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“I have read the catalog of Hafız Ahmed Ağa’s library several years ago, long before I was asked to contribute to this volume. At the time, my interest in Ottoman libraries was the practical interest of a librarian looking for manuscripts for users. More recently, I got interested in the work of Ottoman-era librarians and book collectors as colleagues or fellow practitioners. Elsewhere, I described this interest as an act of “comparing notes” across geographies and centuries. I have come to appreciate the sense of humility this act of comparison generates.”

Guy Burak

Hafiz Ahmed Ağa’s Library and Ottoman (Mostly Provincial) Libraries

In the fall of 1793, two years or so after he had endowed his first endowment (*vakıf*), the retired sultanic stirrup-holder (*rikabdar*) Rodosi Hafız Ahmed Ağa sat down in the neighborhood of Yahya Efendi, slightly north of Galata, to write a second endowment deed (*vakfiye*).¹ The second deed was primarily devoted to the library Hafız Ahmed Ağa wanted to establish in Rhodes, his island of origin. In the endowment deed, the *rikabdar* stipulated the administration of the library and listed the books he had managed to amass through lawful purchase (as required for making an endowment) and were now intended to populate the library’s shelves. The list was quite extensive and may have been the product of years of collecting, suggesting that Hafız Ahmed Ağa had aspired to found a library in Rhodes for quite some time.

It is unclear what sparked Hafız Ahmed Ağa’s interest in establishing a library in Rhodes. It may have been the library endowed by Sultan Ahmed III (d. 1730) in the enderun (the inner court) of the Topkapı Palace, where he spent years as a page and as a member of the closest entourage of three sultans, the libraries founded by Mahmud I (d. 1754) or Abdülhamid I (d. 1789), or the libraries founded over the course of the long eighteenth century in the Ottoman capital and across the empire’s provinces by viziers, ulema and other dignitaries. Many of the founders of libraries came from the upper echelons of the imperial administrative elites, but lower-rank dignitaries engaged in establishing libraries as well. Libraries had been founded throughout the Muslim lands and even the Ottoman realms for centuries prior to the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the sheer number of libraries established over the course of the long eighteenth century justifies treating that century as a distinctive chapter in the history of Ottoman book culture.

In his chapter in this volume, İsmail Erünsal refers to the newly founded libraries in terms of a “library system.” “System”, however, may be too rigid a term, suggesting strict planning and organization that may not have existed in the Ottoman case. Rather, a shared library culture, shaped by founders of libraries, librarians, endowment inspectors and, to a lesser extent, perhaps, readers emerged. There are clear similarities across libraries, but there are substantial differences as well. Moreover, until quite recently, the study of eighteenth-century Ottoman libraries has focused on those in the imperial center (and in Istanbul in particular). In the recent decades, however, several studies have been devoted to libraries established in the different provinces. Broadening the scope has revealed the multiple sites in which the empire’s library culture evolved and casted light on the exchanges between those venues through networks of practitioners and imperial administrators.

At the same time, one needs to be careful when applying adjectives to describe libraries, such as “Ottoman” or “Islamic”. These adjectives may illuminate certain aspects of the collections and institutions that housed them, but they may also be too reductive and fail to account for the particularities of specific libraries. In other words, it is worth asking what makes a library “Ottoman”

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or “Islamic”. This question is especially pertinent given the variation among libraries across the Ottoman Empire. Certainly, as we shall see, shared practices and principles may distinguish the library culture that emerged in the Ottoman lands from those prevalent in other parts of the Islamic world and in earlier centuries. However, as the body of works devoted to specific libraries expands, it becomes increasingly evident that libraries were also quite different in terms of the composition of their collections, which may have reflected the interests and goals of the founders.

Another set of questions relates to the institutional setting in which the library functioned and to the narrative one may impose on a collection of books. Studies of libraries tend to ascribe a great deal of intentionality to the founders of libraries, assuming their libraries were intended to serve political ambitions or a designated goal (serving the students of a *medrese*, for instance). In some cases, such readings of a collection are plausible or even likely. At the same time, it is worth keeping in mind that libraries are to varying degrees a product of serendipity. Put differently, differences among libraries and their founders, even those established in close geographical proximity, defy generalizations and invite us to pay closer attention to the particular histories and forces, both local and imperial, that shaped specific libraries.

This chapter supplements other chapters in this volume by situating Rodosi Hafız Ahmed Ağa in the broader library culture of the empire with special attention to the libraries in the empire’s provinces. The expansion of the scope from the capital to the provinces provides a new context for examining Rodosi Hafız Ahmed Ağa’s library in Rhodes.

By the 1790s, recently-established libraries dotted the Ottoman domains. Senior ulema (such as Feyzullah Efendi (d. 1703)), viziers (such as Ragıp Paşa (d. 1763)) and provincial governors (such as Muhammad Abu al-Dhahab (d. 1775) in Cairo, As’ad Paşa (d. 1758) and Muḥammad Paşa (d. 1783) al-‘Azm in Damascus, Cezzar Ahmed Paşa (d. 1804) in Acre and Halil Hamid Paşa (d. 1785) in Burdur), bureaucrats (such as ‘Uthman Paşa al-Duriki (d. 1747) in Aleppo) and sultans (Ahmed III, Mahmud I and Abdülhamid I) founded libraries throughout the empire. Many of these founders intended their libraries to serve a fairly broad reading public, hence they are occasionally referred to as “public libraries” or libraries established for the public benefit or good (*nef-i amim*). Indeed, the proliferation of libraries was a response to but also enabled a new class of readers and, according to Khaled El Rouayheb, the interest in a seemingly new philosophy of reading, *mutala’a*, which he glosses as deep reading (though, as others have pointed out, references to *mutala’a* appear in earlier centuries as well). Some of the endowment deeds specifically mention copying manuscripts as one of the central activities in their libraries, thus making the libraries hubs for the proliferation of texts and manuscript copies (see **FIGURE 1**).

The rise of the libraries in the eighteenth century was also accompanied by the rise of a professional group of librarians. These librarians, many of whom came from the circles of the ulema and literati, developed distinctive bibliographic practices, which were inspired, at least in part, by the requirements imposed by administrators who managed and supervised the endowments. It is for this reason that many of the library inventories, including Rodosi Hafız Ahmed Ağa’s, use the imperial register (*defter*) layout (I shall return to this point below).

As his endowment deed and the register of the inventory of the endowed books reveal, Hafız Ahmed Ağa was familiar with the library culture that had emerged over the past century. While Rodosi Hafız Ahmed Ağa did not explicitly say in his second endowment deed that the library will

be used by “the public”, he stipulated that readers and copyists (*mutali’in ve müstensihin*) should be granted access to the library’s collection from sunrise to dusk. Much like other founders of libraries, he banned the circulation of books and stipulated that books should be consulted within the premises of the library.



FIGURE 1: The library founded by Sultan Abdülhamid I. Ignatius Mouradgea d’Ohsson, *Tableau général de l’Empire ottoman* (Paris 1787), plate from volume 1 (Library of Congress).

Moreover, Rodosi Hafız Ahmed Ağa stipulated in the *vakfiye* two positions for full-time librarians. Since the library was intended to be a school (*dershane*), the librarians were supposed to hold classes at the library every day of the week, with the exception of Tuesday and Friday. According to the endowment deed, there was a hierarchy among the librarian-teachers: the chief librarian (or “the first librarian”), whose salary was 100 akçe (60 for his duties as librarian and 40 for his professorship), was assisted by the “second librarian”, whose salary was 80 akçe (50 for his librarianship and 30 for his teaching). The “second librarian” was to inherit the position of the “first librarian” upon the latter’s death. The pedagogical duties of the librarians suggest that they were intended to be recruited from the ranks of the ulema. Indeed, the endowment deed refers to the librarians with the title “efendiler”, a title that was commonly reserved to members of the ulema. This was not an unusual expectation, as librarianship was a common employment career for many scholars and jurists. This was the case, for instance, in the library founded by Cezzar Ahmed Paşa in Acre.

Their pedagogical duties aside, the librarians were expected to maintain and preserve the library's collection in an orderly manner and make sure books did not leave the library (as stipulated). Hafiz Ahmed Ağa specifically required that the island's ulema, notables, dignitaries and the wealthy should convene at the library in the beginning of the month of Muharrem (the first month of the Hijri year) of every year and examine all the books in the library's collection one by one, according to the “signed and sealed” register. They should examine the books for missing pages and inform the librarians of missing books.

Despite the dignitaries' stipulated involvement in the management of the library, it is clear that its management relied on the professional expertise of librarians. The endowment deed, which includes a detailed list of the titles Hafiz Ahmed Ağa decided to endow to the library, suggest that the retired Ağa was assisted by librarians or mastered bibliographic descriptive principles. Each entry in the endowment deeds includes a detailed bibliographic description: the title, the binding, the calligraphic script, the number of lines and the number of pages. These entries match the entries in the late eighteenth-century register (for a detailed study of the content of the register see Elif Sezer Aydınlı's chapter in this volume). This is not an uncommon bibliographic description in Ottoman libraries, though including detailed entries in the endowment deed is somewhat unusual. In any event, it is clear that the register, the bibliographic description and the seal he had made for the library were informed by deep familiarity with bibliographic practices.

These practices were employed by librarians in Istanbul (in the eighteenth-century inventory of the Ayasofya, for instance) (see [FIGURE 2](#)) and throughout the empire (in Acre, for example). This was not a fully standardized set of practices and some variations are discernable among libraries. Some libraries, for example, do not mention the number of written lines and there are significant variations in the description of the calligraphic hands employed in copying the manuscript. As opposed to the compilers of inventories of the libraries of Ragıp Paşa and Cezzar Ahmed Paşa, who employed a broad gallery of scripts in their entries, the librarians who compiled the Rhodes inventory mentioned three scripts (*nesih*, *Arap* and *ta'lik*, in addition to mentioning printed books). These variations, while significant for scholars of bibliographic practices, are fairly minor. The elongated register, the seal (and sealing) and the marking of the extant manuscripts with the Arabic letter *mim* (abbreviation for *mevcut*) would have been recognizable to many librarians across the empire.

Examining the composition of the library's collection is another way to consider Hafiz Ahmed Ağa's intentions and goals, although, once again, one has to be careful to allow some room for serendipity. Clearly, the Ağa aspired to build a collection that would cover the Islamic sciences as commonly understood in the empire's scholarly circles. Fellow founders would have surely appreciated his encyclopedic collection. Moreover, the library's collection included titles in Arabic, Turkish and Persian, the main three Islamic scholarly languages in the Ottoman lands. As opposed to libraries from the Arabic-speaking provinces, however, there is no designated section for books in Persian and Turkish, probably because many readers in Rhodes were Turkish readers.

That said, the classification of the sciences and the classification of titles between the sections of the library varies to some extent from the classification in other libraries. For example, the library contained a section devoted to astronomy. Such a section does not appear in every library inventory from the Ottoman lands. In some sections, such as the section devoted to history (*tarih*) books, it is clear that Hafiz Ahmed Ağa was especially interested in histories written by Rumi authors, that is,

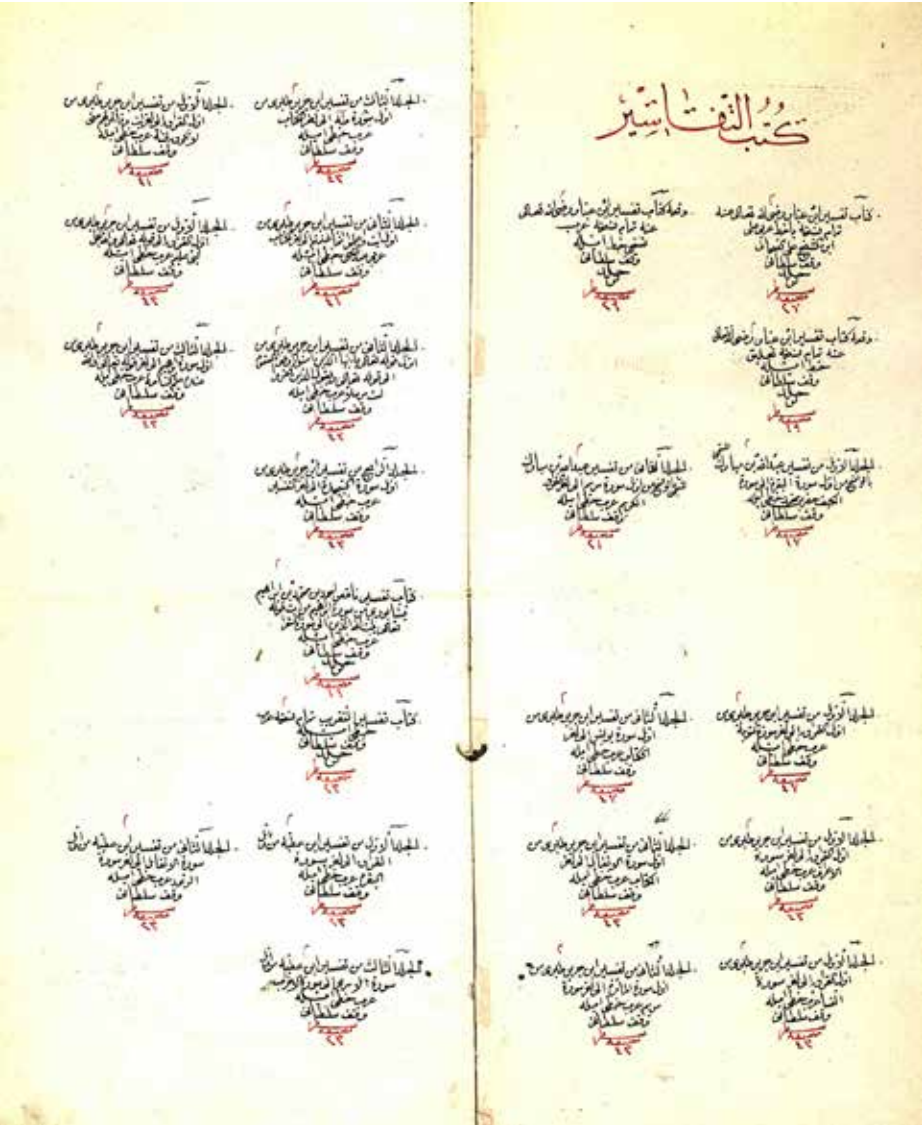


FIGURE 2: The *tafsir* section from the eighteenth-century inventory of the Ayasofya Library, established by Sultan Mahmud I.

authors from the central, Turkish-speaking lands of the empire. Other library collections included titles written by local and pre-Ottoman historians (this was the case, for example, in the library of Cezzar Ahmed Paşa). Similarly, the section on jurisprudence (*fiqh/fikih*) is predominantly Hanafi, the school of law adopted by the Ottoman dynasty, as opposed to libraries from the Arabic-speaking lands (and, to a lesser extent, other libraries in Anatolia) that included books by authors affiliated with other schools of law. The composition of the library raises questions about the intended users. As we have seen, Hafız Ahmed Ağa wanted the library to function as a school, though it is unclear if the collection was intended to serve first and foremost pedagogical purposes.

Founders of libraries in the Ottoman lands and elsewhere did so for a variety of reasons, from bibliophilia to promoting learning and scholarship to promoting their political ambitions. It is unclear what precisely spurred the retired *rikabdar* to endow a library. Be it as it may, it is clear that he aspired to have his library project legible to other eighteenth-century founders of libraries, patrons and readers from various parts of the Ottoman Empire. Seen in the context of other libraries from Cairo and Baghdad to the Balkans, the library of Hafız Ahmed Ağa and its significant collection attests to the scope of this remarkable moment in Ottoman book culture and bibliophilia well beyond the imperial capital.

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FIGURE 3: Reading room of the Ayasofya Library, established by Sultan Mahmud I.
Photo: T.Tuten