

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUR'ANIC QUOTATION 'MĀ SHĀ' ALLĀH' ON BOTH OTTOMAN AND GREEK HERITAGES IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract

Mā shā' Allāh is an Arabic expression used as a spoken amulet in Arabian culture prior Islam, and continued in Islamic heritage, to protect from the evil eye or to bring well luck even. This paper surveys the 'Mā shā' Allāh' and related inscriptions Yā Ḥafīz' and Yā Ḥafīz in the Balkans. It focuses on the extant writings on ottoman buildings in Greece. In this regard, it publishes a group of new inscription. The study also investigates the visual impact of such inscriptions. It analyses these inscriptions considering functional, regional, chronological and calligraphic stylistic criteria. The paper characterises the meaning of the 'Mā shā' Allāh' inscription either as a direct message or as a mirror reflects some aspects of the period and society to which belongs. Moreover, it examines the significance of writing the Mā shā' Allāh in Greek alphabet 'Μάσαλα and Μασαλαχ' on Christian buildings and objects. The paper concludes that the Mā shā' Allāh acquired over centuries a popular folkloric cultural concept as a talisman to protect from the evil eye rather than its own original religious expression.

1. Introduction

Cultural Heritage, including the language provides a context for historical knowledge. It also depicts the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from era to era, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. This paper sheds light on Islamic cultural influence on the Balkans' heritage that resulted from the Ottoman's dominance centuries. In this regard, the Arabic expression 'Mā shā' Allāh' along with its Islamic meaning is a distinguished example. In an encounter with a Mytilenean lady in Lesvos, the author heard the Qur'anic idiom 'Mā shā' Allāh' pronounced in its Greek pronunciation *masalah* with the same concept as the expression used in Islamic culture. Therefore, after research, I found that the 'Mā shā' Allāh' still used in Greek –as in all areas ruled by the Ottoman Empire until early 20th century–

especially by the elderly villagers, who use this expression frequently to protect from the evil eye. Previous studies that have dealt with using the expression 'Mā shā' Allāh' by Greeks were superficial and restricted to a specific village [1] or object [2]. But this paper is studying the 'Mā shā' Allāh' and similar conceptual inscriptions Yā Ḥafīz' and Yā Ḥafīz in the Balkans. It focused specifically on the extant inscriptions on ottoman buildings in Greece. From the historic perspective, dating these inscriptions is crucial. This paper surveys these inscriptions in Greece and analyses them considering functional, regional, and chronological factors. The paper shows the adoption of Mā shā' Allāh in Greek language and heritage and its comparable imitation in Greek alphabet 'Μάσαλα and Μασαλαχ' on Christian legacy.

2. 'Mā shā' Allāh' on Ottoman heritage in the Balkans with a special reference to Ottoman building inscriptions in Greece

2.1. Meaning of Mā shā' Allāh

The Arabic expression 'Mā shā' Allāh' (ما شاء الله) means literally "what Allah wills" [3,4]. In Islamic culture, 'Mā shā' Allāh' is known as a Qur'anic expression, which occurred regularly in the Qur'an. Among these, only the formula "Mā shā' Allāh Lā Qūwata 'Illā Billāh" (ما شاء الله لا قوة إلا بالله) [Q.18:39:6-12], has an additional meaning that expresses one's astonishment and admiration of the beautiful things or beloved possessions which either belong to himself or others, by attributing those "gifts" to the will and power of Allah. The Qur'anic verse [18:39:6-12], where this last formula appears, is the main concern of this paper, as it refers to a story that happened before Islamic times. This overall suggests that it was used similarly and in the same context in Arabic culture prior Islam. This Qur'anic expression "Mā shā' Allāh Lā Qūwata 'Illā Billāh" (ما شاء الله لا قوة إلا بالله), which appears mostly abridged 'Mā shā' Allāh' (ما شاء الله), is used to express the admiration of something or an appreciation towards someone, as well as to protect from the envy and the evil eye, in both spoken and written contexts. This concept of 'Mā shā' Allāh' is rooted in Islamic culture, as confirmed by the Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's sayings. Indeed, a saying "hadith" attributed to the Prophet Muhammad "Whoever sees something, he admires it, to say "Mā shā' Allāh Lā Qūwata 'Illā Billāh" (It is as Allah has pleased, there is no power except in Allah) [5]. Another *hadith* cites the formula "Mā shā' Allāh Kān wa mā lam yasha' lam yakun" which means what Allāh wills, happens and what Allāh does not will, not happens [6]. This hadith concludes that whoever says it including these words in the morning protected by Allāh until the evening and vice versa. Al-Baihaqi wrote a full

chapter on this prophet's saying "Mā shā' Allāh Kān wa mā lam yasha' lam yakun" to explain its different meanings upon the related Qur'anic verses and Prophet's sayings [6]. The Islamic concept 'Mā shā' Allāh' appears to have been transferred also to non-Arab Islamic cultures, including the Turks. Considering its meaning, it was inscribed on beautiful possessions or works such as jewellery, buildings [4], coins etc., as a charm to protect from the effect of the evil eye. Such amulets are still used in Arabic Islamic countries side by side with other talismans as the hand 'khamisa' and, to a lesser extent, the eye-shaped objects.

2.2. Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions on Ottoman buildings in Greece

As far as the author knows, there are 24 examples preserved on Ottoman architectural heritage in Greece. There were other Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions but they are demolished or have disappeared [7]. Among these 24 examples only one cited the full Qur'anic quotation "Mā shā' Allāh Lā Qūwata 'Illā Billāh," [18:39:6-12] above the minaret's door, fig. (1-a) of the Defterdar Mosque at Kos (1137 H/1724-25). Another inscription cited a different formula "Mā shā' Allāh Kān" (ما شاء الله كان)-means what Allāh wills, happens- in a unique example which flanks the restoration inscription, fig. (1-b) of Murad Reis Mosque (1212 H/1797-98) at Rhodes [7, 8]. The remaining 22 examples cite the short form 'Mā shā' Allāh' (ما شاء الله). Among the 22 inscriptions of 'Mā shā' Allāh' on Ottoman buildings in Greece, there are 16 Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions, including a date or without; in five inscriptions Mā shā' Allāh comes as a preamble of the foundation or restoration inscriptions, figs. (1-c,d,e,f,g), whether the inscription is written in Arabic or in Ottoman, and one inscription comprises the Mā shā' Allāh with another religious phrase in a bilingual inscription in Arabic and Greek, figs. (1-h) [9,10].



Figure (1) Shows **a.** inscription above the minaret's door of the Defterdar mosque at Kos, **b.** above the main door of Murad Reis mosque at Rhodes, **c.** above the main door of the Mustafa mosque at Rhodes (1178H/1764-65), **d.** one of the foundation inscriptions of the fountain of Melek Mehmed Pasha at Chios (1181H/1767-68), **e.** restoration inscription of the minaret of Veli mosque at Rethymno, Crete (1204H/ 1789-90), **f.** foundation inscription of the fountain of Youssef Bey at Serres (1230H/ 1814-15), **g.** (fountain?) of Mousa Bey found at the Turkish cemetery at Kremetis, Kos (No date), **h.**; house (154 Arkadiou St.) at Rethymno, Crete (1260H/1844)

Geographically, the majority of the 24 Mā shā' Allāh building inscriptions are preserved in the Greek islands: five in Mytilini, figs. (2-a,b,c,d,e), five in Crete (three in Rethymno, figs. (1-e,h, 2-f), and one in Heraklio, fig. (2-g) and one in Chania above the exterior gate of Shaker Bey Aghazade mansion 19th c.?) [11], four in Rhodes, figs. (1-b,c, 2-h,i), two in Kos, figs. (1-a,g), and one inscription in Chios, fig. (1-d). The other seven are

found in mainland Greece: two in Komotini (Eski Mosque at Komotini, fig. (2-j), and on an interior pier inside the Kir Mahalle Mosque at Komotini, no date [12], two in Kavala, figs. (2-k,l), and one inscription in each city of Athens (Fethiye Mosque at Athens, 17th c.) [13], Serres, fig. (1-f), and Veria (on the exterior façade of the 'Beka' mansion at Veroia, mid 18th c. restored in 1997-99, fig. (2-m). Chronologically, two inscriptions date to the 16th

century, one to the 17th century, and 16 of the 24 inscriptions to the Late Ottoman period (18th - early 20th century). Five inscriptions have no date; the stylistic features of these would suggest a 19th century date. The extant Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions on Ottoman buildings in Greece are seen on different materials: stone, figs. (1-a, 2-b, c,e,g) [14,15], marble, figs. (1-a,b,c,d,f, h, 2-a, 2-l), stucco, figs. (2-d,I,k), iron, fig. (2-f) [16] and copper, fig. (2-j). These inscriptions were executed using several techniques: engraved in stone or marble, carved with stucco mouldings, fig. (2-i), painted on stucco-covered surfaces, fig. (2-k) or on iron board (inscription of Shaker Bey Aghazade mansion at Chania), and pierced in metallic surfaces, fig. (2-j). The perfect design of some Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions suggests the use of *qalib* (Turkish *Kalıp*) for their execution. *Qalib*, or stencil implies that a mould or matrix was used to transfer the calligraphic composition to another material [17]. Such use of the *qalib* – especially for those placed at a high position and executed perfectly in a difficult material as the one topping the dome of the Eski Mosque at Komotini, fig (2-j) – may be used to execute the wanted calligraphic composition 'Mā shā' Allāh' then placed in its final destination, figs. (2-j,e,f,h This

technique was valid for malleable materials such as metals, figs. (2-f,j) or stucco, figs. (2-b,d,h). But engraving or using imprint technique was used for solid and hard materials like marble or stone. Some stone or marble calligraphic panels were executed separately then placed in their places as the inscribed 'Mā shā' Allāh' panel of the Kavala house suggests, fig. (2-l). The Ottomans used both round and hanging scripts [17]. The bulk of these Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions were executed –with one exception of the inscription of Murad Reis Mosque at Rhodes in *riq'a* script–with *jali thulth* (Turkish: *celi sülüs*) script, a typical Ottoman pattern in Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Eastern Mediterranean from the 16th century onwards. Two inscriptions were carved in *jali ta'liq* (Turkish: *celi ta'lik*) script, figs. (1-d,f), and one inscription was in primitive handwriting style (inscription of Shaker Bey Aghazade mansion at Chania) with the *thulth* script. In terms of building's function, Mā shā' Allāh inscriptions are found on 11 mosques, figs. (1-a,c,e, and 2-a, d,h,j), seven houses, figs. (1-h, and 2-b,e,f,m), three fountains, figs. (1-d,g), one medrese (Mehmed 'Ali Com-plex, fig. (2-k), one tekke, fig. (2-g), and one shop, fig. (2-c).





Figure (2) Shows **a.** Yali mosque at Mytilini (1151 H/ 1738-39), **b.** house in the village of Iscopelo, Mytilini (1288H/1781-82) (after *Mάκης Αζιώτης*, 2018), **c.** on the exterior façade of a shop almost in the mid of Ermou street at Mytilini (No date), **d.** above the portal of Yeni mosque at Mytilini (1241H/1825-26), **e.** the house at the end of Ermou street at Mytilini (1319H/ 1901-02), **f.** house no. 82 at Ethnikis Antistaseos St. at Rethymno, Crete (1312H/1894-95), **g.** Bektashi Tekke at Agios Vlasios village at Heraklio, Crete (1253H/1837), **h.** above the portal of Ibrahim Pasha mosque at Rhodes (r. 937H/1535-36), **i.** above the portal of Süleyman mosque at Rhodes (947H/1540-41), **j.** Eski mosque at Komotini, topping the dome (1017H/1608-09; most probably belonging to the 1270 H/ 1853-54 repair), **k.** on the interior facades of Mehmed 'Ali complex at Kavala (1236H/1820-21), **l.** inscription placed on the façade of a house in the city of Kavala, now is the youth center building, **m.** the mansion of 'Beka' at Veroia (mid 18th c.; restored in 1997-99)

2.3. *Mā shā' Allāh* concept and cultural use considering inscriptions in the Balkans

Mā shā' Allāh in Islamic culture has two meanings: it is used to express appreciation, admiration, praise, or thankfulness regarding an event, building, object, talent or person that was just mentioned. Moreover, it is a popular expression to protect something or someone from the evil eye. Furthermore, both interpretations appear together; the person who says 'Mā shā' Allāh' in a given situation, implies "I appreciate and praise your (son, career, car, movie, etc.) and wish it protection from the evil eye, even mine". The inscription *Mā shā' Allāh* on religious buildings is more likely to be connected with the first meaning. But its engraving and writing on houses and shops refer mos-

tly to the second interpretation, and perhaps both meanings. The use of *Mā shā' Allāh* as a charm to protect against the evil eye mainly characterises closed and small communities, in which everyone knows each other well. May one links the writing or engraving of the phrase *Mā shā' Allāh* on buildings, specifically houses and commercial structures, at first glance, with the rising of Islamic culture in the corresponding society. In reality, an in-depth examination of this phenomenon may indicate an opposite result; it reflects the predominance of social diseases in these societies. They resulted from the lack of social justice and high variations in income between people within the same community, as rare were the citizens with high income. Moreover, this fear from the evil eye may refer to the lack of true Islamic practices, such as not giving the

Zakat and charities, by refusing to give the poor people their rights. This practice would increase the poor's suffering and create a community crippled by social diseases, such as envy and hatred. There is no evidence to prove the aforementioned hypothesis, but some indications may support it. All the inscriptions of the *Mā shā' Allāh* on houses and shops date to the last period of the Ottoman rule in Greece, and generally in the Balkans, a time of war and conflicts. The Ottoman state itself was in its worst state of decay, especially in the Balkans, at that time [18]. An Ottoman inscription (1270H/1854) of a house in an Albanian village (Bastar near Tirana) [19] declares clearly that the *Mā shā' Allāh* was used to protect from the evil eye, fig. (3). This inscription consists of two parts; the first part, fig. (3-a) was designed as an amulet in a hexagram within a square. This hexagram was known in Arabic literature as “seal of Solomon” i.e. ring of Sulaymān (خاتم سليمان), and also known as star of David and “magen” shield of David [20]. This pattern was used in Islamic culture as an amulet and as a decorative motif –and in medieval Christian churches as well– many centuries before its first known use in a Jewish synagogue [21]. Its talismanic meaning was used to protect not only from the evil eye but also from the demons and jinn “genies” (جن) considering the power given to Solomon as certified in Islamic “Qur’anic” culture. In the central hexagon is engraved *Mā shā' Allāh* on stone in *jalithuluth (celi sülüs)* script, and in the six outer equilateral triangles were written “*Yā Allāh*” (O God) and “*Yā Ḥafīz*” (O Preserver) – one of the 99 Names of Allāh meaning the Preserver, the All-Heedful and All-Protecting – alternated. In the four corners between the hexagram and the square, crescents and six-leaves rosettes are interchangeably engraved. In the bottom right corner, the date 21 Jumādā al-Awwal 1270 H (19 Feb. 1854) is included. In this regard, we can consider this inscriptive piece as an iconographic inscription; where the hexagram “seal of

Solomon” used in a symbolic form as an amulet against the evil eye. The second part, fig. (3-b) of the inscription comprises a 7-lines text. It is a bilingual inscription in Arabic and Ottoman represents a distinguished piece of symbolic amulet epigraphy confirms the meaning of the first iconographic part cited above. It reads:

1. يا الله ما شاء الله يا حفيظ / 2. الحسود لا يسود
 آجلدقچه / 3. قپانسون عين اعداء / 4. بحرمة انا
 فتحننا لا فتا الا علي / 5. لا سيف الا ذالفقار
 بودنياده / 6. بنم غم گتمز ندندر بوا تا ازلدن / 7.
 ترابله بنا اولمش بدندر بو سنة ١٢٧٠

Transcription: 1. *Yā Allāh, Mā shā' Allāh, Yā Ḥafīz* / 2. *al-ḥasūd lā yasūd achildikcha* / 3. *qapansun 'ain ā 'daā'* / 4. *biḥormat Innā fataḥnā lā fatā illā 'alai* / 5. *Lā saif illā dhu alfaqqār bu dūnyada* / 6. *benim gamim gitmez nedendir bu ta ezelden* / 7. *turabla binā olmush bedendir bu sanat 1270.*

Translation: 1. *O Allāh, what Allāh wills, O Preserver* / 2. *[when] opening [this door] deactivates the evil eye* / 3. *and blinds the eyes of the enemies* / 4. *with sanctity of [Qur'anic quotation] O Allāh has given the victory, there is no hero like 'Ali,* / 5. *There is no sword like dhu al-Faqqār in this world* / 6. *my sorrow never disappears* / 7. *in this body made from earth, in the year 1270.*

The content of this part, fig. (3-b) is completely an inscriptive amulet against the evil eye. It begins with a repetition of the content of the aforementioned “amulet” of the first part “*Yā Allāh, Mā shā' Allāh, Yā Ḥafīz*” which considers an incantation from which mentioned after. The text refers obviously that this inscription was placed above the house's main door; it says that thanks to this charm-invocation when opens this door it deactivates the evil eye and disables the eyes of the enemies. The next sentences “*biḥormat Innā fataḥnā lā fatā illā 'alai* / 5. *lā saif illā dhu alfaqqār*” suggest the strong effect of the Sufi “*Naqshbandi*” Order in linking the explanation of the influence of Qur'an as an amulet against the evil eye. A final note in this inscription, is its content was written in

the so-called “kitābah sam‘aia” i.e. audio-writing; as for instance the word “فتا” instead of the correct dictate “فتى”.



Figure (3) Shows **a.** & **b.** inscription on house in the village of Bastar near Tirana, Albania, 1270 H/1854

2.4. Related inscriptions: ‘Yā Ḥāfīz’ and ‘Yā Ḥāfīz’

Corresponding to this culture of fear from the evil eye, and from the future considering the wars of that period, another Arabic inscription placed above doors or on facades of houses and shops dating to the late Ottoman period in Greece and the Balkans, reads ‘Yā Ḥāfīz’ and ‘Yā Ḥāfīz’. Both are Arabic adjectives meaning the Preserver, the All-Heedful and All-Protecting –as noted in the previous inscription from Albania– the second format is the superlative formula of the first, and the one cited in the most beautiful 99 Names of Allāh. Four inscriptions with the phrase ‘Yā Ḥāfīz’ belong to houses: two are in Rethymno at Crete. The earliest is above the door of the house no. 9 at *Vospourou* Street, fig. (4-a). dated 1207 H / 1792-93, and the second belongs to the house no. 5 *Eustratiou Fotake* [22] Street, fig. (4-b) dated 1324 R/1909. The

latter is recorded with both calendars, the Rumi and the Gregorian (*Miladi*). The third one belongs to the palatial house of ‘Beka’ at Verioa. The house itself dates to the 18th century, but the painted inscriptions and ornaments may be from the 19th century. The fourth inscription is placed on the exterior façade of a Turkish house near the citadel in the city of Kavala [23], designed in the same amulet shape of the *Mā shā’ Allāh* as shown in the fig. (2-d,l). The last example expresses the same culture of fear from the evil eye, and upcoming variables of the island of Crete –considering the difficult political events and the critical situation of the Ottomans at that time –, and is one –in terms of form and script– of the most beautiful and extraordinary preserved inscriptions in Greece. It is the Arabic inscription of the ‘Bon Marché’ commercial building at Irakleio [24,25], Crete. This inscription is designed as an amulet in a lozenge within an oval shape, and the main text forms a circle which fills the lozenge. Seven textual spaces are formed, which read according to the order in the fig. fig. (4-d):

(1 فَاللَّهُ خَيْرٌ حَافِظًا / 2 وَهُوَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ / 3 سنة 1309هـ / 4 كتبه ... / 5 يا حفيظ / 6، 7 ح ف ، ي ظ

Transcription: 1) *Fa-Allāhu Khayrun Ḥāfīz-izāan* / 2) *Wa Huwa 'Arḥamu Ar-Rāḥimīn* / 3) *sanat 1309H* / 4) *katabhu ...* / 5) *Yā Ḥāfīz* / 6&7) *Ḥ f ī z*

Translation: 1) *Allah is the best Keeper,* 2) *and He is the most Merciful of the merciful ones* /3) *the year 1309H [1891]* / 4) *written by ...* / 5) *O Preserver* / 6&7) *Ḥ f ī z* [*mufrada*; Turkish: *müfreda*].

The first two texts comprise the Qur'anic quotation [12: 64: 12-17] from *Sūrat Yūsuf*. The core central textual circle, fig. (4-c) is formed by the 2-letters of the *Yā*, beneath which are the two dots of the letter *ya*. *Ḥāfīz* is engraved here twice: the first in the aforementioned textual circle in *jalithuluth (celi sülüis)* script in separate (*mufrada*) intersected

letters. This composition is flanked with the second Ḥafīz, which is also engraved in single (*mufrada*) letters: two on the right and the other two on the left. It is noteworthy that there are no extant examples of such inscriptions –Mā shā’ Allāh, ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ and ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ specifically those of the houses and shops– dating to the first centuries of the Ottoman rule in Greece and the Balkans. During that early Ottoman period, almost all the wealth of the commanders and the statesmen was directed to build and work effectively many charitable structures for the general benefit of the local community. The most important among these structures was the *imaret* [26]. In our examples, the owner of the house or shop that has the ‘Mā shā’ Allāh,’ ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ or ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ inscriptions forced who sees his beloved possession to read the inscription ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ to protect himself and his house or trade from the evil eye, or asking Allah to preserve it or them. To achieve this result, the patron would then select a remarkable and visible place for ‘Mā shā’ Allāh,’ ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ and ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ inscriptions on the exterior of the structures.

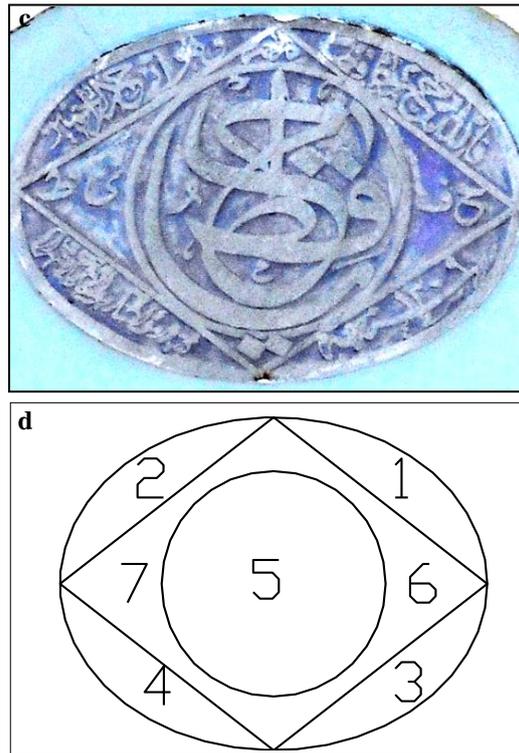


Figure (4) Shows **a.** Above the door of the house no. 9 at Vospourou street at Rethymno, Crete, 1207 H/1792-93, **b.** above the door of the house no. 5 Eustratiou fotakeat Rethymno, Crete, 1324 R/1909, **c.** & **d.** The Arabic inscription topped the façade of the ‘Bon Marché’ building at Irakleio, Crete.

2.5. ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ inscriptions and the visual influence

Considering the aim of the ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ –and ‘Yā Ḥafīz’ or ‘Yā Ḥafīz’– inscriptions, the patron or the possessor was keen to give the inscription the utmost point of visibility. There are ten factors influencing the extent of the visual distinguishability of the inscriptions: seven themes connect with the inscription itself, and three were based on the relation between the inscription and the building on which it was placed. The factors concerning the inscription itself comprise: **1)** dimensions, **2)** colours, **3)** the outline of the inscription, **4)** the design of the content, **5)** the material(s) used, **6)** the technique applied in the execution, and **7)** the ornaments or signs included in, or around, the inscription. The second group affecting the visibility, concerns the relation between the inscription and the building: **1)** the urban context; the routes either around the building or leading to its entrance cons-

idering the position of the inscription, 2) the ratio between the dimensions of the inscription and the building or façade on which it is placed. 3) the position of the inscription on the exterior of the building. Evaluating to what extent the visual impact of the inscription is achieved by considering the abovementioned factors. The original state of the inscription and the building has to be taken into account equally. The paper further details two inscriptions among the examples presented above, considering the aforementioned factors, the ‘Beka’ mansion at Veroia, fig. (2-m, 5), and the two-storey house located in *Ermou* Street at Mytilini, fig. (2-e). The ‘Beka’ mansion at Veroia, fig. (2-m, 5) now houses the Institute of the Balkan Traditional Architecture and the Archive of Professor Nikolao Moutsopoulos. Thanks to the perfect restoration project undertaken in 1997-99, some of the house’s inscriptions and decorations were preserved, two especially are of interest. The first is the ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ which is placed at the top centre of the façade overlooking the river, visible from all the corners. The second inscription is the phrase ‘Yā Hāfiz’, fig. (5) that is repeated twice within a rectangle, placed at the top centre of the main façade above the main door of the building from the courtyard, and visible clearly from the exterior at a distance, figs. (2-m, 5).



Figure (5) Shows the mansion of ‘Beka’ at Veroia (mid 18th c.; restored in 1997-99).

Thus, almost all the factors that influence the visual impact based on the relation between the inscription and its support, are achieved in both inscriptions. Regar-

ding the factors concerning the inscription itself, the calligrapher –and the painter– succeeded to achieve the utmost visibility for both inscriptions by applying four of the seven factors (1, 2, 3 & 7). The dimensions of both inscriptions are suitable, readable obviously with the mere eye, and match the whole dimensions of the façades. The calligrapher used blue colour, in both inscriptions, for the text and decoration rendering a colourful contrast with the light background. Each inscription is delineated with an external shape, a circle for the ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ and a rectangle for the ‘Yā Hāfiz’, distinguishing it from the other ornaments. Moreover, these colourful wall painting ornaments attracted the eyes of the passers-by. The second example here is the two-storey house located at the end of *Ermou* Street at Mytilini, fig. (2-e). On its main façade, the date “1319 H” [1901-1902] and the inscription ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ are engraved. Both inscriptions are symmetrically placed at the top centre of the main façade above built-in piers delineating vertically its mid-section, fig. (2-e). Both inscriptions were painted using the same dark grey colour of the built-in decorative piers, on which the date and inscriptions ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ placed. Except for the rather small dimensions of the ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ inscription in relation to the façade dimensions, the other two factors influencing the visual impact thanks to the placement of the inscription are achieved. Concerning the factors connected with the inscription itself, three aspects are detected here (3, 4 & 6). The inscription is indeed visually distinct thanks to the outline of the inscription, the design of the ‘Mā shā’ Allāh’ and the high relief engraving technique. Whereas it is unclear whether the colourful distinction is a result of the renovation, the inscription was painted with the same colour and material than the background. Therefore, the visual distinguishability was only achieved through some of the factors influencing the visual impact. The most important may be the remarkable height of the inscription, making it easily visible and readable. On the contrary, in

some cases, such as the Mā shā' Allāh inscription placed high above the portal of Ibrahim Pasha Mosque in Rhodes, the painting motifs surrounding the inscription negatively affect the visual distinguishability of the inscription, fig. (2-h). The same result may be due to deterioration factors, fig. (2-d, 4-b) or renovation works, fig. (2-e).

3. 'Mā shā' Allāh' in both spoken and epigraphic Greek heritage

The Mā shā' Allāh expression used as a charm blessing and protecting from the evil eye, transferred to some non-Islamic cultures, among which the Greek culture. Someone can detect the Mā shā' Allāh expression within the contextual culture of both verbal and written Greek literature. The online *Triantafillidi* Greek dictionary matches 'Mā shā' Allāh' with the Greek 'μάσαλα [māsala]' and further explains its meanings and use: "It is an exclamation, rustic, and ancient expression, to express the admiration, praise, thankfulness, or to protect from the evil eye: ex. Wow! (s)he grew up so fast! [Turkish: *maşallah* (derived from Arabic)]" The Greektext: [27] [Λεξικό]. **μάσαλα** [māsala] επιφ. : (λαϊκότρ., παρωχ.) για να εκφράσουμε θαυμασμό, επιδοκμασία, επιβράβευση ή για αποτροπή βασκανίας: ~ το παιδί, πόσο ψήλωσε! [τουρκ. *Maşallah* (από τα αραβ.)]. Using Mā shā' Allāh in spoken Modern Greek language is still noticed specifically in the villages of Lesbos, Rhodes, and Crete Islands. I heard it in 2016, during my last visit to Mytilini, from a Greek grandmother who praised the beauty of her granddaughter then said 'masallax.' An earlier study of Herzfeld (1981) on the semiotic approach to evil eye accusations in the Greek village of Pefko at Rhodes, concluded that, according to the Pefkiot concepts, the person who did not say Mā shā' Allāh 'masallax' is envious and green-eyed (γρουσούζης [*grusúzis*]) [1]. He commented on the Pefkiots using the Mā shā' Allāh expression: *Note that while villagers are aware that [Mā shā' Allāh] this is a Turkish word, as perhaps befits a prophylactic against*

grusuzia, they mostly do not understand it as an invocation to Allah, but describe it simply as a word that brings protection [1]. The Mā shā' Allāh differs from the other words borrowed from Turkish, as it is a religious expression and not the name or adjective of something or someone. It is used in the Greek spoken dictionary with its Islamic 'Turkish' cultural concept. Furthermore, a Greek alphabet of Mā shā' Allāh 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ' is used in non-Muslim epigraphic heritage on buildings and objects with its Islamic cultural meaning, to protect from the evil eye. The *Karamanlides* (*Karamanians*) [28] or Orthodox Christians wrote 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ' on their houses in Anatolia following this Turkish tradition. There is an extant distinguished example above a house in İncesu, fig. (6-a), a district of Kayseri province in Central Anatolia [29]. The inscription combines 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ' with the date September 1871. Another inscription placed above the door of a house, fig. (6-b) in Güzelyurt–Gelveri or Karvali–, a town and district of Aksaray province in Central Anatolia [28]. The inscription comprises two lines: 1) an engraved cross and the 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ'—with the typography of two L 'Λ'—, and 2) the second line comprises the capital letters 'X. I. K' with the date 1900. A gospel book attributed to Armenia, stored in the Morgan Library and Museum (MS M. 1149), holds an interesting example of Mā shā' Allāh in Greek letters 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ' as a charm, among other talismans from different cultures and religions, protecting from the evil eye [2,30]. Though the manuscript itself was made between 1675 and 1725, the wide assortment of priceless objects adorning its cover reflects various regions, cultures, and time periods. Indeed, this 'treasure-binding' comprises two 13th century Seljuk silver coins connected with a circular blue, red and white enamelled medallion, engraved mother-of-pearl plaques, a gilded metal cross, fragments of ornamental jewellery, and 30 engraved seal stones, fig. (6-c,d) [2,30]. Most of these objects, added or attached to the book's cover, functioned as talismans to protect from the evil eye or to bring good luck as a result of their materials or engravings [2,30]. As far as the Mā shā' Allāh inscription is concerned, one of

the 30 seal stones attached to the manuscript's back cover, was engraved with the Mā shā' Allāh in a Greek alphabet 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ' fig. (6-d). It is read in four lines: 1) Cross, 2) Μασα, 3) λαχ and 4) 1759. This Greek seal including the Mā shā' Allāh 'ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ' is active thanks to its borrowed concept from the Islamic 'Turkish' culture.

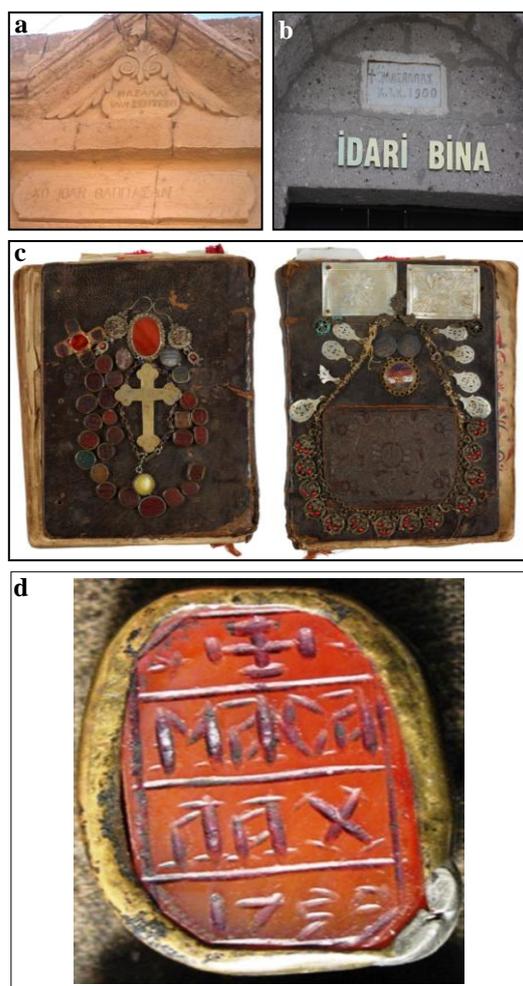


Figure (6) Shows **a.** Mā shā' Allāh in a Greek alphabet "ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ" engraved above the door of Greek house in İncesu, Kayseri, Central Anatolia (after: *Tr: kullamcı: katpatuka*, **b.** Mā shā' Allāh in a Greek alphabet "ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ" engraved above the door of Greek house in Güzelyurt, Aksaray, Central Anatolia, **c.** Gospel book. Armenia, ca. 1675-1725. Calfskin, mother-of-pearl, gilded metal, beads, metal thread, coins, semiprecious stones. The Morgan Library and Museum, MS M. 1149, Purchased on the Herzog Fund, 2006, **d.** Mā shā' Allāh in a Greek alphabet "ΜΑΣΑΛΛΑΧ" engraved on a seal stone attached to the cover of the Armenian Gospel book (after Sylvie Merian & Turner 2019).

4. Discussion

In this paper, we analyse the use of Islamic expression 'Mā shā' Allāh' an amulet to protect from the evil eye by Muslims and Christians together. It discusses the alike conceptual expressions Yā Ḥāfīz and Yā Ḥafīz. It detects the Ottoman building inscriptions characterising these expressions in the Balkans, focusing on those survive in Greece. The Islamic expression 'Mā shā' Allāh' transferred through the Ottomans to Christian "Byzantine" culture, heritage and language. This Christian acceptance of Mā shā' Allāh as a talisman to protect from the evil eye accompanied with its transformation into a popular folkloric significance exceeded its original religious context. This folkloric taste appeared in its use on Islamic and Christian buildings, belongings and daily language with the same concept; to protect from the evil eye. However, we cannot define all patterns including customs, practises, places, objects, artistic expressions and values that transferred from Ottoman "Islamic" legacy to Balkan "Christian" culture, and vice versa. Future research will explore more examples of this pattern which may include Sufi rituals and practises, cult of trees, tekke (dervish or Sufi lodge) community... Based on geographically and chronologically analysis of the surveyed inscriptions in Greece; the study suggests that the extensive use of the calligraphic amulets such as Mā shā' Allāh and Yā Ḥāfīz in the Ottoman Balkans declares the decay and war periods. The paper discusses the relation between attaining the message(s) of such inscriptions Mā shā' Allāh and Yā Ḥāfīz (or Yā Ḥafīz) and their visibility. It suggests a group of factors that influencing the visual impact of those writings; some connect with the calligraphic panels themselves, and other through the relation between the inscriptions and the buildings comprise them.

5. Conclusion

This paper surveyed and analysed the Qur'anic quotation Mā shā' Allāh on both Ottoman and Greek heritages in the Balkans. Its main focus is the existing inscriptions on Ottoman buildings

in Greece. There is a considerable number of such *Mā shā' Allāh* writings survived on varying functional ottoman architectural works in Greece. The main motive of this study is the continuation of using the *Mā shā' Allāh* in Greek language until now. This paper proposes an analysis of the extant inscriptions in Greece considering functional, regional, and chronological categories, and concludes that the preserved examples mainly found in the islands and Northern Greece; territories were under the Ottoman rule until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of these inscriptions date to the Late Ottoman period 18th - early 20th century. The paper suggests that the engraving of the *Mā shā' Allāh* and the relevant inscription of *Yā Ḥafīz*, in its both formulas, specifically on private residential and commercial buildings had two meanings: 1) A direct message of protecting from the evil eye, 2) The fear from upcoming variables considering the difficult political events and the critical situation of the Ottomans at that time of their producing as was in the island of Crete. *Mā shā' Allāh* was engraved also in Greek alphabet 'Μάσαλα' and 'Μασαλαχ' on Christian buildings, and objects as in Islamic cultural context. Thus the Qur'anic Arabic expression *Mā shā' Allāh* (Turkish: *Maşallah*; Greek: *Μάσαλα* and *Μασαλαχ*) carries cultural meaning across different religions, cultures and regions. It was a mascot and a talisman on properties, including houses and belongings of both Muslims and Christians.

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