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Conversation in the Library – Kütüphanede muhabbet – Συζητώντας στη Βιβλιοθήκη is the title of two pioneering volumes that not only reconstruct the history of an endowed late eighteenth-century library in Rhodes but also situate it within broader discussions of writing and reading practices, book and library cultures, and the political, historical, and economic frameworks of the late Ottoman period. The work offers a wide-angle view of Ottoman-Turkish and Greek history. The title “Conversation in the Library” aptly captures the core feature of these volumes: a genuine dialogue among scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, who share their ideas and expertise to bring this remarkable interdisciplinary project to life, each from their own angle, perspective, and set of interests. The seventh-generation deputy (*mütevelli*), Tarik Tüten, opened the doors of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library to more than seventy scholars and generously provided the space in which this conversation could take place.

The first volume, which is the focus of this review, introduces the endowed library of Hafız Ahmed Ağa (d. ca. 1800) through an interdisciplinary approach that combines novelistic and anecdotal narration, historical analysis, archival and documentary research, and codicological studies. It consists of five main sections, beginning with biographical and historical foundations, then examining the library’s material and institutional dimensions, and concluding with a broader historical context encompassing Ottoman libraries, reading and writing practices, and manuscript cultures within Ottoman, Greek, Jewish, and Armenian frameworks. This volume is particularly relevant to this review because of its close engagement with Ottoman book and reading culture, firmly situating it within the field of Ottoman library and book history under the Ottoman Empire.

By contrast, the second volume traces the history of the island of Rhodes in the *longue durée*, from antiquity through successive empires, reaching the Ottoman and Italian periods and the modern Greek present. It contains twenty-three scholarly articles framed by a brief prologue and concluding reflections. The contributions are organised as a wide-ranging diachronic exploration of Rhodes, spanning classical astronomy, Byzantine administration, Hospitaller and Ottoman urban and social history, Italian colonial heritage policies, and modern questions of identity, memory, and multicultural-religious coexistence. Together, the two volumes provide the broader historical and cultural context

of the island, where the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library was established, endowed, and has continued to exist since its founding in 1793, enduring successive political, social, and cultural transformations to the present day.

As for the first volume, it begins with a prologue written by the prominent Ottomanists Gülru Necipoğlu and Cemal Kafadar, who underscore the significance of this collaborative project within the broader field of Ottoman and Greek history. They introduce the library established and endowed in Rhodes in 1793 by Hafız Ahmed Ağa, an Ottoman dignitary born and raised on the island. Necipoğlu and Kafadar emphasize the importance of studying the transmission of knowledge, arguing that the long eighteenth century witnessed a major development in attitudes toward the production and transmission of knowledge. They provide an overview of the thematic profile of the library by shedding light on some of the genres and authors represented in its endowed corpus. This profile is discussed in depth through a focus on the authors, works, and genres most extensively represented in the collection. By comparing the most frequently represented authors in this corpus with the 1502/03 inventory of the Topkapı Palace Library, Necipoğlu and Kafadar demonstrate the relative absence of Sufi works in the Hafız Ahmed Library, in contrast to their prominence in the Topkapı Palace collection, where Islamic jurisprudence appears less dominant. Additionally, as they highlight, within the literary sphere of Hafız Ahmed's corpus, Persian *dīvāns* outnumber Ottoman ones, and Persian classics such as Sa'dī's *Būstān* and *Gulistān*, as well as the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfız, are strongly represented. This thematic overview leads the authors to argue that Hafız Ahmed was a man of distinctive taste, more interested in didactic and "sober" works than in lyrical, mystical, and "amusing" ones (p. 28). After presenting these impressions of the holdings, Necipoğlu and Kafadar address the development of Ottoman libraries' spatial characteristics, which evolved from architectural units attached to mosques and madrasas into independent library complexes. They conclude by inviting scholars to undertake a systematic investigation of the library's content and its cultural-historical significance, emphasizing how such institutions continue to support the production, transmission, and exchange of knowledge and sustain dialogue across generations and communities.

After setting the historical, thematic, and spatial scene of the library, the volume turns to its first section, titled "*From the Aegean to the Bosphorus.*" This section

cultivates an emotional attachment to the library's story and its main figures. It opens with an article by Nektaria Anastasiadou, written in a novelistic style, which introduces Şemsinur, a Greek woman from the island of Chios who was enslaved at the age of twelve in 1822 and brought to Istanbul to be sold in the fish market in a neighbourhood across from the Nuruosmaniye Mosque. Saliha Hanım, the widow of Hafız Ahmed Ağa, became the owner of this Chian girl, Şemsinur.

The section continues with a second article that approaches slavery from a different angle, examining the Ottoman state's systematic enslavement of Chian rebels during the 1822 massacre, its legal justifications, the mechanisms of capture and sale, and its role in reasserting imperial authority, as evidenced in archival documents. The author, Karamürsel, shows how the Ottoman state sought to assert and reaffirm its sovereign authority by using the fear of death and enslavement to deter other rebellious communities, arguing that this policy was supported and justified by Islamic jurisprudence and historical legal practice.

The last two articles in this section, by Yianni Cartledge and Evi Psarrou, further explore the historical context of the Chios massacre, its different perspectives, and the Ottoman legal response. They examine available archival documents and records, addressing the reasons behind the massacre, the surrounding historical developments, when and how it occurred, and who was responsible.

As an opening section, it effectively orients the reader as they enter the world of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library. The novelistic introduction builds a strong emotional connection to the library and the Hafız Ahmed Ağa family, drawing the reader into the narrative. However, the extensive discussion of the Chios massacre, while historically important, at times feels more detailed than necessary for the book's central aim of exploring the library and its cultural-historical significance.

The second section, "The Founders," shifts from emotional narratives to biographical depth, profiling Hafız Ahmed Ağa (1740s–d. ca. 1800), his son Ahmed Fethi (also known as Ahmed Fethi Paşa, 1800–1857), and Ahmed Fethi's son-in-law, Said the Englishman (1830–1896), through their political and intellectual trajectories. İbrahim Akkurt and Burhan Çağlar's comprehensive chapter narrates the foundation of the Rhodes endowed library by Hafız in

1798, two years before his death, initially comprising 878 manuscripts. The authors argue that, having attained a significant political position within the imperial court, Ahmed Fethi played a vital role in reviving and enriching the endowment's collection.

In the second article of this section, Efthymios Machairas presents Hafız as a typical Aegean shipowner and Ottoman maritime merchant who diversified his investments and strategically employed endowment to ensure social and financial stability (pp. 136–37). Despite his execution under Sultan Selim, these endowments protected his family's legacy, as Machairas argues. He notably highlights the active participation of Muslim officials in Mediterranean trade, thereby challenging prevailing assumptions of Greek-Christian dominance.

Gisela Procházka-Eisloffer offers insight into the reception of Ahmed Fethi Pařa's visit to Vienna in the 1830s through the Austrian press and memoir literature. She argues that representations of Ahmed Fethi in the Austrian press reveal a shift in European perceptions of the Ottoman Empire, from a barbaric enemy to a figure of exotic fascination and cultural curiosity. Ömer Eęecioęlu further enriches this portrait by emphasizing Ahmed Fethi Pařa's considerable reputation within European aristocratic circles. In the final article of this section, Eęecioęlu notes that renowned Viennese composers Johann Strauss I and Josef Lanner dedicated waltzes to Ahmed Fethi Pařa, reflecting his social prominence and the nuanced cross-cultural exchanges of the period.

The third section, "Hafız Ahmed Aęa Library: Across Centuries and Seas," brings us to the core subject of the volume: a comprehensive examination of the library, its catalogues, extant manuscripts, financial structures, and enduring material legacy, traced from its founding across multiple centuries and trans-Mediterranean networks.

John Robert Barnes opens with an overview of the library's catalogues. The earliest catalogue appears in the endowment deed (*vakfiyye*) of Hafız Ahmed Aęa in the form of a book register (*defter*), arguably written in 1795. In addition, there are two catalogues written in Ottoman Turkish in Arabic script in 1923, one catalogue produced in 1995 in transliterated Ottoman Turkish in Latin script, and an illustrated (*resimli*) catalogue published in Istanbul in 2013. Barnes offers brief insights into the bibliographical features and practices reflected in these catalogues, highlighting both their similarities and their differences.

He then discusses the library as a foundation and an endowment, addressing its financial structure, educational functions, and its continuity under the supervision of the endower's son.

Elif Sezer-Aydınlı turns to a meticulous codicological study, comparing the booklist in the endowment deed with the 1795 book register (*defter*). Through a statistical analysis of the entries, she identifies reclassifications under different subject headings, while her close reading of layout, classification systems, and marginal traces reveals the broader historical and cultural significance of such catalogues for understanding Ottoman manuscript culture in the long eighteenth century. Building on this material-focused approach, Elif Derin and Gülsüm Gülsev Şanver provide a comprehensive overview of selected paratextual elements (*kuyûdât*) from the endowed collection. These include endowment notes, ownership inscriptions, repair records, and *fa'ida* notes. Their aim is to demonstrate how such elements offer invaluable evidence for reconstructing the social, geographical, and intellectual trajectories of these manuscripts. They argue that these trajectories present the manuscripts within this corpus as dynamic social objects shaped by diverse actors involved in the formation and circulation of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library.

In his analysis of two early twentieth-century income and expense registers from the foundation of Hafız Ahmed Ağa of Rhodes, Elias Kolovos examines the functioning of the foundation during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, prior to the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese (1912–1943). Kolovos analyses the financial symbiosis between the Rhodes and Istanbul endowments, arguing that the foundation's activities on Rhodes generated crucial supplementary income that was redirected to the imperial centre. Barbara Henning reconstructs a poignant life story from a manuscript cover note, presenting libraries as liminal transit hubs within knowledge geographies, where objects and actors negotiate processes of transformation and decontextualisation. Benedek Péri underscores the collection's uniqueness through an early dated manuscript copy of Vecdî's *dīvān*, composed by a mid-seventeenth-century poet of lasting esteem. His discussion reinforces Necipoğlu and Kafadar's argument in the prologue: that Hafız Ahmed's discerning literary taste underpins the library's thematic and cultural distinction. Naciye Detseli presents an illuminated Qur'anic manuscript, meticulously documenting its illuminations through

photographs and illustrations and proposing Safavid stylistic influences through comparative regional analysis.

Nil Baydar, Nikolas Sarris, and Giuseppe Marotta conclude this section with an insightful article demonstrating that Hafız Ahmed Ağa employed carefully considered preservation strategies for his endowed collection. Their analysis of the slipcases added to the manuscripts shows that these protective elements were introduced during the transfer from Istanbul to Rhodes in order to safeguard the volumes' physical integrity, complemented by storage protocols implemented on the island. They further argue that these measures not only ensured safe transport and early storage but also preserved material evidence of the manuscripts' production and subsequent journey.

This rich array of contributions in this section (eight articles in total) situates the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library as a living institution shaped by shifting administrative, intellectual, and material practices within the broader landscape of Ottoman book culture. By examining its catalogues, financial structures, paratexts, codicological features, and preservation strategies, the authors collectively reveal a collection that shares broader cultural characteristics and whose significance lies not only in the textual content of its corpus but also in the social and material histories embedded in its materiality.

The next section of the volume, titled "Ottoman Foundations and Libraries, Custodians of *Muhabbet* and Knowledge Through Time," presents a series of conceptual frameworks related to book culture and libraries in the Ottoman period. The first contribution examines Christian endowment and its legal practice and implementation. Sophia Laiou outlines the principles of Christian endowment by comparing three case studies and discusses the parallels between endowment in Christian and Muslim law. The subsequent article, by Elyse Semerdjian, turns to Islamic endowment and its relationship to urban landscapes within the Ottoman Empire. She argues that the principles of Islamic endowment reflect a continuation of traditions inherited from Orthodox Christian neighbours. Semerdjian further highlights the significance of Hafız Ahmed's endowment as a case study illustrating the intersection of religion and urbanity, showing how endowments across the empire contributed to shaping urban landscapes in both imperial centres and provincial contexts.

The third article in this section, written by Guy Burak, situates eighteenth-century Ottoman book culture within a broader comparative framework. Burak examines bibliographical practices and the shared characteristics of libraries established in both imperial and provincial settings during this period. By comparing the bibliographical features of the book register (*defter*) of Hafız Ahmed's library with those of other eighteenth-century *defters*, he argues that the similarities and differences among these libraries do not indicate the existence of a standardised library system. Rather, they point to shared cultural features of library practice that may have emerged contingently rather than through formal institutional design.

In the following article (a translation of his earlier work), İsmail Erünsal surveys libraries founded from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries across various territories of the Ottoman Empire. His survey considers the founders of these libraries, their positions within the imperial, administrative, and military hierarchies, and the spatial settings in which the libraries were established—whether attached to a mosque or madrasa, or housed in independent architectural structures. Erünsal also outlines the development of library foundations under six Ottoman sultans. Mahmud I (1730–1754) introduced the independent library as the norm, and the reigns of his successors—Osman III (1754–1757), Mustafa III (1757–1774), 'Abdülhamid I (1774–1789), Selim III (1789–1807), and Mahmud II (1808–1839)—witnessed the spread of independent libraries not only in Istanbul but also in the provinces.

The final contribution in this section, by Tûba Çavdar Karatepe, turns to book culture and libraries in the late Ottoman Empire. Her study demonstrates how, following the Alphabet Reform, Ottoman-script printed books and manuscripts were increasingly treated as “rare books” or even as “archaeological artefacts.” This heritage-centred categorisation slowed the development of comprehensive catalogues and delayed the emergence of critical editions and scholarly inquiry that had taken root much earlier elsewhere. Yet the very collections marginalised by this approach contain valuable evidence for the intellectual, scientific, and reading cultures of their time. Karatepe shows how these materials, preserved largely in foundation libraries, were transmitted into the Republican period, where they have continued to be recontextualised and opened to new forms of interpretation.

The fifth and final section of the volume, preceding the epilogue and the *takrızāt* section, introduces a new dimension to the work. Entitled “The Realm of Manuscripts,” this section consists of eleven articles and adopts a distinct approach. Although it is beyond the scope of this review to engage fully with the exceptional scholarship and rich range of arguments presented, certain recurring themes merit particular attention.

This section seeks to provide a broader understanding of book culture within the diverse social and religious fabric of the Ottoman Empire. It addresses a variety of topics not directly related to the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library, such as the evolution of scripts in the pre-Ottoman and early Ottoman periods; reading and writing practices across centuries of Ottoman rule; the multilingual nature of texts produced in both imperial and provincial contexts; the study of specific documentary genres, including letters; the movement of manuscripts into European collections and the agents behind these transfers; and the exploration of Greek, Jewish, Armenian, and Persian manuscript traditions within the Ottoman realm. These materials are examined from multiple perspectives—historical, artistic, codicological, religious, and political—revealing how diverse social and cultural elements interacted to shape the intricate mosaic of Ottoman manuscript culture over four centuries.

At the end of the volume, two additional parts are included: the epilogue by Cengiz Aktar and the *takrızāt* section. In the epilogue, the author reflects on the concept underpinning the project: *muhabbet* (conversation), understood in both its dimensions—friendly exchange and mutual affection. These dimensions are presented as a lens through which the long and intertwined histories of Greeks and Turks may be reconsidered. The epilogue traces how national narratives, political ruptures, and unresolved traumas have eroded this shared space of familiarity and argues for a future grounded in knowledge, dialogue, and a more nuanced engagement with the past.

This thoughtful epilogue is followed by a particularly distinctive section titled *takrızāt*. Within Ottoman and Arabic manuscript cultures, *takrızāt* functioned as early forms of scholarly endorsement and served as paratexts affirming a work’s value within its intellectual milieu. In this volume, six prominent scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds were invited to contribute to this section, each offering a concise evaluative reflection on the project.

As noted in the introduction to this review, the title *Conversation in the Library* evokes the central spirit of the project: a dialogue that brings together a remarkably wide spectrum of topics approached by contributors from diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds. Yet, while this breadth is undoubtedly one of the volume's greatest strengths, it occasionally results in moments of disorientation for the reader. This is due in part to the absence of a clearly unified organisational scheme. The criteria for grouping the articles within each section are not always evident, which at times makes it difficult to discern the rationale behind the volume's internal structure.

Similarly, a degree of repetition across contributions, particularly regarding the biographical details of Hafız Ahmed Ağa and his son Ahmed Fethi, creates the impression that the "conversation" was not fully coordinated under a common editorial framework. As a result, the collaborative coherence one might expect from such a collective volume is, in places, less evident than it could have been.

These observations, however, should be understood as minor issues within an otherwise exceptional achievement. The volume stands as a significant milestone in the study of Ottoman and Greek history, library history, and Ottoman book culture, and Tarık Tüten, together with this impressive team of scholars, deserves the highest commendation for bringing this ambitious and valuable project to fruition.