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TOURIST VALORIZATION OF THE CENTRAL CULTURAL CORE OF PRILEP, BASED ON HILARY DU CROS' MODEL

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Abstract

This paper identified and investigated the cultural assets of Prilep that had the potential to generate economic benefits for the local community, recognizing cultural heritage as a key factor in tourism. It examined the influences on tourists and the role of cultural-historical monuments in tourism development. The research focused on six monuments representing various periods of Prilep's cultural history. Valorization was conducted using Hilary du Cros' method, designed to assess the tourist potential of cultural heritage. Findings based on sub-indicator analysis placed Prilep in cell M (2,3) of the tourist valorization matrix, confirming strong potential for cultural heritage tourism. However, to fully realize this potential and ensure sustainability, a strategic, integrated approach was considered essential. The results highlighted the need for planned management, continuous monitoring and promotion, infrastructure development, and mitigation of negative impacts from tourism, including risks to cultural assets due to investment projects. Based on the findings and assuming key conditions were met, it was proposed that Prilep be included on North Macedonia's tourist map.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Tourism; Motivation; Valorization; Hilary Du Cros Method; Prilep

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic socio-economic phenomenon, a multidimensional and multifactorial occurrence that, in the context of globalization, stimulates market competitiveness, foreign investments, and local businesses by utilizing hospitality and tourism capacities. It encourages the development of infrastructure in transportation, public utilities, and

communications (Ursache 2015). Post-pandemic, the global tourism sector has recorded growth; however, certain destinations still face challenges such as labor shortages, resource management, and environmental protection (Villa 2024). In developing countries, tourism drives economic growth through innovation, preservation of cultural and natural heritage, and inclusive employment (World Bank 2025).

In the Republic of North Macedonia, tourism development is evident, with increased demand for diverse activities and higher standards of services. Cultural tourism is increasingly becoming an alternative to traditional coastal tourism. The country holds competitive potential with a rich offer and qualitative development of active, cultural, and rural tourism, which will guarantee its promotion as an attractive tourist destination. Strategic documents from 2019 emphasize the need for high-quality, attractive tourism products (Korunovski et al. 2019).

Regions like Prilep, in order to build a recognizable tourism brand, must strategically invest in the protection, promotion, and continuity of cultural and natural potentials, which will generate long-term economic benefits and sustainability for future generations.

For the Municipality of Prilep, as one of the key stakeholders, the main challenge is the development of its first tourism strategy that balances utility and sustainability. Although tourism is included in the Local Economic Development (LED) strategy, this document has not been updated or implemented for over a decade, which makes it difficult to measure the economic impact of tourism (Opshtina Prilep 2014).

According to the Office for Protection of Cultural Heritage (Uprava za zashtita na kulturnoto nasledstvo 2024), Prilep has 206 cultural assets—176 shops in the Old Bazaar and 30 other cultural-historical monuments—which reflect the city’s uniqueness and have strong tourism potential. To activate this potential, it is necessary to assess the tourism value of cultural heritage by evaluating various factors from both the cultural and tourism sectors, in order to shape an appropriate tourism offering.

Tourism values—whether potential or advanced—differ in scope, duration, intensity, destination, cost, age, quantity, and range. For accurate and effective results, a combination of quantitative and qualitative evaluation is essential (Marinoski, Korunovski, and Risteski 2024).

This paper focuses on identifying and documenting the most significant cultural-historical monuments with tourism potential, analyzing the factors that influence tourists’ decisions and motivations to visit, and evaluating their impact on local tourism development. The main goal is to explore the significance of cultural assets and the factors influencing tourist visits, as well as the overall effect of cultural heritage on the local economy, positioning Prilep as an attractive destination for cultural tourism in North Macedonia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is still no universally accepted definition of tourism, although there is a genuine need for one. The word “tourist” was first published in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* in 1800 (Fuster 1971, cited in Netto 2009). Tourism is considered a complex phenomenon, as confirmed by the fact that proposed definitions are often subject to criticism. Tourism is a global economic force that plays a significant role in promoting socio-economic growth in the areas where it develops. It implies a wide range of positive outcomes, including employment opportunities, motivation for local populations to remain in their communities, and encouragement of diversification of agricultural activities, depending on the regions.

The term culture derives from the Latin *cultūra*, meaning “cultivation” or “nurturing,” and later came to refer to societies, traditions, and practices. According to Edward B. Taylor, culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Taylor 1871 cited in White 1959). As scholars have noted, “heritage is not history but a celebration of it – a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes. In tourism, heritage becomes a consumable past, staged and stylized for visitors” (Lowenthal 2015). UNESCO (1972) defines cultural heritage as the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes inherited from past generations, preserved in the present, and passed on to future generations. Sančanin (2019) points out that without a clear interpretation, cultural heritage cannot be identified or equated with a cultural *product*. The Macedonian Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage defines material and intangible assets as those with cultural and historical significance that are subject to legal protection (Zakon za zashtita na kulturnoto nasledstvo, September 14, 2005 2004).

The importance of cultural and nature-based tourism is emphasized in the UNWTO document Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals – Journey to 2030, highlighting their key role in strengthening the competitiveness of Southeast EU countries—Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia—as sustainable and attractive tourist destinations (World Tourism Organization 2018). This also applies to North Macedonia, which, although not an EU member, geographically belongs to the region. Well-managed tourism contributes to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage and strengthens local communities. However, the growing number of tourists creates pressure on emissions, economic flows, resource management, and local cultural values. Therefore, strong partnerships and decisive action by all tourism stakeholders are necessary to harness tourism’s positive contribution to sustainable development and mitigate its negative effects.

Cultural tourism is closely tied to the landscape, as historical monuments enhance the identity of their surroundings. For countries traditionally reliant on sun-and-beach tourism, it offers market diversification, season extension, and attracts visitors to lesser-known areas. According to the Eurobarometer report *Preferences of Europeans Towards Tourism*, 25% of respondents cite culture as their primary reason for travel, and nearly 50% are motivated by cultural and natural attractions to revisit a destination. Cultural tourists tend to stay longer, visit more sites, and spend more, contributing significant economic benefits. In Southeast Europe, tourism remains seasonal and geographically concentrated. To maintain growth, countries must integrate tourism with cultural and natural assets. Sustainable tourism development requires long-term vision and balanced policies to support local economies while preserving heritage (Ursache 2015).

Effective use of cultural heritage in tourism begins with inventory, identification, and valorization of key assets. In North Macedonia, several cities have undergone such valorization, easing the strategic planning process. The Hilary du Cros model has been widely applied. According to Todorović (2018) Skopje’s Old Bazaar ranks in field M (2.3) on the valuation matrix—indicating strong market appeal and average robustness. Skopje Fortress “Kale” also shows high attractiveness but moderate cultural value, requiring improved planning and services (Todorović 2020). In Prilep, this study represents the first application of the du Cros method for assessing part of its cultural heritage.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the scientific valorization of the tourism potential of cultural and historical assets, three methods are most commonly used: the quantitative-qualitative method, the method of the World Tourism Organization, and the Hilary du Cros model. **The quantitative-qualitative method** uses quantitative and qualitative indicators to compare attractions of the same type, including motives and the principle of complementarity (Pivac 2006). According to Stanojlović, Čurčić, and Pavlović (2010) the evaluation of indicators is done using a Likert scale, and the average score represents the tourism potential of the cultural heritage.

The method developed by the World Tourism Organization includes the evaluation of tourism resources through internal and external factors. Internal factors relate to utilization (urbanization, infrastructure, equipment, and services) and the natural and cultural characteristics of the resource. External factors (accessibility, proximity, specificity, and importance) influence the resource's positioning in the market. The assessment is done by scoring on a scale (0–3, 0–5, or 0–12), and the overall value is obtained through an algorithm. Finally, resources are hierarchically categorized according to their significance (local, national, or international), serving as a basis for strategic planning and priorities in tourism development (Jovikj 2006).

The method based on the Hilary du Cros model aims to valorize the capacity of cultural heritage to be included in sustainable tourism and to adapt its cultural attractiveness to the needs of the tourism market. It is considered one of the most comprehensive and scientifically validated models for tourism valorization of cultural assets (Djordjevikj 2022). The model is based on an evaluation of sub-indicators across two sectors: tourism and cultural heritage management, along with an assessment of *robustness*—the site's capacity to withstand tourist visits (Du Cros 2001).

The “tourism” sector includes two groups of indicators:

1. Market attractiveness
2. Factors for developing a tourism product

Sub-indicators are evaluated, such as ambiance, recognition beyond the local area, national symbolism, appeal for specific purposes, complementarity with other offers, attractiveness in the region, and connection to culture or heritage. Scores range from 0–5 (or 0–3, 0–4 depending on the indicator), including accessibility, transport connections, proximity to other attractions, and service infrastructure.

The total score determines the level of tourism attractiveness:

- 0–20: low
- 21–40: medium
- 41–60: high

The second sector – **cultural heritage management** – includes two groups of sub-indicators:

1. **Cultural Significance**
2. **Robustness**

The first group contains 7 sub-indicators:

- *Aesthetic, historical, educational, social value, and scientific significance (0–2),*

- *Rarity* (0–3),
- *Representativeness* (0–4).

In the second group (*robustness*), the following are evaluated:

- *Sensitivity* (0–4),
- *Condition for restoration* (0–4),
- *Existence of a management plan* (0–5),
- *Monitoring and maintenance* (0–5),
- *Investment potential* (0–5),
- *Potential negative impact from tourists on the physical condition of the site* (0–5),
- *Potential damage from product development or modification* (0–5).

As in the tourism sector, sub-indicator scores are summed up to produce a total score. The interpretation scale is:

- 0–20: *high sensitivity / low cultural value*
- 21–40: *medium sensitivity / medium cultural value*
- 41–60: *low sensitivity / high cultural value*

Based on the conducted analysis, a “Market Appeal/Robustness Matrix” is established, consisting of nine (9) fields, marked as $M(i,j)$, where $(i,j = 1,2,3)$, depending on the results obtained in the previous value assessment procedure. Thus, for each cultural asset individually, its position within the matrix is determined. The fields are defined as follows:

- $M(1,1)$ – high value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and low market appeal;
- $M(1,2)$ – high value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and medium market appeal;
- $M(1,3)$ – high value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and high market appeal;
- $M(2,1)$ – medium value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and low market appeal;
- $M(2,2)$ – medium value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and medium market appeal;
- $M(2,3)$ – medium value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and high market appeal;
- $M(3,1)$ – low value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and low market appeal;
- $M(3,2)$ – low value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and medium market appeal;
- $M(3,3)$ – low value of cultural significance/robustness indicators and high market appeal.

The authors of this paper have chosen to apply Hilary du Cros’ model, which in both academic and professional practice is considered one of the most scientifically recognized and comprehensive models for the tourism valorization of cultural resources (Table 1) (Seochanac et al., 2022).

The focus of this research is on the cultural assets of Prilep with the potential to become tourist attractions and significant points on the tourist map, as integral segments of sustainable tourism development. To achieve the highest possible objectivity in evaluating the tourism

potential of these cultural assets, a questionnaire was prepared, which, as a research instrument, includes all indicators and sub-indicators according to du Cros' methodology. The questionnaire was administered during January and February 2025. A sample of 22 respondents was selected. Half of them are professionals whose work duties are related to tourism: 3 tourism experts, 2 tourist guides, 1 archaeologist, 1 architect, 1 ethnologist, 1 historian, 1 art historian, and 1 representative from the Municipality of Prilep — the Local Self-Government Unit (LSGU) responsible for tourism.

To ensure a more objective approach, domestic tourists were also included in the valorization process (4 from Skopje, 1 from Kruševo, 3 from Demir Hisar, 2 from Bitola, and 1 from Ohrid), who visited Prilep during 2024/2025 and have knowledge of the specific cultural assets. The questionnaire was sent to all respondents via email, accompanied by a PDF document containing photographs and information on the characteristics of the cultural assets, based on secondary data from available literature, strategic documents, as well as relevant institutional websites. For any unclear points, telephone contact was made with the respondents to obtain the most objective assessment and evaluation of each cultural asset.

Table 1: Market Attractiveness and Robustness Matrix (Source: Seochanac et al., 2022)

Robustness	41-60 (High Robustness)	M (1,1)	M (1,2)	M (1,3)
	21-40 (Medium Robustness)	M (2,1)	M (2,2)	M (2,3)
	0-20 (Low Robustness)	M (3,1)	M (3,2)	M (3,3)
		0-20 (Low Attractiveness)	21-40 (Medium Attractiveness)	41-60 (High Attractiveness)
Indicator	Market Attractiveness			

CULTURAL AND TOURIST VALUES OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF PRILEP

Prilep has a rich cultural history dating back to deep prehistory, over 5,000 years B.C., with remains of material culture from the Neolithic through the Bronze and Iron Ages. The city is first mentioned in literature by the Byzantine writer John Skylitzes, a contemporary of Tsar Samuil (Karadjoski et al. 2014). From the rich cultural heritage of different periods, representative cultural assets have been selected for this paper, which attract the attention of tourists and the national tourism market. Below are presented the anthropogenic values of six cultural assets, which are the subject of valorization.

Markovi Kuli Fortress is one of the most significant cultural monuments, built during the medieval period on a rocky hill that rises on the northern side of the city. The site contains prehistoric elements that indicate a prehistoric chronology of Markovi Kuli (Naumov and Mitkoski 2019). The fortress was a stronghold of King Marko. It is believed that Tsar Samuil also received the news here about the devastating losses of his army in 1014. The hill is named after the fortress, and the city is also known by the phrase “Marko’s Town” or the town under Marko’s Towers. This cultural monument is located 4.1 km from the city center and can be reached by car in 15 minutes or on foot in about 1 hour. There is no bike path.

The Charshi Mosque is a cultural monument dating back to 1475, during the Ottoman Empire. This once grand structure, located in the very center of Prilep, is owned by the Islamic

Religious Community (IRC) and the Prilep Muftiate. It has been left to decay for 24 years following a fire. The Charshi Mosque serves as a reminder of the armed conflict in 2001, specifically the tragic day on August 10 when 10 Prilep reservists were killed by members of the paramilitary formation UÇK (the so-called National Liberation Army) on the Skopje-Tetovo road. On the same day, as an act of protest, a group of young rebels from Prilep set fire to this monument of Islamic faith, along with several shops owned by citizens of Muslim faith (Taleska 2010). All efforts to reconstruct, restore, or conserve the building have so far failed. The ethnic and religious diversity, elevated to the level of animosity and reflected in this building, is the reason for the devastation of this unique cultural monument.

Kuršumli An is a monument consisting of a single wall, a remnant of an inn built between the 14th and 15th centuries in the center of Prilep. According to the legends recorded by Marko Cepenkov (1829–1920), the inn was constructed using building materials taken from the Monastery of St. Nicholas in the village of Čepigovo, near Prilep. Out of envy toward the Turks, the people of Prilep took the carved marble, decorative stones, and pillars from the monastery to build Kuršumli An. Icons were hung on the gate of the inn, which were broken during the day but mysteriously reappeared at night in the same place. Citizens still claim that some of the materials from the inn were also used to cover the Čarši Mosque. In 1955, during demolition works in accordance with the urban development plan, the existing wall decorated with elegant marble rosettes was preserved. Today, a stone stage has been built in front of the wall, used for public events. The wall of Kuršumli An remains a landmark in the city center and a reminder of distant history (Karadjoski et al. 2014).

The Clock Tower is a prominent structure dating back to 1858. It stands on the site of a wooden clock tower that, along with the shops in the old market, was completely destroyed by fire in 1854. The monument is built from massive, precisely hewn stone blocks, with a base shaped as a regular hexagon supported by six pillars, each five meters high. At the top, it is crowned with a conical dome standing 10 meters tall. The clock mechanism, housed within the conical part, was brought by horse-drawn carriage from Vienna via Belgrade. This same mechanism is still operational today. The Clock Tower is the largest and most beautiful structure of its kind in the Balkans, standing 38.76 meters tall. Even after 167 years, this cultural monument and unique architectural structure remains a symbol of the city and the center of all urban events. It is often compared to the Leaning Tower of Pisa due to its evident inclination of 114.4 cm, which adds to its tourist appeal (Taleska 2019).

The “October 11” Memorial Museum Located in the center of Prilep, this early 20th-century building (236m²) was renovated 14 years ago. During WWII, it housed the Bulgarian police, who interrogated resistance fighters. On October 11, 1941, the First Partisan Detachment attacked the building—a date marking the start of the National Liberation Struggle (the People’s Liberation Struggle). The museum exhibits cover local history up to 1940, the April War, and the beginning of the uprising. Displays include photos, documents, weapons, honors of local heroes, and a mural by Borko Lazeski. A bust of Tito and a replica of the “People’s Hero” Order — First Fighter, and a recognition awarded to Prilep for special merits during PLS in 1975 by Marshal Tito, whose bust is also located in the museum (Memorijalen Muzej „11 Oktomvri“).

The Tobacco Museum is one of the most significant of its kind in Europe, featuring over 4,500 unique exhibits from all continents. The collection covers the history of tobacco consumption, production, and advertising, including rare collections of artwork and photographs. Exhibits include pipes, snuffboxes, hookahs, and cigarette packaging, some of which belonged to notable figures such as the Romanovs, Anna Habsburg, and Tito. Their extravagance and

sophisticated craftsmanship—with filigree, precious and semi-precious stones, rare woods, meerschaum, ivory, and various other materials—along with the richness of motifs, stories, and ornaments, fascinate every visitor.

The museum is located 4.3 km from the center of Prilep, within the building of the Institute for Old Slavic Culture, and is accessible by car or on foot. The hall is protected by alarm systems. Detailed information is available on the museum’s website (Muzej za tutun).

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

According to the respondents’ ratings, the cultural assets belong to field M (2,3) — indicating an average value of indicators for cultural significance/robustness and high market attractiveness in the tourism valuation matrix. The only exception is the “Čarši Mosque,” a cultural monument that falls into field M (2,2) — representing an average value of indicators for cultural significance/robustness and medium market attractiveness (see Table 2).

Table 2: Tourism Valorization of the Cultural and Historical Assets of Prilep
(Source: Authors’ depiction/research)

Cultural Asset	Marko’s Towers Fortress	Čarši Mosque	Kurshumli Inn	Clock Tower	Memorial Museum “October 11”	Tobacco Museum
Tourism Sector – Market Attractiveness						
Ambience	4	2	4	4	4	4
Recognition beyond the local area	5	2	3	4	4	3
Important national symbol	5	3	3	4	4	4
Evocative place (has an interesting story)	5	3	4	4	5	4
There are certain characteristics that distinguish it from the cultural heritage sites in the immediate surroundings	5	3	4	5	4	5
Attractiveness for special needs or purposes that could enable increased tourist visits	5	2	3	4	4	4
Complementary (supplements) the existing tourism offer of the destination or region	4	3	4	4	4	4
Tourist attractiveness in the region	5	2	3	4	4	4
The destination is associated with culture or heritage	5	4	4	5	5	4
Tourism Sector – Factors Important in Designing the Tourism Product						
Accessibility	2	4	4	4	4	3
Traffic connectivity between the settlement and the cultural site	2	3	3	3	3	3
Proximity to other cultural attractions	2	3	3	3	3	2
Supporting services (parking, marked path to the cultural site, refreshments, information, etc.)	2	3	3	3	3	3
TOTAL (Tourism Sector)	51	37	45	51	51	47
Cultural Heritage Management Sector – Cultural Significance						
Aesthetic Value	2	1	1	2	2	2
Historical Value	2	1	2	2	2	2
Educational Value	2	1	1	2	2	2
Social Value	2	1	1	2	2	2
Scientific Value	2	1	1	1	1	2
Rarity	3	1	2	2	2	2
Representativeness	3	2	3	3	3	3

Cultural Heritage Management Sector – Robustness						
Sensitivity	1	1	2	2	2	3
Condition of Repair	1	1	2	3	3	3
Management Plan	1	1	1	2	2	3
Monitoring and Maintenance	1	1	2	2	3	3
Investment Potential	4	4	3	4	4	4
Potential Negative Impact of Tourists on the Physical Condition of the Cultural Asset	3	3	4	4	4	4
Potential for Modification or Product Development to Negatively Affect the Physical Condition of the Cultural Asset	3	3	3	3	4	4
TOTAL (Cultural Heritage Management Sector)	30	22	28	34	36	39
Field in the tourism valorization matrix	M (2,3)	M (2,2)	M (2,3)	M (2,3)	M (2,3)	M (2,3)

The analysis of the results using the methodology based on Hilary du Cros' model provides a picture of Prilep as a city that, in the tourism sector — market attractiveness, has a total score of 36 (Table 3).

Table 3: Values of Sub-Indicators for Market Attractiveness (Source: Authors' depiction/research)

Tourism Sector Market Attractiveness	
Sub-indicators	Score
Ambience	4
Recognition beyond the local area	4
Important national symbol	4
Evocative place (has an interesting story)	4
There are certain characteristics that distinguish it from other cultural assets in the immediate surroundings	4
Attractiveness for special needs or purposes that could enable greater tourist visitation	3
It complements (supplements) the remaining tourist offer of the destination or region	4
Tourist attractiveness in the region	4
The destination is connected to culture or heritage	5
Total score	36

Ambience: According to the respondents' evaluations, the city offers a good and pleasant ambience for tourists, enriched with cultural heritage sites. The fortress Markovi Kuli has a particularly distinctive ambience, while all other cultural assets are located within the central urban core, which is legally protected.

Recognition Beyond the Local Area: The city, with its cultural values, is also known at the regional level. This recognition has been supported by an enriched festival tourism offer over the past 15 years, including events such as Pivofest, the „Prochka“ Carnival, the Macedonian Theater Festival „Vojdan Chernodrinski“, the Festival of Folk Instruments and Songs “Pece Atanasoski,” the Jazz Festival, the celebration of the patron saint's day “St. Nikola” with traditional fasting meals, and others. Additionally, the development of alternative sports

tourism—such as paragliding, motocross, bouldering, and more—has contributed to this increased visibility.

Important National Symbol: Prilep is considered an important industrial center, especially with the establishment of the Technological Industrial Development Zone (TIDZ) - Alinci. It holds a leading position as the tobacco center of the country, where, besides the Tobacco factory, numerous foreign tobacco purchasing companies are also located. Prilep also leads in the number of issued concessions for the exploration and exploitation of marble and other mineral resources. Additionally, it is a well-known cultural center with a rich history and a university town, making it an important symbol at the national level.

Evocative Place: According to respondents, Prilep is a city that tells a captivating story. Various cultures have lived in this area since the Neolithic period (5,000 BC), leaving behind archaeological remains from the Bronze and Iron Ages. Prilep is first mentioned by the Byzantine writer John Skylitzes (11th century) as Prilapon — a fortress where Tsar Samuel received his blinded soldiers. One legend claims the city's name comes from the merging of a Turkish settlement with the Christian village of Varosh during the Ottoman conquests. Prilep is also mentioned by the Ottoman travel writer Evliya Çelebi (1661), who described its bazaar, crafts, and daily life. The city is a symbol of resistance — on October 11, 1941, the four-year-long National Liberation War (People's Liberation Struggle) began here. Prilep is the birthplace of many important figures: Pere Toshev, Metodija Andonov Čento, and Gjorče Petrov, as well as three key contributors to the Macedonian language and culture — Marko Cepenkov, Blaze Koneski, and Krume Kepeski. Also notable are authors Stale Popov (“Kalesh Angja”) and Kole Čašule (“Black Things”).

There are certain characteristics that distinguish Prilep from other cultural assets in the surrounding area. As the fifth largest city in Macedonia, with a population of 69,025, Prilep differs from nearby cities not only by population size but also by the concentration of cultural institutions and cultural assets. Although similar institutions and establishments exist in other cities, the cultural differentiation in Prilep is achieved through the authenticity of specific monuments, which are the focus of this research (the fortress Markovi Kuli, the Memorial Museum “October 11”, and the Tobacco Museum).

Attractiveness for special needs or purposes that could enable greater tourist visits. Prilep is well-suited for developing various forms of tourism. In addition to cultural-historical monuments, festivals hold an important place on Macedonia's tourist map. Sports and recreational activities attract diverse profiles: hikers, bouldering enthusiasts, paragliders, motocross riders, cyclists, speleologists (with several nearby caves), hunters, and anglers. Religious tourism is also significant, with four active monasteries that are cultural monuments: „Archangel Michael“ in Varosh, „Treskavec“, „Holy Transfiguration“ in Zrze and „Saint Nicholas“, in Mariovo. Prilep is also known for its traditional cuisine, especially grilled dishes and beaten cheese.

Complementarity. The tourist offer complements the other offers in the destination and region. The central city core, where most of the cultural assets under this research are located, along with the “Markovi Kuli” fortress, achieve a high degree of complementarity with the destination's tourist offer, i.e., with all types of tourism that exist and have the potential to develop systematically and strategically (cultural tourism, transit tourism, festival tourism, monastery tourism, hunting, fishing, speleological tourism, etc.).

Tourist attractiveness in the region. Compared to other destinations in the nearby area, Prilep has undeniable attractiveness due to its authenticity.

The destination is associated with culture. Prilep is a city with a rich cultural heritage, cultural events and manifestations, as well as institutions and organizations in this field.

Factors important in designing the tourist product. The total value of the scores of the sub-indicators from the group “factors important in designing the tourist product” is 13, so the total score value for the tourism sector is 49 (Table 4).

Table 4: Values of Sub-indicators for Factors Important in Designing the Tourist Product
(Source: Authors’ depiction/research)

Tourism Sector	
Factors Important in Designing the Tourist Product	
Sub-indicators	Score
Access	4
Traffic connectivity between the settlement and the cultural site	3
Proximity to other cultural attractions	3
Service facilities (parking, marked path to the cultural site, refreshments, information, etc.)	3
Total score	13

Access. Prilep is an important destination on the geographical map of Macedonia. It is connected by road and rail transport. Located in the northern part of the Pelagonia plain, more precisely in the southwestern part of Macedonia, the city is connected to all parts of the country and the region. It is situated 60 km from the border with Greece and 240 km from the Albanian port of Durrës. It is connected to Skopje (128 km) and Thessaloniki (210 km) via the E-75 highway and the national road M-5. The city is 130 km away from the Skopje International Airport, 125 km from the “St. Paul the Apostle” Airport in Ohrid, and 210 km from the “Macedonia” Airport in Thessaloniki.

Traffic connectivity of the settlement and the cultural site. Prilep is connected to major towns, but the road and rail infrastructure are in poor condition. Key sections, like the road to Skopje and the railway from Bogomila, are outdated and risky, discouraging tourist returns. Local roads to nearby villages are also narrow and poorly maintained.

Proximity to other cultural attractions. Prilep is rich in cultural and historical landmarks and archaeological sites that reflect its turbulent past, especially during the National Liberation Struggle. The city is known as the “city beneath Marko’s Towers” — a fortress located about 4 km from the center. Nearby are the “Treskavec” Monastery on Mount “Baba”, the ancient city of Stibera near the village of Čepigovo (20 km), and the Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration in the village of Zrze (25 km), known for its early Christian monastic tradition. Also close is Krushevo (25 km), a historically significant town and birthplace of the famous Balkan pop star Toše Proeski. About 60 km to the southeast lies Mariovo — a pristine natural area known for its rare flora and fauna, including the endangered griffon vulture, making it a popular destination for nature lovers, anglers, and hunters.

Service amenities. Prilep has a well-equipped city center offering shopping opportunities, gastronomic options, healthcare services, cosmetic and hairdressing services, and other amenities. The range of available conveniences meets the needs of most visitors, providing various accommodation and food options. However, as tourism grows, there is a clear need for further infrastructure development, especially in terms of accommodation capacity, parking

spaces, exclusive restaurants, organized tourist tours within the city and surrounding areas, and a lack of systematic information for all tourist needs. There are no flyers, insufficient promotional materials, marked routes, and more. Additionally, it is necessary to expand the availability of informational resources and digital signs and guides to help visitors navigate the city and its landmarks more easily.

In the Cultural Heritage Management Sector, the total score of the sub-indicators for cultural significance amounts to 14 (Table 5).

Table 5: Values of Sub-Indicators for Cultural Significance (Source: Authors' depiction/research)

Cultural Heritage Management Sector Cultural Significance	
Sub-indicators	Score
Aesthetic value	2
Historical value	2
Educational value	2
Social value	2
Scientific value	1
Rarity	2
Representativeness	3
Total score	14

Aesthetic and Historical Value. Prilep can be “proud” of its aesthetic and historical value, as it is home to numerous buildings from various historical periods, including ancient, Roman, medieval, Ottoman, and modern times. These buildings not only enhance the charm of Prilep but also serve as protected cultural-historical monuments, reflecting the city’s rich cultural heritage.

Educational and Scientific-Research Value. Prilep is a developing educational center with notable institutions, including the Tobacco Institute, the Institute of Old Slavic Culture, the Faculty of Economics, and the long-standing Society for Science and Art.

Social Value. From a social perspective, Prilep is a “lively” city with a diverse demographic: students, pupils, working-age population, and retirees. The city is known for hosting numerous cultural events: music, theater, and other festivals, art exhibitions, art colonies, and traditional celebrations. These events significantly enrich the cultural atmosphere of the city.

Rarity. In terms of the uniqueness of its cultural assets, Prilep stands out as a city rich in historical monuments. It is relatively similar to neighboring cities, but its uniqueness is reflected in the presence of Markovi Kuli Fortress, the “Treskavec” Monastery, the monastery in Zrze, the Stibera archaeological site, the “Mound of the Unconquered,” as well as the Tobacco Museum. All these landmarks give the city a distinctive cultural identity.

Representativeness. Prilep is a city that reflects a blend of cultural values and historical significance. As one of the most important destinations in the country, it offers a wide range of tourist attractions that highlight its uniqueness in the region through its historical landmarks, connections, sites, cultural heritage, and rich gastronomic offerings. All of this contributes to its status as a significant destination. In the cultural heritage management sector, the sub-indicators for robustness have a total value of 19 (Table 6).

Table 6: Values of Sub-Indicators for Robustness (Source: Authors' depiction/research)

Sector for Cultural Heritage Management Robustness	
Sub-indicators	Score
Sensitivity	2
Condition of repairs	2
Existence of a management plan	2
Monitoring and maintenance	2
Investment potential	4
The possibility of a negative impact by tourists on the physical condition of the cultural asset	4
The possibility that modification or product development may negatively affect the physical condition of the cultural asset	3
Total score	19

Sensitivity. According to MAKSTAT, Prilep has experienced a decline in the number of domestic and foreign tourists over the past five years, but in 2024, there was a noticeable increase in the number of overnight stays. Considering its potential, the city still needs to reach its maximum capacity in this regard. The current flow of tourists does not have a negative impact on the cultural and historical assets of the city. The carrying capacity of the city center remains at a satisfactory level, although many new investments are needed.

Condition of Repair. Prilep prides itself on some of its historical sites that have potential for preservation and revitalization. Key sites like Markovi Kuli and the Clock Tower are in fair condition but require improved maintenance. Restoration of the towers and conservation of neglected monuments like the Charshi Mosque are essential to preserve heritage and enhance the visitor experience.

Existence of a Management Plan. Although tourism plans for Prilep have been proposed, they remain largely unimplemented. A comprehensive management strategy is essential to align tourism goals, ensure public-private coordination, and support sustainable development. Without it, Prilep's potential as a tourist destination cannot be fully realized.

Monitoring and Maintenance. The responsibility for monitoring and maintaining the cultural and historical assets of Prilep lies with the relevant authorities and institutions at both local and national levels. However, the maintenance of these cultural properties and sites is, in some cases, inadequate. Emphasis should be placed on regular assessments and restoration efforts to ensure the preservation of Prilep's cultural heritage for future generations.

Investment Potential. Prilep holds notable investment potential, particularly in tourism. However, limited recognition of tourism's economic importance has hindered development. Strategic focus and improved infrastructure are needed to attract private investors and public support, enabling Prilep to emerge as a competitive regional tourist destination.

Possibility of Negative Impact of Tourists on the Physical Condition of Cultural Heritage. In Prilep, there is a possibility of negative impact on the physical condition of cultural heritage as a result of tourist visits. However, considering the current level of tourism in the city, the impact is not significant. It appears that the present volume of tourists does not cause substantial degradation of these cultural assets, although continuous monitoring is essential to prevent any future damage.

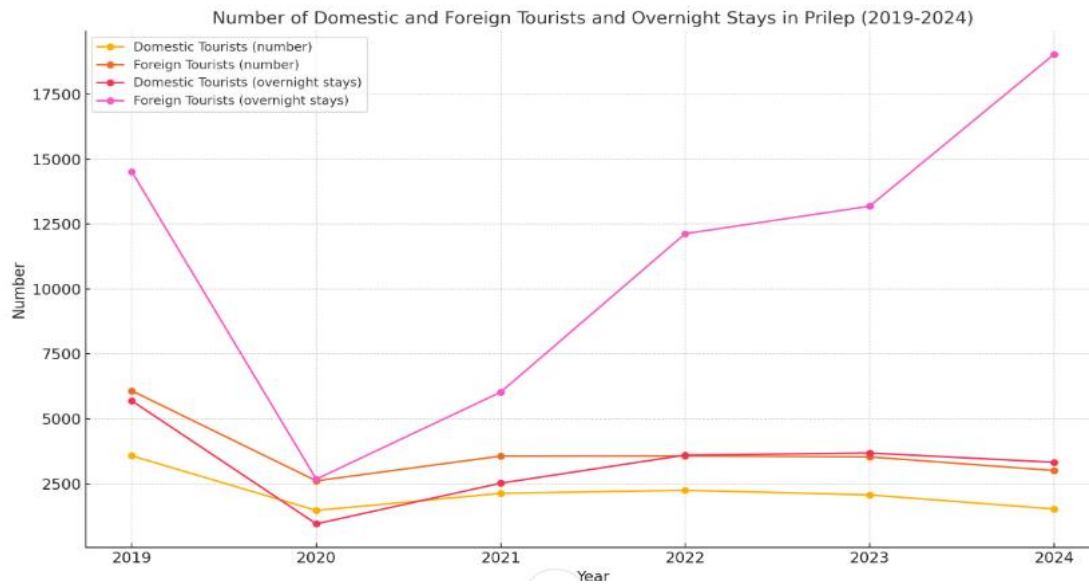
Possibility that modification or product development may negatively affect the physical condition of the cultural heritage. Changes to certain areas or buildings in Prilep, such as restoration or modernization of structures, have so far not negatively impacted the physical condition of cultural heritage. However, if any alterations are made without considering the local historical and architectural context, there is a risk of compromising the integrity and aesthetic value of these cultural assets. Modifications that are not stylistically aligned with the original design or surrounding environment can harm the authenticity and charm of Prilep's cultural heritage. Therefore, all future changes should be carefully planned and executed in a way that preserves the authentic context of the city's cultural heritage.

The research results show that the tourism sector has a total score value of 49, while the cultural heritage management sector has a score value of 33. Accordingly, in the tourism attractiveness matrix, Prilep as a tourist destination belongs to field M (2,3) — indicating a medium value of the indicators for cultural significance/robustness and high market attractiveness.

Table 7: Number of Tourists and Overnight Stays in Prilep 2019 - 2024 (Source: MAKSTAT 2025)

Year	Number of tourists			Number of overnight stays		
	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total
2019	3577	5697	9274	6081	14520	20601
2020	1475	957	2432	2614	2678	5292
2021	2130	2523	4653	3566	6028	9594
2022	2252	3605	5857	3572	12131	15703
2023	2071	3686	5757	3535	13189	16724
2024	1530	3327	4857	3011	19040	22051
Total	13035	19795	32830	22379	67586	89965

On the other hand, secondary data from desk research (Drzhaven zavod za statistika na Republika Severna Makedonija -MAKSTAT) show that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are still being felt. The number of tourists (both domestic and foreign) last year, compared to 2019, is almost twice as low, as is the number of overnight stays by domestic tourists. The only recorded increase is a respectable 4,500 more overnight stays by foreign tourists in 2024 compared to 2019 (Table 7 and Graph 1).



Graph 1: Number of Tourists and Overnight Stays in Prilep (2019–2024)
(Source: MAKSTAT 2025)

Prilep has 135 catering establishments with 6,512 seats and 7 accommodation facilities with 176 rooms and 412 beds. However, on the online platform booking.com, tourists can book overnight stays in 9 hotels and 23 apartments, indicating a growing number of facilities that are being repurposed and rented out to tourists but are not officially registered or included in the state statistics. Alternatively, MAKSTAT should update its data, which currently dates back to 2008 (Table 8).

Table 8: Accommodation Capacities According to the Catering Census, 2008 (Source: MAKSTAT 2025)

	Hospitality Capacities	Rooms	beds	Seats
Prilep	135			6.512
	7	176	412	

DISCUSSION

It is evident that Prilep possesses cultural heritage with significant tourism potential, and in the post-pandemic period, it is slowly but surely returning to the focus of tourists' interest, with its capacities for monastery, religious, festival, and alternative tourism. This is supported by the increase in the number of catering establishments, beds, and taverns. The city is famous for its delicious traditional cuisine, featuring unique specialties in taste and preparation: “shirden” and grilled meat, baked beaten cheese, and during winter, the St. Nicholas fasting sarma – a specialty that holds a Guinness World Record in 2008 with 80.191 prepared sarma. Tourists who have visited are impressed by the taste and presentation of traditional dishes, whose aromas spread through the taverns almost at every corner of the old bazaar, as well as throughout all parts of the city.

On the other hand, Prilep has an adequate commercial network of grocery markets, clothing stores, and shops for other needs, mostly located in the city center, operating from morning until evening. The exception is on market days—Wednesday and Saturday—when the bazaar closes around 4 PM, and Sunday is a non-working day. In the old bazaar, many traditional crafts are still alive, adding extra tourist value: wooden sleepers maker, hammersmith, goldsmith, candlemakers, watchmakers specialized in repairing mechanical wristwatches, hairdressers and barbers, keymakers, barrelmakers and others.

Regarding the tourism infrastructure, according to Cybo – a global business directory – there are 41 travel agencies operating in Prilep (Turistichki agencii vo Prilep 2025). Some of them have developed websites with a full tourism offer aimed at other cities and abroad, but not specifically for their own city. Therefore, tourists cannot easily obtain the information about the city and municipality that they need. A larger number of the registered travel agencies operate only in transporting tourists to foreign destinations.

The info-center for organized tourism promotion and offer, located in the city center and under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Prilep, has not been operational for more than a decade. The tourism sector is also absent from the Regional Chamber of Commerce. As a result, the tourism offer is not organized into tourism packages with fixed prices and professional tour guides. Things happen spontaneously. Tour guides come from other cities to lead tours around Macedonia and present the beauties of Prilep during their visits. Most often, locals take on the role of tour guides and promote what they consider the main tourist attractions to their guests. However, all of this is far from a professional, organized tourism offer.

CONCLUSION

Prilep has strong tourism potential, with high market attractiveness and moderate cultural significance. To capitalize on the cultural heritage and ensure sustainable tourism growth, a strategic and integrated approach is necessary, through: a) Strategic planning and policy development, with clearly defined goals, action plans, and monitoring mechanisms; b) Concrete programs to improve tourism infrastructure, investments for better access, signage, and maintenance of cultural sites; c) Management of cultural heritage, including restoration, conservation, and revitalization of cultural assets to preserve the city's cultural-historical value; d) Cultural branding and marketing strategies focused on both domestic and foreign visitors, digital promotion, storytelling, and cultural events that will enhance visibility on the tourism map; and e) Tourism development based on the principles of sustainability, responsible visitor behavior, environmental protection, and community involvement in heritage preservation.

The cultural heritage of Prilep remains a precious asset in the tourism market despite the challenges. By addressing infrastructure gaps, improving management practices, and implementing a strategic approach with a holistic and sustainable vision, Prilep has the potential to strengthen the role of its cultural heritage, enhance its competitiveness, and become a leading tourist destination in Macedonia and beyond. With the implementation of strategic recommendations such as increased investments in conservation and restoration, revitalization of cultural heritage, innovations through the development of interactive tourism programs using digital technologies, regular monitoring of sites, promotion of cultural tourism through events and experiences, strengthening connectivity and mobility of tourism by establishing a tourist shuttle service (regular tourist lines with small buses, minibuses, tourist transport) that links Prilep's cultural landmarks with nearby towns, and options for sustainable tourism (to reduce

harmful environmental impact), showcasing traditional crafts and local gastronomy, and ensuring sustainable tourism growth with controlled development—including conducting impact assessments on cultural heritage in all new tourism projects and enforcing legal measures to protect cultural sites from unauthorized construction and excessive tourist pressure—Prilep can develop a sustainable, well-managed cultural tourism sector that will increase its tourist attractiveness.

The research showed that Prilep possesses significant tourism potential rooted in its cultural heritage, characterized by high market attractiveness and moderate cultural significance. To ensure sustainable growth, a strategic and integrated approach involving all stakeholders is required. The findings also indicate that the full utilization of Prilep’s cultural heritage depends on clear tourism policies, improved infrastructure, efficient management, and innovative cultural branding strategies targeting both domestic and international visitors. Tourism development must be guided by the principles of sustainability, environmental protection, and active community participation. Despite existing challenges, cultural heritage remains a valuable asset in the tourism market. With improved infrastructure, modern management practices, and targeted measures, such as investment in conservation, digital programs, and the promotion of local crafts and gastronomy, Prilep can enhance its competitiveness and position itself as one of the leading destinations for cultural tourism in North Macedonia and beyond. These insights are also relevant for other destinations in the region, offering broader lessons on linking cultural heritage with sustainable tourism development.

Nevertheless, this research is subject to certain limitations. First, the results are based on a limited number of indicators and survey data, which may reduce their representativeness. Second, the analysis focuses on selected cultural assets, leaving scope for broader coverage in the future. Third, external factors such as global economic trends, political circumstances, and climate change were not examined in detail, although they may significantly influence tourism development. Future studies should therefore integrate a wider set of indicators, adopt a longer time horizon, and include comparative analyses with similar destinations. Such efforts could provide deeper insights and open new perspectives for understanding cultural heritage as a driver of both local and regional development.

CRedit AUTHOR STATEMENT

Monika Taleska: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization. **Sašo Korunovski:** Conceptualization, Validation, Resources, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision

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