

TÛBA ÇAVDAR KARATEPE worked as a Professor in the Department of Information and Records Management at Marmara University and retired in 2023. She graduated from Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Librarianship. She completed her master’s degree in Journalism and Public Relations and earned a PhD in Librarianship from the same university. Her research focuses on Rare Works, Book Publishing, Ottoman Library History, and Private Archives. She has held roles at the Istanbul Branch of the Turkish Librarians’ Association and the Women’s Library and Information Center Foundation. As part of the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture events, she led the *Istanbul Women-Women Istanbul* project. She has worked on various private archive projects, conducted projects at different levels, and held administrative positions at the university.

The Final Period of the Ottoman Libraries

Tradition and Change towards the Republic

The libraries in the Ottoman period were founded by sultans, sultans’ mothers, statesmen, scholars, religious figures, and other benefactors who valued books and libraries. In addition to libraries that were primarily established during the lifetime of their benefactors, there were also those founded through bequests. Libraries were predominantly established in Istanbul, followed by other political centers and other Ottoman territories. The operational framework of the libraries founded through foundations was determined by the waqfiyyas (foundation deed). In the waqfiyyas, with some exceptions, it is specified who established the library, where, when, and under what conditions, as well as the identity of the foundation’s trustee or trustees. Additionally, the waqfiyyas often outline the number of library staff, their qualifications, salaries, duties, rules regarding the lending of books, and other conditions of benefit are also specified. Information about the donated books is sometimes provided only as numbers, while in some cases, detailed lists of books are included.

The Ottoman library tradition was initially shaped by educational institutions, but later foundation libraries were established in other institutions and places. These foundation libraries became an important part of the educational and cultural life in the Ottoman Empire. The manuscripts in these libraries have long provided a foundation for intellectual inquiry, stimulating new discussions and raising questions as transmitters and bearers of knowledge, science, and tradition. The motivations behind the writing of manuscripts, whether through copyright, translation, transcription, *sema* (auditory transmission), or other similar methods, and their characteristics differ significantly from those of printed books. All these attributes related to the book constitute a gradually developed, transmitted, and long-practiced methodology, ultimately forming a tradition.

Many foundation libraries, some of which likely contained only a limited number of books, were lost or damaged for various reasons but managed to survive until the Republic period primarily due to the foundation system. Moreover, it was the presence of users who adhered to the conditions outlined in the waqfiyyas (foundation deed) that was crucial for ensuring the continued benefit desired by the endowers. These readers approached the books with ‘decency’ and ‘respect’, and refrained from engaging in any form of ‘malediction’. The librarians, referred to as ‘*Hâfız-ı Kütüb*,’ had long safeguarded these libraries while simultaneously facilitating access to their resources. They combined the qualities of scholars with their officially appointed roles as ‘trustworthy individuals,’ as emphasized in their designations.

Library buildings during the Ottoman period included both detached buildings and those that were not in separate structures, existing instead as libraries within various educational institutions. In libraries constructed specifically as libraries, architectural solutions were employed to protect the books from humidity, fire, and theft. Although the sounds of the city may not have been as prominent as they are today, a more isolated and quiet environment for the workers was provided through the use of inner courtyards. These libraries reflected a style in harmony with the architecture of the period, characterized by simplicity yet distinctiveness, without being ostentatious.

Library buildings, particularly detached structures, have also become subjects of study in the fields of architecture and art history.¹ Some of these works include plans and surveys, and, based on the historical characteristics of the buildings, they also offer recommendations for preservation. Only a small number of the libraries from the Ottoman period that have survived to the present day are used for purposes other than their original intent. Some still serve as libraries for rare works and manuscripts.

In the modern era, innovations in the education system and the diversification of the reader profile and demands in large cities brought about significant changes. Additionally, the variation in book production methods played a role. As a result, Ottoman libraries and librarianship began to evolve, incorporating new practices alongside traditional ones. While foundation libraries continued to exist, the emergence of new types of libraries can be explained by this change. İsmail Erünsal writes the following about the recent foundation libraries:

“Except for detached libraries, the use of madrasa libraries, whose collections were primarily formed with the needs of madrasa students in mind, gradually declined as new schools replaced traditional madrasas. The fact that these libraries were foundation institutions prevented them from innovating and adapting to the needs of the period. As a result of this structure, which focused solely on preserving the existing collection, acquiring new works for the library became impossible. Until the Republican period, foundation libraries had become institutions primarily visited by madrasa students, researchers in classical Islamic studies, and a limited number of scholars. The decline in the importance of madrasas within the empire also contributed to the diminishing significance of foundation libraries.”²

During this period, due to the low wages received by librarians, they were forced to engage in other work, which resulted in disruptions to library services. Both local and foreign users, when they manage to access these rarely opened libraries, often express their admiration for the valuable books. Nonetheless, they also noted the neglected state of the buildings and the dusty condition of the books. These observations were frequently recorded in travel books, memoirs, or articles in periodicals.

Various efforts were made to address these complaints and restore the libraries to a usable condition. Efforts were made to investigate the appropriate course of action for libraries and librarianship by consulting the opinions of invited experts. It is difficult to assert, however, that all of these measures were fully implemented during the Ottoman period.

Ahmet Zeki Bey of Egypt, in his report proposal known as the ‘The Report Presented to Grand Vizier Hilmi Pasha in 1909 Regarding the Order and Increase of the Public Libraries of the Capital City,’ both demonstrates the condition of these libraries and presents solutions for their improvement. Ahmet Zeki Bey is an important figure due to both his roles in the Egyptian government and his intellectual personality. The question of why someone from Egypt was invited to write a report on

1 Detailed information regarding the buildings and the evaluation of the studies conducted can be accessed through the bibliographic imprints of their Works. Özer Soysal, *Türk kütüphaneciliği*. 6. c. Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Kütüphaneler Genel Müdürlüğü, 1998-1999 ve İsmail E. Erünsal, *Osmanlılarda kütüphaneler ve kütüphanecilik: tarihi gelişimi ve organizasyonu*. 3. bs. İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2020.

2 İsmail E. Erünsal *Osmanlılarda Kütüphaneler ve Kütüphanecilik: Tarihi Gelişimi ve Organizasyonu*. 3. bs. İstanbul: Timaş, 2020. s. 391-392

the libraries of Istanbul during the late Ottoman period could stem from the belief that Egyptian libraries were in a better condition than those of the Ottoman Empire. Yet by that time, Egypt had lost most of its valuable manuscripts, and in fact, Ahmet Zeki was a researcher actively pursuing these works. Additionally, he had established good relationships with Western Orientalists. Between 1892 and 1912, he participated in various international Orientalist congresses. It is highly likely that during these occasions, he visited and benefited from the libraries at these congresses. In the book translated and published in 2023 by Ahmed el-Shamsy, the following information is provided about Ahmet Zeki Bey:

“Desiring to continue his project, Zeki traveled to Istanbul in 1909 to conduct research in its rich manuscript libraries.... The magnificent collections, located at the heart of the Ottoman Empire, were preserved in libraries that had lasted for centuries. Some of these libraries were openly accessible and operated in connection with mosques, madrasas, and dervish lodges. Others, such as the Köprülü and Atf Efendi Libraries, established in the 17th century, endeavored to maintain their existence independently. Moreover, unlike in countries like Egypt, where manuscript copies of lesser-known works were exceedingly rare, the collections of Istanbul’s libraries were still in good condition. These institutions, in addition to containing a considerable number of Arabic manuscripts, also prided themselves on possessing numerous old and rare works that were no longer found in Arab countries. As a top government official in Egypt, Zeki, who was skilled at establishing the necessary connections, had gained the support of the Ministers of Public Education and Charitable Foundations. Additionally, he received the assistance of the Ottoman Grand Vizier, Huseyin Hilmi Pasha. With this support, he was granted the opportunity to conduct research in various libraries in Istanbul.”³

During his research, he faced numerous challenges, which he detailed in this report. In it, he elaborates on the measures that should be taken to improve the libraries in Istanbul, likely considering the libraries he encountered in the West. His recommendations provide a detailed outline of the necessary steps for enhancing these libraries.⁴

Furthermore, other reports were prepared to assess the condition of the libraries and propose improvements. The proposal to transfer collections from old and dilapidated library buildings to more stable ones, the organization of libraries according to their areas of specialization, the creation of libraries designated for female readers, and changes in the criteria for selecting the librarians are among the various solutions offered. These suggestions reflect the efforts made to preserve the existing collections and enhance the functionality of the libraries. During the Republican era, libraries would be addressed through reports by Western experts, and efforts would be made to transform them and give them a modern identity.

In the 19th century, alongside its efforts to reform existing classical educational institutions, the Ottoman administration made decisions to establish new schools modeled after the West. As a result of these decisions, libraries were established in both military and civilian schools. The libraries

3 Ahmed el-Shamsy, *İslam Klâsiklerini Yeniden Keşfetmek: Editörler ve Matbaa Kültürü Bir Entellektüel Geleneği Nasıl Dönüştürdü*. Çev. Ayşe Mutlu Özgür. İstanbul: Ketebe, 2023. s. 201-203

4 İsmail E. Erünsal, “Ahmed Zeki Bey’in İstanbul Kütüphanelerinin Tanzimine Dair Raporu” *Kütüphanecilikle İlgili Osmanlıca Metinler ve Belgeler I*, İstanbul 1982, 323-352.

included those of the Civil School (Mülkiye Mektebi) established in 1859, the Forestry School (Orman Mektebi) in 1871, the School of Fine Arts (Güzel Sanatlar Mektebi) which opened in 1883, and the Veterinary School (Baytar Mektebi), established in 1894. It is also known that the Naval School (Mekteb-i Bahriye) had a library in 1851, when it was operating in Heybeliada. It can be observed that in these libraries, there was a particular emphasis on French books in addition to Turkish.

The reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II holds a special place in the history of Ottoman libraries and librarianship. The improvements made to the foundation libraries, the preparation of their catalogs, and measures and regulations implemented to ensure their systematic operation all reflect an effort to reform the library system. When these actions were considered alongside the changes made in the educational system, it became possible to see Sultan Abdulhamid II's distinct vision for education and libraries. The library established at Yıldız Palace is a unique collection, both in terms of quantity and content.⁵

The establishment of Dârülfünûn considered an important educational institution in the modernization of the Ottoman Empire, took place in 1845. Education continued, albeit intermittently, between 1853 and 1919. The lack of continuity in education was caused both by political and social instability and by fires. Although libraries consisting of 4,000 to 5,000 volumes were established with each new opening of Dârülfünûn, these libraries were destroyed in the fires of 1865 and 1907. In 1919, a regulation granted Dârülfünûn autonomy. After the declaration of the Republic, it was restructured in 1924, and the libraries of the existing faculties of literature, law, and science were merged into the central library. That same year, by order of Atatürk, the Yıldız Palace Library of Sultan Abdulhamid II was transferred to Dârülfünûn. As a result, the library's collection reached approximately 200,000 volumes.

Among the professional and scientific associations⁶ established following the Tanzimat reforms, was the Cemiyet-i İlmiye-i Osmâniye (Ottoman Society of Science), founded in 1861. This association, with its activities, members, and library, has been studied within disciplines such as history, the history of science, and librarianship. In studies particularly focused on Westernization, *Mecmua-i Fünûn*, the publication of the association, has been analyzed in terms of its content and purpose.⁷ The library of the association, in addition to books, regularly provided daily newspapers and periodicals in languages such as Turkish, French, English, Greek, and Arabic. It operated with a membership system and is considered the first example of this new type.

In 1876, the first Ottoman Assembly began its activities and established a library open to its members. It is known that this library was destroyed in a fire. A report from 1917 indicates that the Assembly Library contained a collection of 2,277 volumes. Additionally, it is understood that the library was cataloged according to the principles of modern librarianship. This library holds a special significance as it is considered the first to use a card catalog, according to current findings.

The Committee of Ottoman History, *Târîh-i Osmânî Encümeni*, was established in 1909 with the aim of providing a new and modern approach to Ottoman historiography. In 1932, the activities of the Encümen were terminated, and its library, consisting of 3,000 volumes, was transferred to the library of the Turkish Historical Society.

In 1882, the *Kütübhâne-i Umûmî-i Osmânî* (Ottoman Public Library) was established in Istanbul with the support of Sultan Abdulhamid II, aiming to fulfill various purposes. Before the library became operational, a decree was issued in the Ottoman Empire mandating that one copy of each book, whether it was a copyright or a translation, published within the empire be sent to this library free of charge. This decision can be viewed as an attempt to establish a national compilation law, and it is argued that the *Kütübhâne-i Umûmî-i Osmânî* was founded with the intention of becoming a national library. It has been determined that this decree was not fully implemented, and disruptions occurred in the arrival of books to the library in the subsequent years.

Particularly after 1911, with the *İttihat ve Terakki* (Committee of Union and Progress) becoming the ruling party, and following the expression of nationalist-Turkish views in party programs and congresses, libraries with the word 'national' in their names were established. These libraries are, in fact, public libraries. Examples of these include the Izmir National Library, Bursa National Library, and Eskişehir National Library. Özer Soysal evaluates the libraries established during this period with the word 'national' in their names as follows:

"It was during this period that the library *institution* was first used for a specific purpose and with a strategic objective by political authority."⁸

"Although the intention and desire for a 'National Library' were expressed by various individuals and institutions at different times, it was during the Republican period that planned efforts were put to practice."⁹

In the period leading up to the Republic, İsmail Erünsal evaluates the period following the Tanzimat as follows:

"Although some efforts were made during the Tanzimat period to improve the physical conditions of foundation libraries, prepare regular catalogs, organize collective catalogs, and enhance the salaries of librarians, it seems that these attempts were not very successful. Despite all these initiatives, the reorganization of foundation libraries and their regular functioning were not effectively achieved. An analysis of documents on this subject reveals that the Balkan Wars and World War I caused severe hardships and shortages within the empire. Despite these adverse conditions, the country's intellectuals proposed ideas to facilitate the reform of foundation libraries. At the same time, the bureaucrats of the period showed remarkable dedication and selflessness in their efforts to enhance the functionality of these libraries."¹⁰

5 Erünsal, *Ibid.*, p.337-340.

6 For detailed information on this topic, see: *Osmanlı İlmi ve Meslekî Cemiyetleri*. Yay. Haz. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi-IRCICA, 1987.

7 For a study that examines the association alongside similar institutions of the period and evaluates it from the perspective of Occidentalism, see: İbrahim Şirin, "Oksidentalizm Alaturka" *Osmanlı'da Siyasal Dilin İnşası*. Ed. İbrahim Şirin. İstanbul: Ketebe, 2023, s.23-97.

8 Özer Soysal, "XIX ve XX. Yüzyıllar Osmanlı Siyasal Yaşamı'nın Kütüphane Kurumu'nu Etkileyen İki Olgusu". *Türk Kütüphaneciliği: Bilginin Yazgısı*. 2.bs. Ankara: Türk Kütüphaneciler Derneği, 2007. s. 26.

9 Law No. 5632 on the Establishment of the National Library on March 23, 1950, was repealed. This was done by Decree Law No. 703 on amendments to certain laws and decree laws to ensure compliance with the constitutional amendments. The repeal was published in the 3rd Duplicate Legal Gazette no. 30473 on July 9, 2018.

10 Erünsal, *ibid.*, p. 390.

In the period leading up to the Republic, the wars, occupations, and all political and practical activities undertaken for the ‘survival’ of the Ottoman Empire had significant impacts. The reforms¹¹ and decisions made to ensure the solid and unshakable continuity of the Republic undoubtedly affected books and libraries in many ways. Every institution reflects the psychology of the period in which it was established, and its structure is shaped by these conditions.¹² It is most appropriate to evaluate Ottoman-era libraries and librarianship based on this perspective.

It is known that some supervisory officials from the Ottoman period continued their duties in new institutions during the Republican period. A question that arises is whether this was the case for librarians. In a decree prepared on August 6, 1924, signed by Gazi Mustafa Kemal and his deputies, it was stated that foundation libraries were transferred to the Ministry of Education. Following the identification of a disruption in the allocation of salaries for the librarians working there, the necessary funds were allocated. The sum of three thousand lira was designated to address concerns that ‘librarians might abandon their duties, which would consequently lead to the valuable works remaining unprotected.’ The preservation of the remaining Ottoman-era materials was entrusted to the librarians, at least until new solutions could be found.¹³

Especially after 1924 and 1925, the librarians (*Hâfız-ı Kütüb*) working in the institutions specified by the laws were reassigned to various places and institutions. Some exceptions can be observed, such as the assignment of members from the closed Dervish Lodges and madrasas to libraries, likely to leverage their scholarly value and perhaps to honor them. It is known that, even after surpassing the age limit, they continued their duties in the post-Republic period, drawing upon both their knowledge and experience.

When examining two reports published approximately nine years apart, it is observed that fundamentally the same opinions are expressed about the same libraries. Upon closer inspection, differences in descriptions and characterizations become apparent. The first of these reports, was written by a director of education in 1916. Given that its language might be somewhat heavy for today’s readers, it can be summarized by highlighting the key points as follows. The director of education acknowledges the value of the foundation libraries established during the Ottoman period. He even mentions that some books, due to their physical characteristics, are worthy of being placed in museums. He then points out that most of these books are in Arabic and address subjects relevant to madrasa students. He questions how these Arabic books can be of use in public libraries, considering that the official language of the state is Turkish, with the exception of those in madrasas. His focus here is on the content and language of the books. Despite his critical approach, he refrains from using any disparaging terms.¹⁴

11 Notably: The Law on Unification of Education (*Tevhîd-i Tedrîsât Kânunu*) (1924). The Law on the Closure of Religious Convents and Dervish Lodges (*Tekke ve Zâviyelerle Türbelerin Seddine ve Türbedarlıklarıyla Bir Takım Ünvânların Men’ ve İlgâsına Dâir Kânûn*) (1925), and the Acceptance and Application of Turkish Alphabet (*Yeni Türk Harfleri’nin Kabul ve Tatbiki Hakkındaki Kanun*) (1928).

12 Taşansu Türker, *Cumhuriyet’in Yeni Yüzylında Yeni Dünya Politikası: Kafiye Çağı*. İstanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2023. s. 32.

13 Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, 30-18-1-1 / 10 - 38 - 4

14 Erünsal, *ilid.*, p. 392. “Among the libraries established by foundations and benefactors (*ashâb-ı hayr*) in the Ottoman Empire, there are some that are very valuable. An dozen some of them, due to the becoming antique and hardcover books they contain, are suitable for inclusion in museum collections. Since approximately ninety-five

Nine to ten years later, in 1925, Hamit Zubeyir Kosay’s article on libraries addresses the same issues. In fact, the text is remarkably similar. The phrase ‘the public heritage (*asar-ı umumiye*) in libraries bears the mark of Islamic scholasticism from two or three centuries ago’ is quite natural, given the circumstances of the time, and it provides a strong foundation for the modernization of libraries. This expression not only reflects the historical context but also offers a solid basis for the efforts to modernize libraries:

“When it comes to the relative value of the content in these libraries, these works possess extraordinarily high, museum-worthy significance. Yet, they do not align with the needs of the present day.

“The public heritage (*asar-ı umumiye*) in libraries reflects the influence of Islamic scholasticism from two or three centuries ago. Eighty percent of the content consists of works related to tafsir, hadith, the methodology of hadith, Islamic law (*fiqh*) and theology. These works, written in Arabic, Persian, or Enderun Turkish, can be considered part of a class library, specifically that of the religious-scholarly class with turbans with even their buildings to be considered parts of mosques and dervish lodges. Only theological works, not deemed beneficial to education by the public library (such as Battal Gazi, Castle of Blood (*Kan Kalesi*), Köroğlu, Nasreddin Hodja, Aşık Kerem, Şah İsmail, Tahir and Zühre) have found a place in these libraries.”¹⁵

In official documents and parliamentary records, the same attitude and expressions can be observed in almost all intellectuals who worked tirelessly to defend the Republic. One reason for the state-led efforts regarding the collections of foundation libraries, which began in 1935 and yielded their first results in 1942, could very well be this.

After the Turkish Alphabet reform, the collections of Ottoman libraries, which theoretically gained the status of ‘rare books’, have long been defined as ‘archaeological artifacts’ for many years. Even today, they are still categorized as ‘Manuscripts and Rare Books that are Part of Our Cultural Heritage’. This may explain why collective catalogues of rare books, manuscripts and books written in Ottoman Turkish, as well as other alphabets and languages, have not yet been completed. These rare manuscripts could provide valuable data for scholars working in various fields, such as the history of science, literary history, historiography, reading culture, and economic history, thus opening up new opportunities for research.¹⁶ Perhaps for this reason, critical editions or investigative research, which had started much earlier in the West and even in the East, started quite late in our country. These studies, however, continue today attracting increasing interest.¹⁷

percent of these books were written in Arabic, most of the mentioned libraries were primarily used by students and teachers of madrasahs offering Arabic language courses. Only rarely did these libraries contain books related to natural sciences, such as philosophy. These works, which contradict theories explained by current valid experimental methods, should naturally be considered entirely as old works, except for those related to religious sciences. Although the official language of the eternal state (*Devlet-i Ebed Müddet*) was Turkish, nearly all the works preserved in public libraries located in mosques, aside from those found in madrasas, were written in Arabic. This raises a question: does this align with logic and the aim of ensuring the general public’s benefit?

15 Hamit Zübeyir “Koşay, Kütüphanelere Dair (I)”, *Türk Kütüphaneciler Derneği Bülteni*, C. 9, S. 1-2 (1960) s. 36.

16 The aforementioned institution, which began its work in 2010 with the Law No. 6093 on the Establishment and Duties of the Turkish Manuscripts Institution, has made significant and promising contributions to librarianship.

17 The works Berat Açıllı and the activities of the FSMVÜ should be mentioned. <https://yazmaeserler.fsm.edu.tr/>

As a result, the Ottoman Empire, particularly through its foundation libraries, passed on to the Republic a collection of printed books in Ottoman Turkish, as well as manuscripts in Turkish and other languages. These collections not only encompass scientific knowledge but also illuminate the reading practices and intellectual culture of their time. Transmitted through various channels, they were recontextualized and rendered open to reinterpretation within evolving historical and cultural frameworks.

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Abdulhamid’s Yıldız Library, *Kütübhâne-i Hümayûn*, established in late 1870s.

Photo courtesy of Istanbul University Rare Books Library Archive