

Let’s Put That Here for Now
The Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library as a Transit Space*

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“I only recently discovered the library’s unique collection and rich history, in the context of a conservatory survey prepared under the auspices of Davidson MacLaren, a research associate and dear colleague at the Center for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at Hamburg University. In the spring of 2025, I arrived in Rhodes to work together with a wonderful team of international experts from Italy, Greece, and Turkey. Tasked to assess the material conditions of the collection and map out its current and future needs, we quickly realized that whatever we might have planned, the library itself, as a living repository, had its own agenda for us, and its own stories it wanted to tell. The traces left by others who had browsed the shelves before me and engaged with the collection in centuries and decades past have occupied my thoughts ever since, and I am therefore deeply grateful to be part of this Conversation sparked by the library.”

Barbara Henning

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In the following, the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library on the island of Rhodes is examined through the lens of *intended* transfers and circulations of various types of written artefacts. Many of the items that are part of the library’s holdings – including manuscripts and printed material, calligraphy, and building inscriptions – situate it within broader transregional networks of people, practices, and ideas. By considering what kinds of material entered the library at different points in time, who brought them, from where, and with what intentions, ideas or hopes for future circulation and possible continued trajectories, the library is approached as a living and changing repository. Attention to the collection’s multiple layers and overlapping logics of organization opens up avenues for further research beyond the activities of the library’s founder. The Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library thus provides a suitable case study for thinking about libraries in general as liminal spaces of “neither-here-nor-there” where objects undergo recontextualizations and former users, owners, or custodians renegotiate their relationship to the written material in question.

Labelled with inventory no. 121, the collection includes a printed book that is a later, 19th century addition to the library’s collection but still found its way onto the dark wooden shelves that dominate the center of the storage room, custom-built to house the original late-18th century manuscript holdings. Over the years, these shelves have become increasingly crowded, containing a mix of printed books and manuscripts from different time periods, loosely organized by topic and stacked two, sometimes three rows deep. The volume in question is rather slim and unassuming. Neither its black spine nor its label, which identifies it as a work of *sharḥ al-aḥkām al-shar’īya* or explanatory commentary in the field of Islamic law, draw any particular attention to it. Everything changes, however, once the book is removed from its shelf and reveals not only a bright red cloth cover but also a handwritten note in bold Arabic script. Nine confident lines in black ink, followed by a signature, stretch across almost the entire front cover (**FIGURE 1**). They are clearly meant to be seen, to be noticed by someone like me – a casual browser of the shelves, pulling out this or that book, weighing it in their hands, putting it back without necessarily taking time to consult in detail or even open any particular book. Even the most distracted library visitor, however, could not have missed the message on the book’s cover – and neither did I. *Bu kitab*, it read in Ottoman Turkish, *this book* had once belonged to Yahya ibn Muhammad from Yemen, who had been exiled to Rhodes along with a group of companions. His local acquaintance İbrahim Rodosî, the author of the message, had borrowed the book for study purposes. Meanwhile, Yahya had attempted to flee the island by boat, together with one of his compatriots. It does not become entirely clear from the short note what ultimately happened to the two fugitives, but İbrahim now appeals to any future reader: whoever gets his hands on this book should see to its safe return to Yemen, where it should be delivered to the heirs of Yahya.

This is a surprisingly personal encounter, and the short message can be studied both for its historical detail and as a miniature ego-document. Through it, we encounter not only Yahya ibn Muhammad, who was exiled far from home and took matters into his own hands by

attempting an escape, but also his contemporary İbrahim, whose note reveals a strong sense of responsibility for the book he had borrowed. Encountering the volume today on the shelves of the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library in Rhodes, we realize that İbrahim's hopes of ensuring the book's return to its rightful owners in Yemen were, in hindsight, overly optimistic, his strategy fell short. Despite his efforts and the clarity of his message, the book never embarked on its journey home to Yemen. More than a century later, it remained exactly where İbrahim left it, in the care of the library.

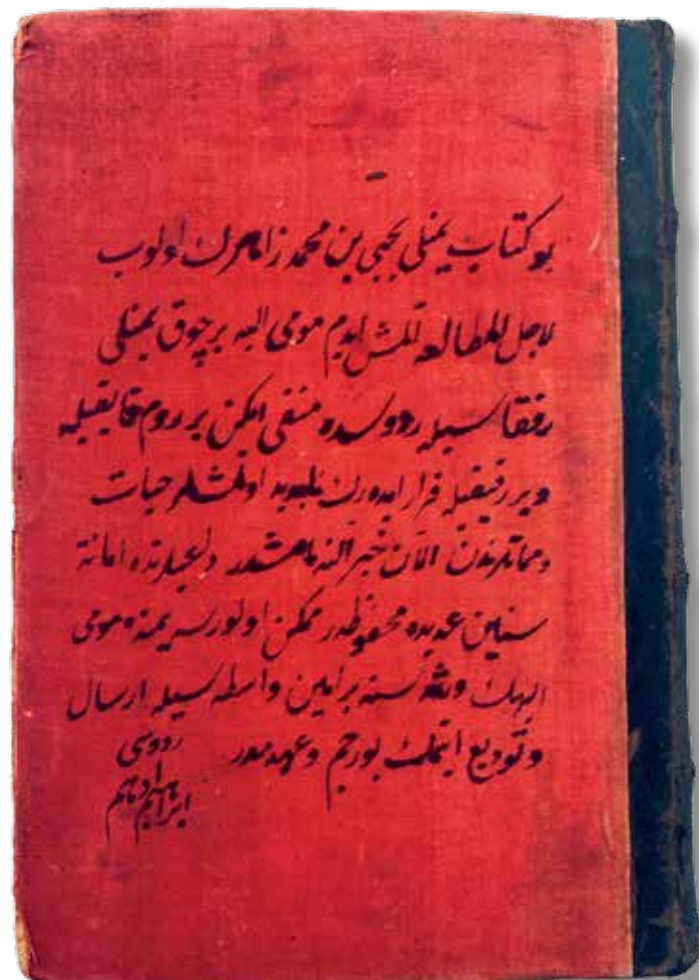


FIGURE 1: Yahya ibn Muhammad's book with the note of İbrahim Rodosī.
Photo: T. Tuten

Even with the few coordinates this story provides, it is possible to further contextualize İbrahim's message. In the late-19th century, the island of Rhodes served as a place of internal exile for Ottoman intellectuals, officials, and other dissidents who had fallen out of favor with

the sultan. The fact that the island was heavily fortified and difficult to access or leave without anyone noticing made it a convenient site of detention while granting individuals some degree of freedom of movement on the island itself without much risk of escape. Among the most well-known figures exiled to Rhodes in the 19th century were the writer Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844–1912) and his contemporary, the publisher Ebüzziya Tevfik Bey (1849–1913), both of whom spent time on the island between 1873 and 1876.¹ In the 1890s, fifty-five members of Yemen's tribal elite, who were accused of supporting Imam al-Mansur, a local ruler and opponent of Ottoman centralization politics, were deported to Rhodes on the orders of the Ottoman governor of Yemen. In their petitions to the central government in Istanbul, they complained about their dire living conditions on the island, as no financial support was provided for them.² In 1904, some members of this group were permitted to return to the Arabian Peninsula. At least two individuals, Sayyid Ahmad al-Kibsi and his father Yahya, however, are known to have escaped from Rhodes to Egypt, where they found British protection before returning to the Ottoman Empire during the Second Constitutional Period after 1909.³ While they cannot be identified as İbrahim Rodosī's acquaintances beyond any doubt, the name Yahya and context align with the exiled scholar and book owner described in his note. The politically sensitive nature of their escape into foreign territory and their turn to British protection may explain İbrahim's somewhat cryptic and reluctant description of their fate. His remark that they disappeared (*nā-bedīd olmuşlar*) and nothing good came of their situation (... *hayāt ve memātlarından elān hayr alınamamıştır*) is possibly deliberately vague and could be intended to avoid drawing attention to his association with Yahya and shield himself from any suspicion.

In addition to offering insights into the transregional scholarly networks of Ottoman Rhodes in the late-19th century and the intertwined stories of Yahya and İbrahim, the incident also invites further conceptual reflections about the Hafiz Ahmed Agha library as a space. The library's reading room and courtyard served as physical meeting points for readers and scholars from different parts of the Ottoman world, and the library's collection was a hub of texts, ideas, and references. In addition, the library can productively be investigated as an active repository – a space for things to arrive and depart on a regular basis, a place to hold objects in safekeeping for an interim period of time. In the case of Yahya and İbrahim, the intended trajectory of the borrowed book was interrupted. Instead of returning to Yemen, the volume remained stranded in the collection. Yet its presence there – and the message it bears – offer a glimpse into the fragmented, non-linear, and at times unruly practices, deliberations and individual interests that have shaped the different layers of the library collection as we encounter it today.

This subjective layering deserves to be taken seriously, offering an opportunity to learn about the role of the library and its collection in the lives and imaginations of historical actors. From this perspective, the library's cramped and seemingly disorganized shelves are not a nuisance to be corrected by modern-day conservators. Rather, they are an invitation to study the collection as an ongoing process, attentive to previous ideas, conceptualizations

1 Roderic Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton 1963): 299.

2 Caesar E. Farrah, *The Sultan's Yemen: Nineteenth-Century Challenges to Ottoman Rule* (London 2002): 176–177 and 235.

3 Thomas Kuehn, *Empire, Islam and Political Difference* (Leiden 2011): 6, footnote nr. 7.

and practices of dealing with written artefacts. In turn, looking at the library like İbrahim Rodosî did, as a suitable place to leave things behind in the hope that they might find their way forward across space and time, picked up by others or preserved for future usage, further clues are revealed as one strolls through the library compound or browses shelves and opens drawers in the library room: There are the remnants of Ottoman-Islamic building inscription in the library garden,⁴ works of calligraphy adorning the walls of the reading room⁵ as well as the 19th-century Ottoman archival documents stored in the cupboards of the library's less accessible back room, some still wrapped in their original Ottoman cloth packaging. There are also the records of a local primary school for Turkish-speaking children, including rosters of names and weekly lesson plans from 1946. And, of course, there are plenty of books, printed and hand-written, left behind by different individuals over the past century. Some of them bear witness to previous readers and owners, in the form of penciled reading notes, doodles or ink stamps. From among these fragments, countless stories are waiting to be uncovered alongside the one of İbrahim Rodosî and Yahya from Yemen.

But there is also an overarching argument to be made. In terms of genre, content, and even format, the written artefacts preserved in the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library are vastly different from one another. Yet they share some features that made their previous owners think that the library was the most suitable place for them, perpetually or at least for an interim period of time. Much of the material that accumulated in the garden and the interior of the library has in common that it was deposited in the library as one of the few remaining Muslim-Turkish spaces on the island, at a time when the local community itself was shrinking due to aging and the departure of members of the younger generations from the island.⁶ These developments greatly accelerated in the mid-1970s. What unites the diverse written materials entrusted to the library is their perceived relevance to shared communal pasts. They were seen as worthy of continued care, but deemed not personally meaningful enough, or simply too bulky and impractical to be taken along by the people who were departing from the island. This feature of potential relevance to a communal memory and archive conceptually unites Ottoman building inscriptions, bureaucratic paperwork from now-defunct imperial institutions, and collections of books in Ottoman language and Arabic script that younger generations could no longer access or know the concrete meaning or value of. To be on the safe side, until someone comes along to make better sense or use of it again, it seems, community members followed İbrahim Rodosî's strategy and left the items behind in the library. In doing so, they as well treated the library as a repository, as a transitional space where materials were safe, but no longer in one's personal responsibility, put there in the hopes of them being recontextualized and thereby able to continue a meaningful trajectory later on. In this sense, the library is not only a collection of artefacts but also an archive of early- to mid-20th-century attitudes

4 See also Zeki Çelikkol, *Rodos'taki Türk Eserleri ve Tarihçe* (Ankara 1986), who has an appendix with black-and-white photographs of the inscriptions.

5 An inventory from 1341 H (1922/23) lists thirty panels with various calligraphic inscriptions – and contains detailed information on the trajectories and current whereabouts of some of these items, as not all are found in the library at the time of the inventorying, hinting again at the continuous flow of written artifacts in and out of the library. Today, not all of these thirty panels are still accounted for.

6 For example, see Mustafa Kaymakçı & Cihan Özgün, *The Recent History of the Rhodes and Kos Turks* (İzmir 2015): 53–68.

towards archiving, cultural heritage, and communal memory, reflecting community priorities about what should be retained, retrieved, and remembered of Ottoman-Turkish life on Rhodes. Those who left the island could not know whether they or their descendants might be able to return, and thus through their acts of collecting and depositing, they made sure that the library might serve as a first point of contact for future generations interested in historical sources, community archives, and material heritage.

These observations suggest a shift in how libraries are generally conceptualized: Often, a functional perspective is foregrounded, conceiving of library collections as components of educational and scholarly infrastructures, and as repositories of knowledge and written documents. The existing research on the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library has also taken into account the political and cultural activities of the founder and his successors. However, looking closely at the layers and diverse artefacts in collection also illustrates another dimension, pointing to the role of a library as a transit space, where items are temporarily deposited by different actors with the intent of future circulating, reinterpreting and redistributing them across time and space. In this sense, those who engaged with the library and its collection did not necessarily perceive it as a final destination for written material. Rather, they engaged with it as an active, ever-changing repository and a kind of relay station within wider networks of knowledge circulation. For every trace of an interrupted trajectory, such as İbrahim Rodosî's borrowed book destined for Yemen, one may assume that many more artefacts successfully continued their onward journeys without leaving a record behind.

Following Victor Turner, the library may be understood as a liminal space of “neither here nor there”, where objects forgo their initial status and meaning and are open to new recontextualizations.⁷ Crucially, they also loosen their ties to previous owners, who entrust them to the threshold space of the library and relinquish control but are also freed from any previous responsibility and burdens of custodianship over the item. Both the previous owner and the object thus undergo a transformation as the item enters the library as a transit space: The former owner assumes a new role as a donor, and the item becomes detached from its original context, freed up for new interpretations and potential movement. Yet this moment of transformation also carries a risk: Once uprooted, the item becomes vulnerable, exposed to dangers of being neglected, lost or rendered completely illegible, meaningless or forgotten. In this sense, the library as a liminal space is also a precarious one. The example of suspended or interrupted trajectories of items stranded in the collection also highlight the vulnerability and fragility of previous practices of archiving and knowledge circulation. İbrahim Rodosî uses the term *emānet* for his course of action as he hopes to return the book he borrowed from Yahya to the latter's heir, an Ottoman-Turkish term derived from the Arabic root for trust, security and also safety or safekeeping, which reflects both the liminal situation of the artefact and the transfer of custodianship.

The same idea – and the identical term – resurface in one of the most recent additions to the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library: a set of four copy books dating from the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Written on delicate, almost translucent paper, these copy books contain duplicates

7 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York 1995 [1969]).



FIGURE 2: Mehmet Nuri Alayalı's donated books with his note.
Photos: T. Tuten

of Ottoman and Greek correspondence from two different individuals and had once been part of the collection of local historian Ahmet Nuri Alayalı. When Alayalı donated these books to the library in February 2009, he included a hand-written note, stating that he was placing the books in the safekeeping (*emanet*) of the library, while also emphasizing that they would forever remain connected to him personally (*benim için daimi makamları da olur*, FIGURE 2).

These preliminary observations suggest that as research into the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library continues, there is rich potential to unpack further details about life stories, every-day interactions and local archival practices on the island of Rhodes from the late-19th to the mid-20th century and enrich historiographical narratives about the island for both its Ottoman and post-Ottoman context. At the same time, there is a conceptual argument to be made which takes the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library as its starting point and nuances our understanding of historical functions and perceptions of libraries as transit hubs within wider geographies of knowledge circulation and as liminal spaces in which both actors and objects undergo transformations, meaning is suspended, transferred or reassigned, and the precarities of being detached from context need to be navigated.

