

Research Notes

TÜBİTAK Project Titled “Ottoman Ego-Documents: Inventory, Analysis (1500-1800)” and the Research Activities of the Istanbul Group I

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During the first meeting of the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) project coded 122K722 and titled “Ottoman Ego-Documents: Inventory, Analysis (1500-1800)” held on March 6, 2023, the idea of launching a journal for the publication of the project’s findings was welcomed by the team with great support. *Ceride* was the alternative that had been highlighted from the very beginning and gathered the most extensive appreciation as the title of the journal. Creating a platform for researchers outside the circle of the official team and volunteer supporters of the project, expanding the dialogue by learning from them, and welcoming

contributions beyond this relatively small group of researchers replaced the initial and functional motivations of publishing the project's findings on a regular basis. A journal will be published and will be named *Ceride*; it will not be merely the journal of the project but a journal of the field of ego-document studies. The project has now completed its fifth month and this journal has probably been the agenda article that the team has thus far most easily reached a consensus on.

The formal meetings of the project, especially during the first two months, were dominated by an atmosphere of uncertainty. The extended effort we put into the question, "What is an ego-document?" can be explained by the ambiguity surrounding the second question following the first one: "What are the Ottoman ego-documents?"¹ Regarding Ottoman ego-documents, the persistent challenges of the lack of a clear definition and an adequately defined scope for this evolving field, despite the dedicated work of respectable researchers, have been a significant concern from the very start of the project. These challenges have been as constant and lively participants of the project meetings as the researchers themselves. Moreover, the need to create a clear definition from within the Ottoman written culture and to keep the concept from becoming a useless amorphous term, especially when the umbrella term referring to this source corpus is still considered an "upstart" by some Ottoman historians, was crucial. Despite the apparent difficulty of providing a definitive answer (which can only be offered after the project is finalized, an inventory of Ottoman ego-documents formed and thus a typology emerged), this seemingly exhausting issue has a favourable aspect. Knowing that such questions can only arise in parallel with comprehensive and systematic studies in the field, and as an innate result of such efforts, it is possible to consider it as an indication that the project is progressing in the right direction.

Suraiya Faroqhi identified two inherent obstacles to the study of Ottoman ego-documents, which also explain the long neglect of this field. The first is an ideological/intellectual obstacle rooted in a Eurocentric approach that denies the possibility of non-Western and pre-Western self-awareness

1 Of course, a significant progress has been made around the question, especially within the last few years. The "Workshop on Ottoman Ego-Documents" (2020) and the "Symposium on Ottoman Ego-Documents" (2022), held at Istanbul Medeniyet University, provided opportunities for researchers to exchange ideas about Ottoman ego-documents. For more detailed information, see <https://benanlatilari.medeniyet.edu.tr>

and its natural outcome, ego-documents. While it seems that this primary obstacle, which has dominated literature for quite a long time, has now transformed into a largely obsolete idea, the second challenge Faroqhi identified in the early 2000s is still relevant. The “technical difficulty” the systematic and comprehensive studies in the field are facing is the scattered and unclassified nature of Ottoman ego-document material in various libraries and archives. Cataloguing is rarely organised in a way that facilitates researchers in identifying ego-document texts.² The main reason that works in this field have been primarily focused on publishing and analysing single texts so far is the incidental and isolated discovery of Ottoman ego-document materials.³ The research team creating an inventory of the Ottoman ego-documents with their expertise on manuscripts and experience in the field realised that the safest, albeit the most extended and laborious, way to overcome this obstacle is to examine each manuscript individually. Despite researchers’ warnings in support and the obvious difficulty of this chosen path, the project team decided that relying solely on catalogue records would prove to be ineffectual, and the collections must be searched text by text. Considering the method, it is evident that the most challenging and time-consuming genre is the *mejmuas*.

Of course, this does not mean that we entirely disregard existing catalogues. However, it requires careful scanning and trained scepticism to utilise them. Keeping in mind that during the cataloguing process of the manuscripts in libraries, the works were recorded without reference to the modern genres that they might correspond to today, we needed to decide to which genres we should be alert that appear in the catalogues. For example, for a catalogue that potentially involves diaries, and since they were not recorded as such, we attempted to identify keywords that might make

2 See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163-164.

3 Here, it should be noted that Cemal Kafadar and his pupils, Derin Terzioğlu and Aslı Niyazioğlu, constitute an exception. Cemal Kafadar was the first to evaluate an early text from the Ottoman period as an ego-document, thus contributing greatly to the field. See Cemal Kafadar, “Self and Others: The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature” *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989): 121-150. Kafadar and his students have paved the way for the Ottoman ego-documents studies, practically opening up the field and providing inspiration and encouragement for subsequent researchers. For an analysis of selected texts written in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish between the 14th and 20th centuries from the perspective of ego-documents, see also Ralf Elger, Yavuz Köse, (ed.) *Many Ways of Speaking About the Self, Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian and Turkish (14th- 20th Century)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010).

us suspicious of it being actually a diary: *Jurnal, sergüzeşt, mejmua, sal-name...* Thus, a list of genres corresponding to each modern example was developed and expanded.⁴ Furthermore, we also received help from manuscript experts and researchers outside the project team, and we scanned fundamental sources such as *Keşfü’z-Zunûn, Osmanlı Müellifleri* and *Sicill-i Osmânî* to identify the genres – and, of course, the texts. The genre of each work is recorded in the inventory using three datasets consisting of the original title, the name in the catalogue record, and its modern equivalent genre.

According to autobiographical theory, the author claims that their text contains and reflects the truth of the external world. In this regard, there is a “pact”⁵ between the reader and the author, similar to one that exists in scientific texts. Hence, the author -or scientist- promises to present the reality to the reader by writing their name at the beginning of the text,⁶ but literary theorists and historians alike are cautious about this promise of reality. The “problem of unreliable author”⁷ immanent to ego-documents did not pose a significant difficulty for us, at least while forming the inventory, and we included fictional ego-documents in the inventory as well. Since every text that an individual produces about themselves and their life is essentially a cultural product and a representational reconstruction of it in writing, there is no reason to exclude clearly fictional, imaginative texts from the inventory. In the early modern world, where there was yet a limited number of evidence invented and people described reality through their feelings of it rather than communicating it in Celsius or Richter scale -back when descriptiveness was yet a solid alternative to numerical evidence-;

4 *Mersiye, cerîde, salnâme, sergüzeştname, jurnal, esaretnâme, tarih, ihrâknâme, vâkiât, yevmiyye, mecmûa, fehrese, sebet, esâretnâme, ihtidânâme, rûznâme, arzuhal, şikâyetnâme, sabîrnâme, münşeât, hâtıra-hâtîrat, menâmât, tabîrnâme, hasbihâl, mahzar, lâyiha, yaşnâme, sıhatnâme...*

5 For Lejeune’s concept of “referential pact,” see Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 22-23.

6 Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 22-23.

7 Here, I borrow Wayne C. Booth’s category of “unreliable narrator” from his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. However, I’ve made a slight modification by using “unreliable author” instead of “unreliable narrator.” The reason for this is that when it comes to ego-documents, and as the primary characteristic feature of these texts, the narrator, author, and protagonist are identical. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), 158-159. Among the four main types of unreliable authors (*Liar, Picaro, Madman, Naif*), the “Liar” role is most commonly attributed to authors of ego-documents, and it is the most intentional and, therefore, the most dangerous one. The liar alters or fabricates their story with motivations to vindicate themselves, justify the deeds done, and gain benefits. These kinds of intentions by authors of ego-documents are ordinary pitfalls that researchers working on such texts are familiar with and equipped to overcome.

can one object to the historical truth behind the statements like “the snow fell first like the extent of a dream and then, like *bulghur*” or “the earthquake was severe”? When working with ego-documents, we acknowledge that this writing form allowed authors a wide degree of freedom over their texts throughout history. It grants the right to choose, mildly twist, exaggerate, or even outrightly distort the truth. Moreover, historians have now long moved away from providing definitive answers to questions like who the credible author is and which sources are reliable, instead focusing on discovering the unique characteristics of each document at hand and developing customized reading strategies accordingly. In summary, just like an “authentic” ego-document, a fictional one is equally valuable, or perhaps even more in certain aspects, and deserves attention.

We include dictated ego-documents in the inventory, just like fictional ones. One of the most common examples are tombstones, where individuals seemingly trust others to record information about themselves and their lives after their deaths. However, it is impossible to be sure who actually wrote these texts and how faithful they were to the original statements. But when it comes to the inscriptions on tombstones –and if they are original texts, not part of a trend copied as templates– the question of whether the narrator in the inscription is truly the deceased or not becomes insignificant. Even if they are not texts of testamentary transmission and are essentially the product of people’s imagination, they provide an answer to a fascinating question: “If the deceased could speak about themselves and their life, what would the alive expect them to say?”, which presents society’s perception of ego-documents. Just like self-portrait miniatures,⁸ we would not risk ignoring any possible representation produced about the *self*.

Initially, the inventory had entries of approximately 50 texts, but after five months of work, it now has over 250 ego-documents in prose and verse. However, ego-documents, in terms of their features regarding content and form, do not constitute a uniform genre but rather refer to a type of source as a whole. Developing a balanced criterion for classifying the texts identified within this diverse source corpus proved to be quite challenging, considering the variety in both their form and content. Once we agreed the pri-

8 We need to thank Cemal Kafadar for drawing the attention of the ego-documents research group and, of course, the audience filling the conference hall to self-portrait miniatures during his Keynote Speech at the “Symposium on Ottoman Ego-Documents.”

mary criterion for identifying an ego-document is that the author's primary motivation in writing the text is to speak about themselves and their experiences, it became necessary to explore the various forms and characteristics of talking about the *self*. Currently, we categorise separate texts primarily devoted to the *self* as autonomous ego-documents and texts written with other intentions but contain a relatively small part dedicated to the *self* as "partial"⁹ ego-documents. We classify texts that contain scattered mentions of the *self* under the category of "fragmental" ego-documents.¹⁰ The categorisation of ego-documents takes the physical conditions of the text or part of the text, such as having a separate title or being between two covers, as well as the author's motive in writing the text or part of it into consideration. Our discussions on individual texts during the categorisation process of ego-documents have refined the conceptual framework of the project over the past months.

In addition to these three categories, we are following a simple yet functional method to ensure standardisation of inventory data entry. The nature of the source we are working with necessitated making small additions to the data entry forms used in all other similar research projects based on manuscript sources. Beyond basic information about the source we are working on, such as the type of writing, language, and available copies, a reasonable final analysis of ego-document production practices can only be achieved through well-formulated questions directed at the authors. Identifying patterns and points of differentiation requires recording geographical and occupational information about the author. Questions such as which regions and professions are more prone to expressing their *self* and whether there are differences in the self-expression styles of individuals from different regions and professions will be revisited at the end of the project -this time to be answered.

We also search through state archives alongside manuscript libraries, evaluating the potential of materials found in these places as ego-documents. One issue we haven't resolved yet is how to access and utilise private archives. We believe the journal will help in this regard, and we hum-

9 The sections explaining the "reason for publication" in these texts can be considered as the most well-known examples of this category.

10 Derin Terzioğlu inspired us for the third category. See "Autobiography in Fragments: Reading Ottoman Personal Miscellanies in the Early Modern Era", *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives* (Wurzburg: Ergon, 2007).

bly expect individuals who possess ego-documents in their family archives to contact us.

In this summary of the project team's efforts thus far, it is evident that many of the issues on our agenda have been the specific challenges of ego-document studies. As the team asks these inevitable questions, seeks solutions, and makes decisions - and perhaps changing their minds several times- we have realised that our method and approach can be informative to those interested in this field of study. We hope that the first part of the meeting notes we are publishing here will contribute not only to ego-document studies in particular but also to Ottoman cultural history in general.