

Araştırma Makalesi/Research Notes

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

GÜLŞEN YAKAR

İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü
Istanbul Medeniyet University, Faculty of Letters, Department of History

(gulsen.yakar@medeniyet.edu.tr), ORCID: 0009-0005-5100-6845

Çeviri/Translated by: YASEMİN TUĞYAN

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü, Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü
Boğaziçi University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of History, Department of Turkish Language and Literature

Yakar, Gülşen. “TÜBİTAK Project Titled “Ottoman Ego-Documents: Inventory, Analysis (1500-1800)” and the Research Activities of the Istanbul Group II,” Translated by Yasemin Tuğyan. *Ceride* 1, no. 2 (Aralık/December 2023): sayfa/pp 164-169.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10668952>

The interest received by the initiation of the publication of *Ceride: Journal of Ego-Document Studies*, now in its second issue that you are reading - a significant outcome of the project “Ottoman Ego-Documents: Inventory, Analysis (1500-1800)” - has proven to be a major source of motivation for the project team during the research process.

Since the publication of the journal’s first issue, the project team had the opportunity to formally present their preliminary findings for the first time at the Turkologentag 2023 - The Fourth European Convention on Turkic, Ottoman, and Turkish Studies, hosted by the University of Vienna on

September 21-23. On September 23rd, during the special session titled “Ottoman Ego-Documents: Analysis on Sample Texts, Research Activities of the Istanbul Group,”¹ moderated by the project coordinator and *Ceride*’s editor-in-chief, Prof. Selim Karahasanoğlu, Dr. Semra Çörekçi presented the paper titled “Reading the Life of a *Mudarris* from His Diary: An Analysis of the Diary of Sıdkızâde Mustafa Hamid Efendi,” introducing the audience to Sıdkızâde Mustafa Hamid Efendi (d. ~1850), a scholar at the early stages of his career belonging to a prominent scholarly family by examining the diary, which recorded both the intimate and ordinary details of the author’s daily life diligently. In the presentation titled “Istanbul Group of Ego-Documents: What They Did, What They Are Doing, What They Will Do?” Özlem Kumbar and Emre Eken informed the audience about the research group and the TÜBİTAK project, providing an analysis of the project’s early findings in terms of century, genre, and authors. As for myself, in my paper titled “In Tears and in Pleasure: The Daily Life of a Dervish in 17th Century Istanbul,” I attempted to present the diary known in the literature as *Sohbetnâme*, written by Seyyid Hasan (d. 1688), a this-worldly Halvetî-Sünbülî sheikh who lived in 17th-century Istanbul, sharing his days filled with both tears and joy.² Following the presentations, during the Q&A session, Prof. Selim Karahasanoğlu answered questions related to the project and informed the audience about the planned activities.

Another significant development for the project, now entering its tenth month of research, is initiation of the evaluation of findings. In addition to the regular project meetings where the team assesses the project’s progress, delves into technical issues, and plans future activities, we also conduct weekly sessions as part of the PhD course titled “Ottoman Ego-Documents.” In these sessions, each finding added to the inventory is introduced by the respective researcher, followed by a rigorous categorisation and discussion of its ego-document qualities by the project team. Notably, there are instances where a consensus on categorising specific works cannot be reached. However, the valuable aspect of the course lies not only in providing the project team with information about each text in the inventory but

1 Detailed information and panel proposals can be found on the website of the project. See <https://benanlatilari.medeniyet.edu.tr/tr/olba-envanter-tubitak-1001/konferanslar-olba-envanter>.

2 I am now and always grateful to my dear professor, Assoc. Prof. Güçlü Tülüveli, who introduced me to this diary when I was still an undergraduate student.

also in fostering discussions related to the field. This process contributes to refining the conceptual foundations of the project, repeatedly bringing each hypothesis to the forefront for testing them against new findings. Undoubtedly, when the project moves into the analysis part at its conclusion, these sessions will prove to be helpful by making the team's work considerably more manageable.

The effort invested in revealing the ego-document quality of each new finding is shaped by existing lines of discussion in the field of ego-document studies and various approaches specific to the area. It would be easier but monotonous if the project team adopted a uniform approach to ego documents and evaluations were made unanimously. Fortunately, the team is lucky to have researchers who bring diverse backgrounds and experiences of different disciplines, often resulting in a productive and dynamic discussion environment.

Each meticulous examination of every finding centres on its personal and intimate qualities. How profoundly and openly do Ottoman authors of the early modern period express their emotional and intellectual worlds in their works? More importantly, how does the broad framework of generalisation, such as the composite term "Ottoman" within the extensive time span of the "early modern period," fit, disregarding various cultural spheres, writing traditions, community legacies, and, above all, personal inclinations to the schema? Despite appearing otherwise, the intellectual legacy of Burckhardt persists in academia and even in approaches seemingly developed in reaction to him. As evaluations are made without a comprehensive understanding of the entire material, they often do not extend beyond assumptions. Despite increasing number of ego documents of *ulama* (scholars) and Sufis, the notion that Ottomans³ refrained from speaking about themselves and considered mentioning the *self* shameful remains ingrained in mental frameworks. Evidence has shaken the grounds but has not entirely demolished them; in the East, the absence of an individual endures.⁴

3 Or, whichever you prefer: Muslims, Easterners, those governed by the Sultanism or Eastern Despotism model, those in the *Gemeinschaft* (community) phase... In summary, societies that have acquired positive traits and values of the West only through imitation of their patrons, Western outsiders.

4 Let's briefly summarize a lengthy line of thought. Although the existence, singularity, and time span of the period that Orthodox historiography labels as the "Renaissance" with its distinct characteristics, is today a subject of debate, Jacob Burckhardt, in his comprehensive work published for the first time in 1860 and which has influenced the literature on Renaissance culture for a long time, identifies the Renaissance as the starting point of the modern era. According to Burckhardt, Renais-

The reality revealed by the inventory, which now exceeds the registry of 300 works, is that contrary to popular belief, early modern Eastern authors created opportunities to narrate the most intimate aspects of their lives in various occasions and in various genres. Neither the genres nor their content is rigid or absolute; they are cultural products that authors modify, thus, open to experiment and transform. Autobiographies within *icazetnames* (diplomas), private letters within *fiqh* texts... As we thoroughly analyse

sance Italy was the unique ideal environment that gave birth to the first individuals of Modern Europe (“*first born sons of Modern Europe*”) with its distinctive administrative, social, cultural, and economic conditions. This very environment is unparalleled in any other era or society. For the first time in history, and only in Italy, individuals who previously identified themselves only as members of a race, family, or community and were conscious of their identity only in connection with a broader category and a wider community transformed into modern individuals. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: The New American Library, 1961). The advocates of the profound transformation in history, where individuals develop the notion of becoming individuals independent of the groups to which they are affiliated, is not only Burckhardt. A similar Durkheimian societal transformation with an evolutionary approach can be observed in Ferdinand Tönnies’ transformation of community-society (*Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft*). However, the values attributed to the stages of this transformation are pretty different in Tönnies and Burckhardt. See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirischer Culturformen* (Leipzig: Fues, 1887).

Burckhardt’s assertion, which denies the existence of pre-Western and non-Western self-consciousness and the autobiographical genres as its cultural products, has formed a significant intellectual legacy in Ottoman ego-document studies. This stance is supported by assessments of eminent orientalist such as Gustave von Grunebaum and Franz Rosenthal, who produced evaluations of Islamic culture and the nature of Muslim communities. Grunebaum, Rosenthal, and many others argued that Islam as a religion created a cultural barrier to developing the notion of individuality. They contended that Muslims perceived themselves primarily as part of the religious community, *cema’at*, and then the larger community of Muslim believers, *ummah*, but most certainly as members of a community of believers rather than as individuals. For example, see Gustave von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946); Franz Rosenthal, *Man versus Society in Medieval Islam*, ed. Dimitri Gutas, (Leiden: Brill, 2014). The discussion over the impossibility of individuality in Eastern/Muslim cultures supported with the observation that the existence of individualism and the awareness of being an individual is directly indicated by the autobiographical genre of writing. It was argued that this genre was acquired only in a late period, around the 19th century, and only through imitation of Western culture.

The notion of individuality, the concept of individualism, and the analyses based on the historical development of these ideas aside, there is a need to re-explore autobiographical texts produced outside the West, which are considered cultural products of the so-called self-consciousness. George Makdisi, for instance, argued that within the Islamic writing tradition, the intersection of historiographical genres of biographies and annuals gave rise to the genre of diaries as early as the 8th century. See George Makdisi, “The Diary in Islamic Historiography: Some Notes” *History and Theory* 25 (1986): 173-185. In comparisons made by adopting Western, that is, high standards, one of the results drawn without bothering to evaluate the cultural world and writing tradition in which non-Western texts take shape is that these texts do not adequately reflect individuals’ inner worlds, emotions, and thoughts. A comprehensive compilation and nuanced analysis of the Eastern/Muslim autobiographical writing tradition were only produced in the early 2000s. It was recognised that examples produced by different cultural worlds and writing traditions are textual products that involve different writing strategies and require different reading methods. See Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

the content of early modern Ottoman ego-documents, we eagerly become confidants and suffering companions of love, longing, sexuality, illness, mourning, ambition, jealousy, all kinds of emotions, and dreams as their reflection. It is challenging to say that our findings support the thesis that the early modern or non-Western examples of genre is more of a social act,⁵ shedding light on the writer's social environment, and can be fully utilised as historical sources when evaluated solely with this potential, rather than as personal documents. We must admit that it is indeed a celebrated observation for the project team.

The representative nature of the findings has been a matter that we have consistently emphasised since the beginning of the project. How could we claim to bring the life in Ottoman society to light by creating an inventory of works containing first-person narratives in an era where only a small and privileged segment is literate? Would not it limit the project findings to those who are highly literate, considering their relationship with the written world to be beyond its most basic functions, who view it as a means of self-expression? However, we will not limit the project with ego-documents that have long been at the life stories forefront of historiography, whether they belong to the group of statesmen or to Sufis known for their inclination to observe and express themselves. Setting aside the fact that there are still undiscovered works or texts not yet evaluated for their ego-document qualities, whether belonging to the state elite or the Sufi community, we intend to listen to the voices that have not been present in the historiography for a long time or are considered inaccessible with the existing historical sources.

A ruler's primary function is to provide promises to society that often do not go beyond ensuring an ideal. The establishment of justice, embodied in the existence of Ottoman sultans, is among such promises. Those who feel they have been wronged attempt to bring their situation to the attention of the Sultan or his loyal servants. These include people who have suffered injustice from state officials, those who have not achieved the position they believed they deserved, and those who have lost their power or wealth due to the twists of fate. There are quite a few who see the solution in explaining themselves to the Sultan. Among them, literate individuals present vo-

5 *Autobiography as social act.*

luminous texts, often praising their potential patron, hoping to make their stand known. On the other hand, the majority, who are not literate, briefly express their concerns through intermediaries. In the early stages of the project, the team agreed to include dictated ego-documents, such as *Gazavat-ı Hayreddin Pasha*. However, we have discovered the potential of the Ottoman Archives later in the project, compared to the manuscript libraries that have been the apparent target from the beginning. Letters and petitions found in the archives alongside *hatt-ı hümayuns* often provide detailed ego-documents. Although these detailed accounts primarily serve the practical purpose of communicating the specific period in life and the issue at hand, there is no doubt that the motivation behind them is to express oneself and narrate one's circumstances. Perhaps the most crucial aspect related to *arzuahals* (petitions) is that they serve as a way to access women's ego-documents. The project seems to have made significant progress in overcoming a problem that emerged during the conceptual stage—namely, the representative capacity of the findings for the broader society while addressing concerns and criticisms expressed in academic circles. By developing the appropriate method and ensuring source diversity in research, especially if the research activity has not chosen the easy path of turning a deaf ear, it becomes possible to hear many voices from the past with varying loudness, as evidenced in the “An Ego-Document from the Ottoman Archives” section of the journal.

The preparations for the third meeting, which will take place in Skopje between May 24-26, 2024, are underway. We are eager to explore ego-documents from the Balkan region and look forward to meet in Skopje.⁶

6 For detailed information, see <https://benanlatilari.medeniyet.edu.tr/tr/uskup-2024/ana-sayfa-uskup-2024>.