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NIKOLAS SARRIS is a senior book and paper conservator at the National Library of Greece. He has been an Assistant Professor of book and paper conservation at the Department for the Preservation and Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Zakynthos, Greece and a conservator at the British Library where he took part in the conservation project of the Codex Sinaiticus. He was the supervisor of the conservation laboratory at the monastery of St John Theologian, Patmos, Greece, where he also organized the “Patmos Workshops on Conservation and Historic Bookbinding”, 2006-2012. Dr. Sarris collaborated since 2001 with the Ligatus Research Centre, UK on bookbinding research related to the St Catherine’s Library Conservation Project in Sinai and since 2006 with the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation for conservation and training projects at the National Library of Egypt, Cairo. He worked with Hamburg University on the EU funded project Ethio-SPARE for the preservation and on-site conservation of Ethiopic manuscripts in Tigray, Ethiopia. He has been an UNESCO consultant and ALIPH Foundation project leader for training and manuscript conservation projects for libraries of Iraq and is an Expert Evaluator, Reviewer and Vice Chair for the EU Commission on HORIZON projects. He has lectured, given workshops and published widely on the topics of book conservation and historic bookbinding. He received his PhD from the University of the Arts London, on the decorated bookbindings of the manuscripts from library of the St Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt.

GUISEPPE MAROTTA is a PhD candidate in archaeometry at the University of Hamburg. He is member of the Mobile Lab of the Cluster of Excellence ‘Understanding Written Artefacts’. He obtained his Master’s degree in book, paper and parchment conservation at the Istituto Centrale per la Patologia degli Archivi e del Libro in Rome.

“As a third-generation descendant of a Turkish family that was originally from Thessaloniki on my mother’s side and Cretan on my father’s side, I was incredibly excited by the idea of working with manuscripts at the Hafız Ahmed Agha Library in Rhodes. This opportunity, which would bring together the presence of colleagues with whom I would work, the unique atmosphere of Rhodes, and the work I enjoy most in my life, came along at a time when orange and lemon blossoms were mind-blowing. We spent a wonderful week hosted with great warmth by Tarık Tüten and Aydın Bostancı. I am deeply honored and grateful to have been part of this project, initiated under the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at the University of Hamburg, in the peaceful setting of the Library. I sincerely hope that our efforts will help ensure the preservation of these precious manuscripts and rare printed books for many generations to come.”

Nil Baydar

Manuscript Enclosures in the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library in Rhodes: Early Examples of Preventive Conservation

When Hafız Ahmed Agha of Rhodes who also held the title *Rikâbdar-ı Şehriyârî* during the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789–1807) established the Hafız Ahmed Agha Library in Rhodes on 26 February 1792 (3 Rajab 1206), the transportation of the books to the island was likely a matter of great concern. The library, which officially opened about a year later in 1793, was founded with an “original collection” of 828 manuscript volumes that had been selected, commissioned, or acquired prior to the outset of the library’s activity.

Preparations for the transfer of these manuscripts must have started well ahead of time. Every possible measure was taken to ensure their safe arrival, preventing potential damage during transport or early storage.

In a manuscript—typically—the text block is primarily protected by its binding. When the binding itself needs protection, it is sometimes covered with paper or cloth. For safeguarding the entire book, whether for storage or transportation, various types of enclosures such as boxes, slipcases (*mahfaza*), pouches, satchels, dust jackets or secondary covers have been used in different manuscript cultures, sometimes becoming characteristic features of particular bookbinding traditions.¹ In the case of the Hafız Ahmed Agha Library, each manuscript was individually protected by a custom-made slipcase² prepared specifically for its journey (FIGURE 1).

Preventive conservation efforts in the library were not limited to the packaging of the books. Measures were also taken within the storage space where the books would await their readers. The glazed cabinets made of cherry wood were placed in the central area of the domed hall, raised from the floor and positioned away from the walls to facilitate the necessary air circulation and prevent dampness from reaching the cabinets and the books (FIGURE 2). These cabinets share several features with those found in other independent Ottoman libraries of the 18th century, such as Hagia Sophia, Ragip Pasha, Hekimoglu Ali Pasha, and Tire Necip Pasha Libraries, demonstrating their wide-spread use and effectiveness.³

Designed to be well-ventilated, easily accessible, and spacious enough to prevent overcrowding, these unvarnished wooden cabinets—with their internal compartments—can create microclimatic zones, especially when cleaned and maintained regularly. This attention seems to suggest that the construction of the library storage room was planned with awareness, thinking ahead about the potential effects of a coast climate characterized by frequent hygrothermal fluctuations. The fact that the wooden panels have not deformed significantly over centuries suggests that they were made from well-seasoned, dry timber even at the time of their manufacture. These qualities align remarkably well with the standards emphasized by contemporary preventive conservation practices.

1 See Colini *et al.* 2025, paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6, pp. 19-22. For further reading see Plummer *et al.* 2023 and Scheper, K. 2023.w

2 The *Ligatus Language of Bindings* describes slipcases as “*rectangular enclosures that are open on one edge for the insertion of a book. The open edge may either be at the top (top-loading slip cases) or on one side (side-loading slip cases)*”. (concept uri: [/w3id.org/lob/concept/4466](https://w3id.org/lob/concept/4466))

3 For a comparable case study including monitoring of indoor climate see Sahin *et al* 2017 and Coşkun *et al.* 2018.



FIGURE 1: Manuscripts with green cloth-covered bindings reinforced with paper, and their marbled slipcases.
Photos: T. Tuten



FIGURE 2: Original wooden cabinets of the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library.
Photo: N. Baydar.

The concept of preventive conservation encompasses all efforts undertaken to preserve heritage items over time by controlling environmental factors and minimizing risks, without directly intervening on the object. In contrast to interventive conservation, which addresses already-damaged items, preventive conservation aims to safeguard the item before deterioration occurs. This is especially a concern in the case of collections stored within historic buildings, withstanding the vital connection between the objects and their spatial and contextual relationships.⁴ Both the cabinets and the slipcases in the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library demonstrate an attempt to provide care for the collection that adhere to the principles of preventive conservation remarkably well.

The slipcases are made of paper pasteboard, covered on the front and back with marbled paper and edged with leather, and open along the short side. On their inside, a ribbon is included to facilitate the removal of the manuscript (FIGURE 3). In addition to marbled slipcases, fully leather-covered examples have also been identified. Most of the marbled slipcases are decorated with papers attributed to Hatip Mehmed Efendi (d. 1773) or one or two of his students dating to the last quarter of the 18th century⁵. The interior of the envelope and head flaps are also covered with matching marbled paper. The burgundy leather used along the spine and side edges of the slipcases is of the same type and texture as the leather found in the fully leather-covered examples, which suggests they were made by the same workshop. On the marbled slipcases, the leather borders are adorned with double gold fillets, while the leather slipcases feature both gold fillets and decorative tooling made with S-shaped finishing tools (FIGURE 4).

4 See Pickwood & Velios 2006, pp. 293-295, Sahin *et al.* 2017 pp. 67-68; On the more general topic of paper-based objects collections in historic buildings see Bülow 2002.

5 See Babaoğlu, 2024, pp.129-130. Marbling artist Mr. Babaoğlu stated that the marblings used in the cases here were prepared by Hatip Mehmed Efendi and/or his students. Also, for detailed information on marble paper and Hatip Mehmed Efendi, see Babaoğlu 2017; Babaoğlu 2020; Benson 2005; Benson 2006; Radunsky 2012.

The outer surfaces of the slipcases also feature delicate tooling executed with small handheld tools and gold highlights. The S-shaped motif is used prominently on the head flap. In the marbled slipcases, the ribbon tip affixed to the lid, used for removing the manuscript is cleverly concealed beneath a piece of shaped marbled paper (FIGURE 5).

Studying not only the content of the manuscripts but also their material and technical aspects of their bookbindings and their enclosures provides critical insight into how the collection of the Hafız Ahmed Agha Library was formed, transported, preserved and accessed. The widespread use of marbled paper produced by Hatip Mehmed Efendi and his school, both on the outer surfaces and on the envelope and head flaps, highlights a coordinated decorative program which indicates connections with the preparations for this collection (FIGURE 6).

The consistent use of other materials on these slipcases also suggest that they were produced as part of a carefully planned program. The uniformity in the dyed goatskins, paste boards, marbled papers, and ribbons, the techniques by which they have been put together as well as the consistent format of the enclosures point towards the operation of a specialized binding workshop supported by a professional team.



FIGURE 3: Leather slipcase with S-shaped motif, gold fillets, and blue ribbon, Hafız Ahmed Agha Library 339.
Photo: N. Sarris, G. Marotta



Figure 4: Marbled slipcase, Hafız Ahmed Agha Library 429 (left); leather slipcase, 339 (right).
Photos: T. Tuten and N. Baydar



Figure 5: Ribbon end concealed beneath shaped marbled paper in marbled slipcase, Hafız Ahmed Agha Library 724.
Photo: T. Tuten



FIGURE 6: Marbled front panel and interior flap, Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library 627 (top left);
marbled back panel and decorated leather head flap (top right);
slipcase and interior of front board, Hafiz Ahmed Agha 950 (below)
Photos: T. Tuten and N. Sarris, G. Marotta

Toward Future Studies

Future research should focus on identifying structural similarities in the bindings and repairs of the manuscripts—particularly those hidden beneath the green cloth coverings. For example, a manuscript recorded under number 950, which lacks the green cloth covering, displays strips of sanded Hatip-style marbled paper inside its cover, presumably added during previous repair. These strips closely resemble the marbled paper used on its own slipcase (FIGURE 7). Such findings may shed light on the manuscripts’ repair histories and the logistics of their shipment to Rhodes.



FIGURE 7: The same marbled paper used on the envelop flap and the slipcase of the manuscript,
Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library 924.
Photos: N. Sarris, G. Marotta

Another valuable observation is that the endbands of many manuscripts appear to have survived in their original state without restoration (FIGURE 8). The consistent use of thread types and sewing techniques suggests that the books may have been rebound collectively or were commissioned and bound as a group specifically for the library . The use of slipcases during transport likely helped prevent structural damage, allowing the bindings, endbands, and text-blocks to remain intact to this day.

The protective strategies employed by Hafız Ahmed Agha reflect a highly developed awareness of preservation practices for his time, and seem to be driven by awareness and understanding of the collection needs. The slipcases not only safeguarded the physical objects but also preserved the story of the manuscripts’ production and journey. Today, they provide us with the opportunity to understand these narratives through their own materials and techniques. Our responsibility is to uncover this hidden knowledge—by evaluating manuscripts not only for their textual content but also for their materiality as complete historical artifacts.



FIGURE 8: Endbands preserved in their original state.

Photo: N. Baydar

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