facilitate digital cataloguing; for example, "0001Did01A" denotes the first Arabic inscription from Didymoteicho.

Inscriptions were further classified along seven axes—language, function, content, patron, stylistic features, region and inscription type. Illegible or missing pieces were still recorded with provisional metadata. Where inscriptions were inaccessible or lost, satellite imagery and high-resolution photographs were consulted.

**Figure 3**: Ottoman numismatics exhibited in the Historical Museum at Drama (on the left, © A. Ameen 2008) **Figure 4**: A group of Ottoman tombstones in Iraklion (on the right, © A. Ameen 2016).

## 3. Classification of Inscriptions

### 3.1. Language

The surviving inscriptions reflect a multilingual environment. Most texts are in Arabic or Ottoman Turkish written in Arabic script, but examples also appear in modern Turkish (Latin script), Persian, and Greek. A few late monuments even bear French and Italian inscriptions. Three Persian inscriptions have been identified: one on a decorative plaque in Iraklion's Historical Museum, one over the türbe of Sheikh Hortacı (now part of the Church of Saint George/Rotunda) in Thessaloniki, and another inside Ioannina's Arslan Pasha Mosque (Figure 5). These Persian verses point to the presence and influence of Sufi orders in the Balkans.

Greek and modern Turkish inscriptions tend to date from the late Ottoman era and underscore the region's linguistic pluralism. On Lesbos, for example, fifty of the sixty Greek-language inscriptions adorn fountains, while the remaining ten are found on buildings in Komotini, Xanthi, Rhodes and Crete. Many of these monuments were commissioned by local Greek patrons, illustrating how Ottoman architectural patronage transcended religious lines.

**Figure 5**: The Arabic-Persian inscription of the central medallion of the interior of the dome of Arslan Pasha Mosque in Ioannina (© A. Ameen 2008)

In the early centuries the formal foundation and religious inscriptions were composed primarily in Arabic. After the mid-sixteenth century, however, Ottoman Turkish became the dominant epigraphic language as part of broader cultural and administrative shifts. A complete foundation or restoration inscription typically includes five components: (a) an invocation or Qur'anic verse, (b) a verb describing the act (such as "founded" or "restored"), (c) a description of the building, (d) the name and titles of the patron, and (e) the date of construction (Blair 1998: 29). In cases where some parts are missing but a date is present, the tablet is classified as an abridged foundation inscription.

Of the 367 foundation and restoration inscriptions recorded, 54 are in Arabic, 210 in Ottoman Turkish, 60 in Greek (Axiotis, 1994), four in Byzantine Greek, three in modern Turkish, two in French, nine consist solely of numerals and 25 are multilingual. The high proportion of Arabic inscriptions—unusual in comparison with other Balkan provinces—provides insight into the religious and cultural character of Ottoman communities in Greece (Ameen 2012; 2018: 226–227).

### 3.2. Function

Because inscriptional content often reflects the purpose of the building, functional classification helps illuminate shifts in architectural terminology and use. In the present corpus the inscriptions (see: Table 1, Chart 1) were distributed as follows: 117 were associated with mosques; 118 with water works (109 fountains or şâdırvâns, two reservoirs, three springs, two baths, one aqueduct and one bridge); 20 with educational institutions (including mekteps, medreses, idâdîs and rüşdiyes); 17 with Sufi complexes such as tekkes and imarets; 15 with fortifications; 14 with mausoleums; 17 with houses; seven with clock towers; four with commercial buildings; two with judicial buildings; and two outliers (a prison and a customs house).

Examining inscriptions in light of building function reveals, for example, how terminology for schools evolved from *mektep* and *medrese* to *idâdî*, *rüşdiye* and *dârülfünun*. Similarly, texts on madrasa buildings frequently extol the virtues of knowledge and exhort students to pursue learning.

### 3.3. Content

Content analysis uncovers broader historical and religious contexts. Inscriptions from Ottoman-period Greece fall into six thematic groups:

1. **Foundation or restoration** inscriptions, recording the building of a structure or its repair.
2. **Religious** inscriptions, subdivided into Qur'anic quotations and non-Qur'anic supplications or devotional phrases.
3. **Endowment** inscriptions, which refer to charitable foundations (waqf).
4. **Funerary** inscriptions, typically epitaphs.
5. **Craftsmen's signatures**, acknowledging architects or artisans.
6. **Graffiti** inscriptions, informal incised texts often added by visitors.

These categories overlap: a single tablet may combine a foundation formula with a Qur'anic verse and a craftsman's name. Previous scholarship has privileged foundation inscriptions, reflecting a traditional emphasis on patronage and chronology. This focus has obscured the importance of religious tablets, which constitute the largest single category in Greece with approximately 350 examples. Only one confirmed endowment inscription has been identified, on the Mahmoud Ağa Mosque (Figure 6) in Komotini, and just one funerary inscription survives, located inside the Karaca Ahmed Mosque (Figure 7) in the village of Şahin, Xanthi (Ameen 2024).


**Figure 6**: An endowment "Waqffiye" inscription of Mahmud Agha Mosque at Komotini (on the left, © A. Ameen 2008) **Figure 7**: A funerary inscription inside the mosque of Karaca Ahmed in the village of Shaheen in Xanthi (on the right, © A. Ameen 2008)

### 3.3.1. Signatures

Signatures reveal the identities of architects, artisans and builders who shaped Ottoman Greece. These inscriptions are relatively rare but invaluable for reconstructing professional networks and cross-cultural collaboration. Stand-alone signatures occur as independent plaques separate from foundation texts. A notable example is the inscription on Thessaloniki's Yeni Mosque that credits the Italian architect Vitaliano Poselli (Figure 8) (Ameen 2019c). This tablet exemplifies the cosmopolitan architectural culture of the late Ottoman period, when European and non-Muslim professionals were active in provincial cities.

In other cases, the architect's name is embedded within the foundation inscription. The secondary Arabic foundation inscription of the Sultan Mehmed Çelebi Mosque at Didymoteicho names the early Ottoman master builder Hacı İwaz (ʿAwāḍ) (Figure 9) (Ameen 2025), underscoring the prestige accorded to architects in the empire's formative period. Similarly, an 1884 Greek inscription on a fountain in Chania attributes the work to the local architect Georgaraki, demonstrating how multilingual collaboration persisted into the final decades of Ottoman rule (Figure 10) (Ameen 2019c). Collectively, signature inscriptions attest to the pluralistic society of Ottoman Greece and highlight the agency of individual craftsmen.

**Figure 8**: A signature inscription of the architect of the Yeni Mosque at Thessaloniki (on the left, © A. Ameen 2009) **Figure 9**: the second Arabic foundation inscription of Sultan Mehmed Çelebi Mosque at Didymoteicho (on the right, © A. Ameen 2008)

**Figure 10**: Both Ottoman and Greek inscriptions of the Sultan Abdülhamid II çeşme of the Kalami village at Chania (© A. Ameen 2016)

**Table 1**. Geographical proportion of inscriptions of Ottoman buildings in Greece considering their content (Ameen 2019)

| Region \ Inscrip. Categ. | Buildings | Inscriptions | Foundation | Short Found. | Qur'anic | Non-Qur'anic | Funeral | Other | Tot. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thrace | 69 | 211 | 37 | 17 | 114 | 59 | 1 | 18 | 526 |
| Macedonia | 41 | 70 | 30 | 12 | 19 | 12 | 2 | 3 | 189 |
| Aegean Islands | 122 | 224 | 90 | 79 | 48 | 22 | 0 | 1 | 586 |
| Crete | 77 | 101 | 50 | 21 | 23 | 11 | 3 | 6 | 292 |
| Epir.&Thessaly&Cen.Gr.&Attic.&Pelop. | 34 | 78 | 26 | 5 | 16 | 26 | 0 | 10 | 195 |
| Tot. | 343 | 684 | 233 | 134 | 220 | 130 | 6 | 38 | 1788 |

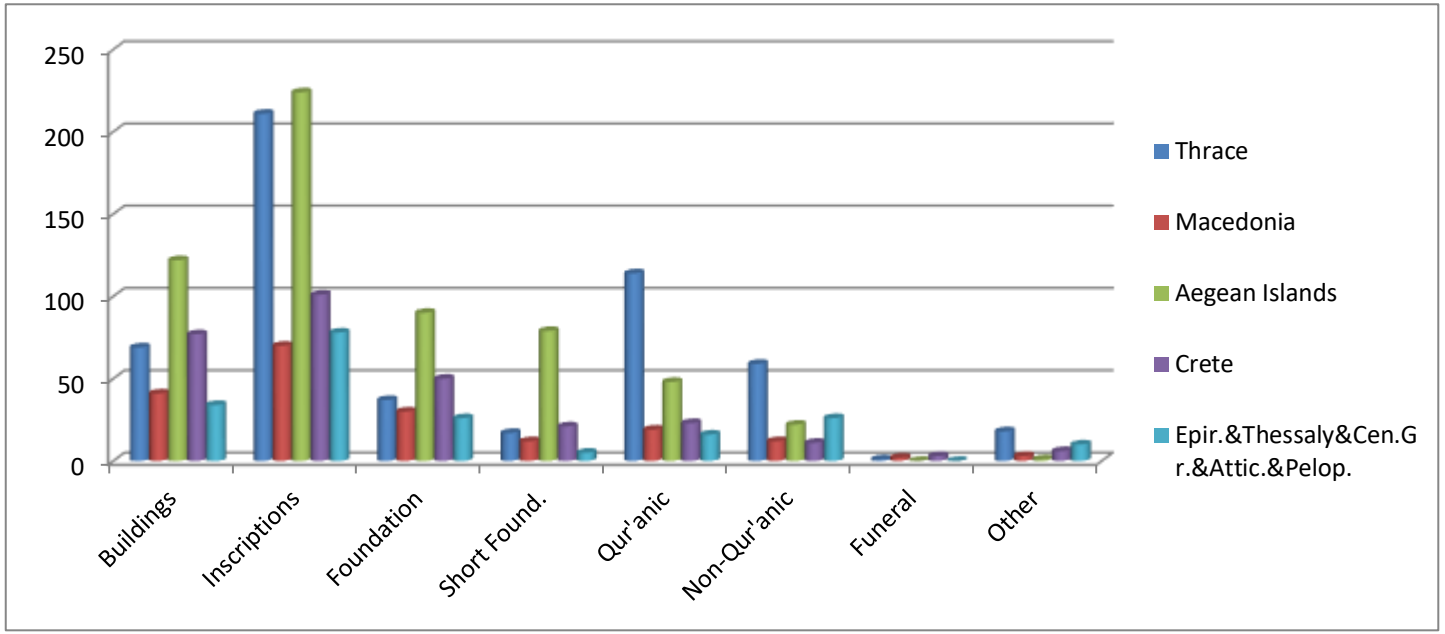


**Chart 1**. Geographical proportion of inscriptions of Ottoman buildings in Greece considering their content (Ameen 2019)

### 3.3.2. Graffiti Inscriptions

Graffiti constitute a distinct yet often overlooked category of Ottoman epigraphy. These incised texts, scratched into stone or marble by visitors and devotees, are scattered across many buildings. They appear on door and window frames, as at the Fethiye Mosque in Athens, on column shafts in the porticoes of the Arslan Pasha Mosque in Ioannina and the Sultan Süleyman Mosque in Rhodes, and in other prominent locations. The majority consist of Qur'anic verses, Hadith quotations, supplications and devotional poetry, sometimes accompanied by the inscriber's name or a date. Despite their informal nature, these inscriptions offer invaluable historical data—especially when dated—and have helped establish the chronology of buildings like Athens's Fethiye Mosque (Kiel 2002).

## 3.4. Patron(s) and Craftsmen

One fruitful approach to Islamic epigraphy is to examine inscriptions according to their patrons—individuals, families or institutions who financed the works. The Ottoman inscriptions in Greece reflect a broad social spectrum. At the apex are imperial patrons such as Sultans Bayezid I, Mehmed Çelebi, Murad II, Bayezid II, Süleyman I (the Magnificent), Mustafa III and Abdülhamid II. Beneath them stand grand viziers, military commanders and members of the royal family. For example, the mosque of Mohamed Bey in Serres (Ameen 2017: 87–89; Ameen 2026) was built by the son of Grand Vizier Ahmad Pasha, who married Bayezid II's daughter Selçuk Hatun.

Female patronage is attested as well; the Hamza Bey Mosque in Thessaloniki, also known as the Hafsa Hatun Mosque, is attributed to a woman. Another phenomenon of the later Ottoman period is communal patronage: mosques and medreses such as those at Ierapetra in Crete and in the town of Komotini were financed collectively by local Muslim communities (Ameen 2019a; 2024). Christian benefactors occasionally commissioned public monuments too. A striking case is the bilingual Greek–Ottoman inscription on the clock tower at Naousa (1895), erected by the Greek industrialist George Anastasiou Kergi (Figure 11) (Ameen 2019c). These examples underscore the inclusive character of Ottoman urban development and the participation of diverse social groups.


**Figure 11**: The bilingual foundation inscription of the Clock-tower of Naousa, Source: https://odosell.blogspot.com/2014/04/blog-post_9961.html [Accessed on 25 June 2018]

**Figure 12**: A Kufic inscription above the lateral niche eastern the main entrance of Sultan Mehmed Çelebi Mosque at Didymoteicho (© A. Ameen 2008)

## 3.5. Stylistic Features

The visual and material qualities of inscriptions—size, placement, script, colour, shape and technique—offer important chronological and regional clues. Yet the Ottoman inscriptions of Greece have rarely been examined from this perspective (Ameen 2025). An instructive case is

the Sultan Mehmed Çelebi Mosque at Didymoteicho (Ameen, El-Hussiny & Benkheira), where a monumental ensemble combines angular Kufic script with the flowing Thuluth (sülüs) style (Figure 12). This combination marks a transitional moment in early Ottoman epigraphy, after which Thuluth and its monumental variant Jali Thuluth (celî sülüs) became the dominant scripts. Features such as panel framing, segmentation and decorative integration may help identify regional workshops and warrant further study.

### 3.6. Regional Distribution

A geographical framework proves especially useful for cataloguing inscriptions. Greece is currently divided into thirteen administrative regions (Figure 13), which this study groups into five larger zones—Thrace, Macedonia, the Aegean Islands, Crete and a combined inland group consisting of Epirus, Thessaly, Central Greece, Attica and the Peloponnese. No inscriptions have been recorded from the Ionian Islands.

Statistical analysis reveals that the number of inscriptions correlates closely with the density of surviving Ottoman architecture. The Aegean Islands contain the greatest share (224 inscriptions), followed by Thrace (211), Crete (101), Macedonia (70) and the inland group (78). The abundance of fountains on the Aegean Islands and in Crete explains the high proportion of foundation inscriptions there, whereas Thrace's large Muslim communities account for its many religious inscriptions. Proximity to Turkey and continued religious use have aided preservation in Thrace, while regions liberated earlier—Central Greece, the Peloponnese and Thessaly—witnessed more thorough destruction of Ottoman heritage. Ioannina in Epirus is an exception: its exceptionally rich epigraphic record owes much to the semi-independent rule of Ali Pasha and the city's relatively peaceful incorporation into Greece in 1913.


**Figure 13**: A map shows the regional units of Greece

Retrieved from: https://www.greek-islands-ferries.gr/ferry_GREECE.htm (Accessed on 10 May 2025)

**Table 2**. Geographical proportion of inscriptions of Ottoman buildings in Greece considering their function (Ameen 2019)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Building Type / Region | Külliyesi (Complex) | Mosque /Mesjid | Educational Instit. (A) Medrese/Mekteb/İdadiye /Rushdiya | (B) Library | Water Works (A) Fountain/ Şadirwan | (B) Other | Tekke/ Zawiya /Imaret | Fortification | Clock Tower | Turbe | House | Khan/ Bedestan /Shop | Other | Tot. |
| Thrace | | **47** | **2** | **1** | **9** | **2** | **3** | | **2** | **2** | | 1 | | 69 |
| Macedonia | 1 | **17** | **3** | | **3** | **3** | **1** | **3** | **2** | **2** | **5** | 1 | | 41 |
| Aegean Islands | | **31** | **7** | **1** | **52** | **2** | **2** | **6** | **1** | **8** | **2** | 1 | **9** | 122 |
| Crete | | **15** | **2** | **1** | **33** | **2** | **6** | **1** | | **2** | **10** | 1 | **4** | 77 |
| Epir.&Thessaly&Cen.Gr.&Attic.&Pelop. | | **7** | **3** | | **12** | | **5** | **5** | **2** | | | | | 34 |
| Tot. | 1 | 117 | 17 | 3 | 109 | 9 | 17 | 15 | 7 | 14 | 17 | 4 | 13 | 343 |

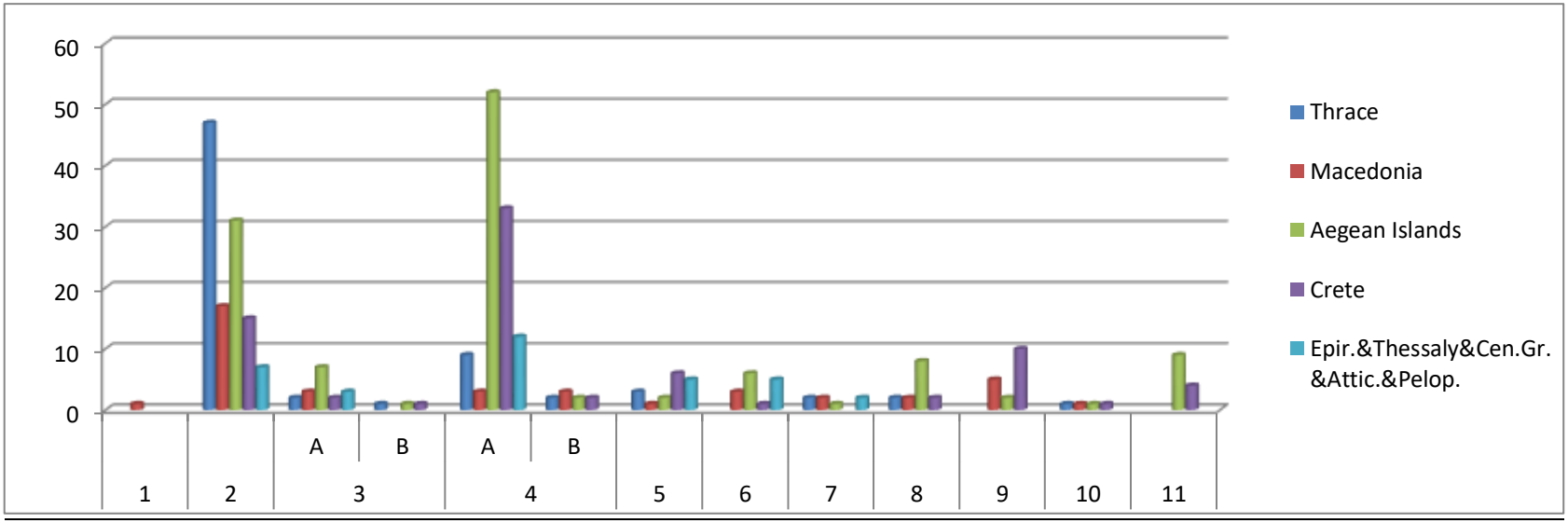


**Chart 2**. Geographical proportion of inscriptions of Ottoman buildings in Greece considering their function (Ameen 2019)

## 4. A Suggested Methodology in Cataloguing the Corpus of Inscriptions

To prepare a comprehensive corpus of inscriptions, the study proposes cataloguing each structure separately using the regional framework described above. Each entry should include, when available: (1) a recent photograph or, if lost, an archival image; (2) the original text in its script; (3) an English translation or a reference to previously published translations; (4) a brief commentary on architectural context, patronage, historical importance and peculiarities; and (5) a bibliography of relevant scholarship. Given the large number of inscriptions and the limited time, this project focuses on compiling the raw data and making it accessible for future researchers rather than providing exhaustive philological analysis.

A structured codification system is essential for managing the corpus. Each inscription receives a unique alphanumeric identifier composed of a sequential number, a two- or three-letter regional abbreviation, a local serial number and a one-letter language code. This code facilitates cross-regional comparison and database indexing. The eight standardized data fields for each entry include the corpus ID, regional unit name (modern and Ottoman), a basic data table (building type, inscription type, dates in Hijri/Rumi/Gregorian, material and language), photographs, transcription, translation, commentary and bibliography.

## 5. Results

The survey documented 684 inscriptions on 343 buildings across modern Greece. Because many plaques contain multiple texts, the corpus comprises 1 788 discrete textual units. A clear chronological shift emerged: Arabic dominated in early foundation and religious contexts, whereas Ottoman Turkish, still written in Arabic script, became prevalent from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Besides these languages, the corpus includes 60 inscriptions in Greek, four in Byzantine Greek, three in modern Turkish, two in French and three in Persian; an additional 25 inscriptions are bilingual or trilingual.

Functional analysis confirms that mosques (117 inscriptions) and waterworks (118) account for the largest categories. Smaller numbers are associated with educational institutions, Sufi lodges, fortifications, mausoleums, houses and commercial or judicial buildings. Content analysis shows that 367 inscriptions record foundations or restorations, while religious inscriptions—containing Qur'anic verses or invocations—form the largest thematic group with about 350 examples. Graffiti, though often formulaic, were ubiquitous on doorframes and column shafts; their dates sometimes help anchor building chronologies. Signature inscriptions, whether stand-alone or embedded, identify architects such as Vitaliano Poselli and Georgaraki and provide glimpses into the multiethnic composition of the building trades. Regionally, the Aegean Islands yielded the highest number of inscriptions, followed by Thrace, Crete, Macedonia and the inland group, while the Ionian Islands produced none. This distribution reflects both Ottoman administrative patterns and the survival of Muslim communities.

## 6. Conclusion

The extensive corpus of Ottoman inscriptions preserved across Greece offers an unparalleled window into the region's Islamic architectural heritage. Spread over five centuries, these inscriptions illuminate patterns of patronage, linguistic change, devotional practice and artistic style. By surveying 684 inscriptions linked to 343 structures and analysing 1788 discrete texts, this study demonstrates the richness of Greece's epigraphic legacy. The research underscores the importance of Arabic and Ottoman Turkish texts while highlighting the contributions of Greek, Persian and other languages. It reveals how mosques, fountains and schools functioned as focal points for Ottoman communities and how inscriptions preserve voices ranging from sultans to local artisans and visitors.

This paper is part of an ongoing project aimed at creating the first comprehensive corpus of Islamic inscriptions in Greece. By proposing a standardized methodology and codification system, the study lays the groundwork for future cataloguing and digital preservation efforts. Ultimately, these inscriptions—etched into stone and marble—serve as enduring witnesses to the cultural interchanges that shaped the Ottoman Greek world.

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