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“Libraries are supposed to be silent places that do not lend themselves to conversation, yet they may be the place of conversation par excellence. Letters, on the other hand, constitute a conversation written down for an eternity, short or long. Three co-authors writing a study of letters, in a volume devoted to libraries, is a conversation upon conversation - an excellent path toward knowledge. We are glad, moreover, that we participate to the Conversation created by chapters of different authors in this volume - a library in itself.”

Marinos Sariyannis

Ottoman Personal Letters as a Source for Cultural History

Scholarly interest in letters and letter-writing has been constantly growing, partly as a result of the ‘linguistic turn’ but mostly of the growth of cultural history and the study of private life.¹ Studies in ancient, medieval and early modern epistolography have been blooming for almost half a century,² while the importance of letters not only for social and economic history but also for the history of ideas (e.g. the emphasis on the political significance of the Italian *ars dictaminis*),³ the history of gender or of the self has long been acknowledged. Broadly speaking, the presence of letter-writing in history is three-fold, at least in the cultures of the Mediterranean basin and Eurasia: there are compendiums of exemplary letters, made to guide potential authors along the various types of the genre (administrative, commercial, private or love letters, etc.); there are collections of actual letters written by a (usually prominent) personality, sometimes compiled in order to serve as epistolary models too; and there are actual private letters, scattered in various archives, often written by illiterate persons without any literary or rhetoric claims. All three groups have different yet significant appeal for the historian, who can use letters either as sources of historical information on topics as varied as economic transactions, family relations, intimacy and affection, and so forth, or as an object of research per se, focusing in the development of the genre, its limits and its interaction with society.

Along with specialists of European history, scholars of Islamicate societies have also considerably developed the study of letters.⁴ Still, Ottoman letter-writing is an almost completely unexplored yet extraordinarily promising source of information for understanding the social and cultural realities of Ottoman history. Whereas the attention of scholars to the manuals of correspondence

1 On the ‘linguistic turn’, see e.g. V. E. Bonnell – L. Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn. New directions in the study of society and culture*, Berkeley 1999. On the turn to the study of private life, see Ph. Ariès – G. Duby (eds), *Histoire de la vie privée*, 5 vols, Paris 1985, and cf. M. Mavroudi, “The Modern Study of Selfhood in Byzantium compared with Medieval Europe and the Islamic World: Parallel and Diverging Trends in the Construction of ‘East’ and ‘West’”, *Palaeoslavica* 30/1-2 (2022), 234-304.

2 See e.g. M. L. Stirewalt Jr., *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography*, Atlanta 1993, and P. Ceccarelli, *Ancient Letter Writing: A Cultural History*, Oxford 2013 on ancient Greek epistolography. J. Darrouzès, “Notes d’épistolographie et d’histoire des textes,” *Revue des Etudes byzantines* 12 (1954), 176-186; M. Mullet, “Epistolography”, in E. Jeffreys, J. Haldon and R. Cormack (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, Oxford 2008; and S. Papaioannou, “Fragile Literature: Byzantine Letter Collections and the Case of Michael Psellos” in P. Odorico (ed.), *La face cachée de la littérature byzantine. Le texte en tant que message immédiat*, Paris 2012, 289-328, on the Byzantine case. G. Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, Turnhout.1976 on the Middle Ages. J. Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing (1512-1635)*, London 2012 on early modern English letters.

3 Q. Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, 2 vols, Cambridge 1978, I:28ff.

4 W. Qureshi, *Insha Literature in Persian: A Critical Study*, Lahore 1952; W. Diem, *Arabische Privatbriefe des 9. bis 15. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien* (Documenta Arabica Antiqua 2), Wiesbaden 1996 and Idem, *Arabische Amtliche Briefe des 10. bis 16. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien* (Documenta Arabica Antiqua 3), Wiesbaden 1996; A. Gully, *The Culture of Letter-Writing in Pre-modern Islamic Society*, Edinburgh 2008.

has been drawn for half a century now,⁵ few such manuals have been published⁶ and there is no comprehensive study of them. Some Ottoman collections of letters have been transliterated and published: especially those belonging to sultans, from the famous love letters of the harem⁷ to the dream notes of Murad III,⁸ but also collections authored by Sufi sheikhs⁹ or poets.¹⁰ Finally, from the apparently vast amount of private letters preserved in various libraries and public or private archives, only a very limited number has been known to scholarship and it definitely has not drawn the attention it deserves.¹¹

Manuals, collections and private letters

The significance of letter-writing in Ottoman culture is manifest from the fact that even imperial orders follow a pattern and structure that may classify them into yet another epistolary genre.¹² Ottoman bureaucrats gave tremendous importance to the model prose, *münşeât* or *inşa* (meaning “construction” or “creative composition”). Such collections contained models and instructions with

5 W. Björkman, “Die Anfänge der türkischen Briefsammlungen,” *Orientalia Suecana* 5 (1956), 20-29; J. Matuz, “Über die Epistolographie und Inšâ-Literatur der Osmanen,” *Deutscher Orientalistentag* 1968, Wiesbaden 1970, 574-594; O. Ş. Gökyay, “Tanzimat dönemine değin mektup,” *Türk Dili* 30/274 (1974), 17-87; C. Woodhead, “Ottoman İnşa and the Art of Letter-Writing: Influences Upon the Career of the Nişancı and Prose Stylist Okçuzade (d. 1630),” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları/The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 7-8 (1988), 143-159; eadem, “Circles of Correspondence: Ottoman Letter-Writing in the Early Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of Turkish Literature* 4 (2007), 53-68; eadem, “The Ottoman Art of Word-Painting. Rhyme and Reason in Seventeenth-Century Turkish Literary Letters.” *The Seventeenth Century*, 38/5 (2023), 885–903; H. İ. Haksever, “Münşeât mecmuaları ve edebiyat tarihimiz için önemi,” *İlmi Araştırmalar* 10 (2000), 65-76; A. J. Riedlmayer, “Ottoman Copybooks of Correspondence and Miscellanies as a Source for Political and Cultural History,” *Acta Orientalia Hung.* 61 (2008), 201-214; E. E. Tuşalp Atıyas, “Political Literacy and the Politics of Eloquence: Ottoman Scribal Community in the Seventeenth Century,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University 2013; H. Gültekin, *Türk edebiyatında inşa*, Istanbul 2015.

6 W. Björkman, “Eine türkische Briefsammlung aus dem 15. Jahrhundert,” *Documenta islamica inedita*, Berlin 1952, 189-196; N. Lugal – A. Erzi, *Fâtih Devrine âit Münşeât Mecmuası* (Wien, Nationalbibl. H. O. 161), Istanbul 1956; V. L. Ménage, “An Ottoman Manual of Provincial Correspondence,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Morgenlandes* 68 (1976), 31-45; Ş. Tekin, *Menâhicü’l-inşâ. The earliest Ottoman chancery manual by Yahyâ bin Mehmed el-Kâtib from the 15th Century*, Cambridge MA 1971; idem, *Kırımlı Hafız Hüsam: Teressül* (Hacı Selimağa, Nurbanu No:122/5). *Edition in transcription, translation into Turkish, notes and facsimile*, Cambridge MA 2008.

7 Ç. Uluçay, *Osmanlı Sultanlarına Aşk Mektupları*, Istanbul 1950.

8 Ö. Felek, *Kitâbü’l-menâmât. Sultan III. Murad’ın rüya mektupları*, Istanbul 2016; for other specimens see A. Yıldız, “Şehzadeye öğütler: Ebûbekir Ratıb Efendi’nin Şehzade Selim’e (III) bir mektubu,” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları/The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 42 (2013), 233-274; K. Gurulkan, “Şehzade Korkut’un mektupları,” *Ceride: Ben-Anlatıları Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Ego-Documents Studies* 1/2 (2023), 205-225.

9 M. S. Güven, “Çeşitli yönleriyle Azîz Mahmûd Hüdâyî’nin mektupları,” unpublished MA thesis, Marmara University 1992; S. Akkach, *Letters of a Sufi Scholar: the Correspondence of ‘Abd al-Ghanî al-Nâbulusî (1641-1731)*, Leiden 2010.

10 J. R. Walsh, “The *Esâlibu’l-mekâtib* (Münşe’ât) of Mehmed Nergîsî Efendi,” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 1 (1969), 213-303; V. L. Ménage, “The *Gül-i sad-berg* of Mesîhî,” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 7 (1988), 11-32; H. İ. Haksever, “Eski Türk edebiyatında münşeâtlar ve Nergîsî’nin münşeâtı,” unpublished PhD thesis, İnönü University 1995; H. A. Esir, *Münşeât-i Lamîi: Lamîi Çelebi’nin Mektupları*, Trabzon 2006; İ. H. Aksoyak, *Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli: Menşei’l-inşâ*, Ankara 2007; A. Oktay, *Münşeât-ı Nabi. Nabi’nin mektupları*, Istanbul 2017.

11 Among the very few studies using such sources see R. Murphey, “Forms of Differentiation and Expression of Individuality in Ottoman Society,” *Turcica* 34 (2002), 135-170; D. Giagtzoglou, “Η προσωπική επιστολογραφία ως πηγή για την κοινωνική και πολιτισμική ιστορία των Οθωμανών” [Personal epistolography as a source for Ottoman social and cultural history], unpublished MA thesis, University of Crete 2018.

12 See e.g. J. Reychnan – A. Zajaczkowski, *Handbook of Ottoman-Turkish Diplomats*, ed. T. Halasi-Kun, The Hague – Paris 1968, 139-149.

all the necessary ornaments for composing letters with a view to serving as the pattern for the day-to-day correspondence of the government. Usually, such collections were compiled and used alongside collections of official documents, copies of registers and law regulations, and other useful texts.¹³ Model letters were classified into several categories, such as letters of friendly enquiry, of congratulation (*tehniyet*), condolences (*taziyet*), professional complaint (*şikâyet*), requests and recommendations.¹⁴ The earliest known example, comes from the early 15th century, *Teressül* (“Correspondence”) by Kırımlı Hâfız Hüsâm (who was probably trained in the Germiyan court of Kütahya in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century), contains general advice for letter-writing and specific model phrases for letters addressed to governors, viziers, princes, various officials, and ulema, as well as to merchants, sheikhs, friends, and various relatives, including husbands and wives (as well as lovers, both male and female); model letters (and model answers to them) follow, together with model documents, mainly appointment diplomas for teachers, judges and officers.¹⁵ The manual by the poet Ahmed Da’î (d. after 1421) is of similar nature.¹⁶

As the palace bureaucracy was becoming an increasingly powerful and diversified apparatus, such manuals kept being produced throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (the next known specimen was copied in 1479), culminating with Feridun Bey (d. 1583) and his famous collection of sultanic letters and treaties, *Münşe’âtü’s-selâtîn* (“The correspondence of sultans”), completed in 1575.¹⁷ Feridun, the private secretary of the grand vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, presented this collection to Murad III in 1575; it contains more than 500 documents, running from the first years of Islam until Murad’s own time. Not all these documents were genuine, and some were probably forged or invented by Feridun himself in order to legitimize the Ottoman dynasty and its worldview: as Dimitris Kastritsis has recently observed, the collection “was never intended as a practical chancery manual at all, but rather as a type of history writing”.¹⁸ Whereas later manuals are more focused in official correspondence, it may be the case that manuals of the late 17th and 18th centuries show a return to letters of private character, as they contain categories between parents and children, or between husband and wife.¹⁹

Ottomans themselves highly valued private letters, as they collected them either in compilations aimed to promote a sheikh’s wisdom and success, or in miscellanies for private use. Apart from the exemplary letters of the *inşa* literature, actual letters compiled with eloquence and rhetoric competence would constitute model collections in their own right. A great number of such *münşe’ât* were authored by poets aspiring for a post in the administration,²⁰ or by educated officials of the

13 For a list of *inşâ* collections see Matuz, “Über die Epistolographie”, 585-591.

14 Woodhead, “Circles of Correspondence”.

15 Tekin, *Kırımlı Hafız Hüsam: Teressül*.

16 H. İ. Haksever, “Ahmed-i Dâ’î’nin *Teressülü*,” *Turkish Studies* 6/1 (2011), 1265-1273; C. Sucu, “Ahmed-i Dâ’î ve edeb eserlerinin Osmanlı okuyucu çevrelerine aktarımı,” in E. Ökten and S. Polatoğlu (eds), *Tarihsel bir inceleme alanı olarak edeb*, Istanbul 2024, 151-180 at 169-173.

17 Feridûn Bey, *Mecmû’a-yı münşe’ât-i Feridûn Bey*, 2 vols. Konstantiniye H. 1264/1848; there are two different printed Ottoman editions of this monumental work and a modern systematic study is highly needed.

18 D. Kastritsis, “Feridûn Beg’s *Münşe’âtü’s-selâtîn* (‘Correspondence of sultans’) and late sixteenth-century Ottoman views of the political world”, in S. Bazzaz – Y. Batsaki – D. Angelov (eds), *Imperial geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman space*, Washington 2013, 91-110 at 107.

19 As in a 1792 unpublished manual; see Giagtzoglou, “Η προσωπική επιστολογραφία”, 27. For even later examples see F. Eren, “Osmanlı hanımlarının mektup yazma kurallarına dair iki kitap”, *Adıyaman Üniversitesi, Ulusal Eski Türk Edebiyatı Sempozyumu (15-16 Mayıs 2009)*, Ankara 2010, 1-7.

20 Walsh, “The *Esâlibu’l-mekâtib* (Münşe’ât)”; Ménage, “The *Gül-i sad-berg* of Mesîhî”; Haksever, “Eski Türk

higher grades.²¹ These were written to colleagues, superiors or other acquaintances and while they do refer to specific requests or events of the authors’ lives, their main purpose is often both to exhibit their eloquence and to assert their sentiments of fidelity and friendship.

In the same vein, often Sufi sheikhs (or their entourage) would collect their letters to their peers or disciples, in order to demonstrate their importance and to instruct their inspirations and insights. Some famous examples include the collection of letters or *Tezâkir* long attributed to Aziz Mahmud Hüdayî, an important Celveti sheikh of the early 17th century, but which (as shown by Derin Terzioğlu)²² belong to a late-16th-century Crimean Sufi, or the letters of the influential early-18th-century sheikh al-Nabulusi.²³ Miscellanies include correspondence with a specific topic: among the most well-known examples, we can quote a seventeenth-century lady from Üsküp/Skopje, Asiye Hatun, who sent systematically her dreams to her sheikh, as the Sufi order she belonged to, the Halvetis, considered dream a privileged way for God to communicate with the believer.²⁴ Similarly, Özgen Felek recently studied and published the letters and notes Murad III (r. 1574-1595) sent to his sheikh, Şeyh Şücâ’, informing him of his dreams and visions but also answering to his requests for personal favours or asking his opinion on matters of internal and foreign policy.²⁵

What is more, private letters can be found in numerous archives, and these tackle with topics as diverse as friendly and family exchanges, introductions of protégés, commercial transactions, or requests for favours.²⁶ A comprehensive study of this material would shed light into practically every aspect of Ottoman realities: from the function of family and friendship ties to education and literacy, from the practicalities of posting to methods of cryptography, from family and social hierarchies to the client networks, and from magic spells to the history of emotions. The turn to the history of private life led to the discovery and study of numerous first-person narratives or, as they are perhaps more properly called, ego-documents, which previously were considered absent from Ottoman literature.²⁷ This topic

edebiyatında münşeâtlar”; Aksoyak, *Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli: Menşei’l-inşâ*; H. A. Esir, “Klasik Edebiyatımızda İnşa ve Lamii Çelebi’nin *Münşeât’i*”, in H. Aynur, et al. (eds), *Nesrin İnşası. Düz yazıda Dil, Üslup ve Türler*, İstanbul 2010, 140-65; C. Woodhead, “The Gift of Letters: Correspondence Between Nergisi (d. 1634) and Veysi (d. 1627)”, in H. Aynur, B. Aydın, and M. B. Ülker (eds), *Kitaplara vakfedilen bir ömre tuhfe: İsmail E. Erişal’a armağan*, vol. 2: *Edebiyat ve tasavvuf, kütüphanecilik ve arşivcilik*, İstanbul 2014, 971-988; H. İ. Haksever, B. Selçuk and M. Algül, “The Letters of Sümbülzâde Vehbî”, *International Journal of Language Academy* 6/5 (2018), 353-390.

21 See e.g. C. Imber, “Four Letters of Ebu’s-su’ud”, *Arab Historical Review* 15-16 (1997), 177-183; C. Woodhead, “Writing to a Grand Vezir: Azmizade Efendi’s Letters to Nasuh Paşa, 1611-1614”, in F. Emecen, İ. Keskin and A. Ahmetbeyoğlu (eds), *Osmanlı’nın izinde. Prof. Dr. Mehmet İpşirli armağanı*, vol. II, İstanbul 2013, 485-492; A. Kılıç, “Unutulmuş bir münşî, Akhisarî Abdülkerim Çelebi, münşeâtı ve Şeyhülislâm Yahyâ Efendi’ye bayram tebriği vesilesiyle gönderdiği mektubu”, *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmaları Dergisi* 8/40 (2015), 102-111.

22 D. Terzioğlu, “Power, Patronage, and Confessionalism: Ottoman Politics Through the Eyes of a Crimean Sufi, 1580-1593”, in M. Sariyannis (ed.), *Political Thought and Practice in the Ottoman Empire. Halcyon Days in Crete IX - A symposium held in Rethymno, 9-11 January 2015*, Rethymno 2018, 149-186.

23 Güven, “Çeşitli yönleriyle”; Akkach, *Letters of a Sufi Scholar*.

24 C. Kafadar, *Asiye Hatun: Rüya mektupları*, İstanbul 1994; L. Schick and C. Kafadar, “Dream Letters of a Sufi Woman in Skopje, 1640s”, in H. Karateke and H. Anetshofer (eds), *The Ottoman World. A Cultural History Reader, 1450-1700*, Oakland 2021, 29-35.

25 Felek, *Kitâbü’l-menâmât*.

26 Giagtzoglou, “Η προσωπική επιστολογραφία”.

27 C. Kafadar, “The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth Century Ottoman Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature”, *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989), 121-150; D. Terzioğlu, “Autobiography in Fragments: Reading Ottoman Personal Miscellanies in the Early Modern Era”, in O. Akyildiz, H. Kara and B. Sagaster (eds), *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, Würzburg 2007, 83-99; R. Elger – Y. Köse (eds), *Many Ways of Speaking About the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian and*

is still thriving and new texts are constantly discovered and analyzed; very recently (2023), a special journal was launched, *Ceride: Ben-Anlatıları Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Ego-Documents Studies*,²⁸ focusing in Ottoman ego-documents. Yet, whereas these new texts include diaries, travelogues, dream diaries and notes, memoirs and autobiographies, very few scholars have thought of private letters as parts of this genre.²⁹

Christine Woodhead, the scholar who has *par excellence* studied Ottoman collections of *inşâ*’ literature, states that “there appear to be no significant caches of *original* sixteenth- or seventeenth-century personal letters”.³⁰ Indeed, the ephemeral nature of letters which were not part of the *inşâ* genre and were not kept by their authors for future display of their skills means that they must have often been thrown away after being read, or at any rate that compilers of archival collections did not bother to keep what seemed like insignificant notes of strictly private nature. Yet, on the one hand, as we have already remarked, collections of letters of Sufi content preserve rich private material, and these have also begun to be located and published. On the other hand, significant numbers of private letters of lesser importance (or, more precisely, composed by less important persons) remain scattered and dispersed in libraries and archives. The major source, abundant in Turkish and European manuscript libraries, are copybooks and miscellanies (*mecmu’a*), which are one of the richest sources of information on private life, as they contain all sorts of notes, from magic spells to recipes and from poems and prayers to calculations and personal memoirs, including copies of texts that seemed valuable or useful to the author of the miscellany. *Mecmu’as* have been the subject of numerous recent studies,³¹ but letters as content have attracted the attention of few scholars.³² But apart from letters copied in miscellanies, we know that a large number of private letters has been preserved in loose leaves. A cursory study of archival collections in the Balkans, for examples, shows that they often contain letters that have some relationship with the owner of the archive: for instance, letters sent to the Prior of an Orthodox monastery would be preserved in its archive (and monastic archives are extremely rich).³³ Back in 1932, Lajos Fekete had located a collection of twenty-four letters in the archive of Nikolaus Esterhazy, dated from the early 17th century; these letters are highly interesting and yet have attracted minimal attention so far.³⁴ More letters from the Austrian archives, dating from the mid-16th century, were published by Gisela Procházka-Eisl and Claudia Römer.³⁵ Such private letters can be found in monastic and state archives, but also in libraries.

Turkish (14th-20th) Century, Wiesbaden 2010; S. Karahasanoğlu, “Ottoman Ego-Documents: State of the Art”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53 (2021), 301-308.

28 The journal is available in open access: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ceride>

29 See e.g. A. T. Şen, “The Emotional Universe of Insecure Scholars in the Early Modern Ottoman Hierarchy of Learning”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53 (2021), 315-321; Gurulkan, “Şehzade Korkut’un mektupları”.

30 Woodhead, “The Ottoman Art of Word-Painting”, 888.

31 See e.g. E. Kolonos, *Θωμανικές πηγές για τη νεώτερη ιστορία της Λευκάδας* [Ottoman sources on the early modern history of Leukada/Ayamavra], Iraklio 2013, 396-397.

32 J. Schmidt, “First Person Narratives in Ottoman Miscellaneous Manuscripts”, in Elger and Köse (eds), *Many Ways of Speaking*, 159-170.

33 See e.g. E. Kolonos, *Θωμανικές πηγές για τη νεώτερη ιστορία της Λευκάδας* [Ottoman sources on the early modern history of Leukada/Ayamavra], Iraklio 2013, 396-397.

34 L. Fekete, *Türkische Schriften aus dem Archiv des Palatins Nikolaus Esterhazy*, Budapest 1932. For some studies see Murphey, “Forms of Differentiation”; Giagtzoglou, “Η προσωπική επιστολογραφία”.

35 G. Procházka-Eisl – C. Römer, *Osmanische Beamtenschreiben und Privatbriefe der Zeit Suleymans des Prachtigen aus dem Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv zu Wien*, Vienna 2007.

The relationship of actual private letters with the requirements of the *inşâ* genre is a topic that merits special attention. Many of the “private letters” were written by professional scribes, who must have been acquainted with an at least superficial knowledge of *inşâ* literature. There are stories about well-educated high officials, who would be happy to review and amend letters of their peers or even inferiors.³⁶ However, we can tell that at least some were composed by their authors, as evidenced by lack of proper spelling or calligraphy³⁷ or by the total neglect for the formalities and the established sections.³⁸

A research agenda

Thus, Ottoman letters constitute a superb source for intellectual, cultural and social history, not to mention the various topics (e.g. of political or economic history) they can give us information about. Their systematic study would show how the Ottoman world itself was connected and how relationships were continued across an empire. For example, it has been observed that high ranking judges had to write letters to connect with each other while each was sent to a different town for service.³⁹ The study of such material will provide an opportunity to think about Ottoman imperial servants “on the move.”

Moreover, a detailed study of Ottoman correspondence will shed light upon the history of communication: the speed and width of the flow of information on political, social and cultural trends between Istanbul and the periphery (but also with the “infidel” world) is an important aspect of Ottoman realities that has not been examined yet.⁴⁰ We know that news of political developments, especially revolts, were quickly spreading throughout the Ottoman Empire; that aesthetic trends and literary tropes, as well as social fashions were also quick to expand their influence;⁴¹ that religious, philosophical or other topics (e.g. the use of tobacco) were debated in real time through treatises circulating all over the Ottoman territory.⁴² Yet we do not know the exact mechanisms such information traveled. We must assume that news (private or public) did not travel only by hearsay: various known private letters attest to this, and it is expected that much more will be discovered by carefully looking into the archives. The systematic examination of private letters will shed light into this important topic, in other words into the material basis of information exchange. We know that Ottomans maintained a postal system, which, however, was only for official use, often using cryptographic methods.⁴³ The way private letters travelled is still obscure. Information on the bearer

is often mentioned in letters, sometimes as a friend or a *protégé* worthy of attention. Indeed, letters for recommendation are a major source to study Ottoman networking.⁴⁴ These letters usually follow the “recommendation triangle” or “*amicitia* triangle”, known from similar letters of the Roman world,⁴⁵ comprising the author of the letter, the receiver and the person recommended.⁴⁶ We also know of letters accompanying (or accompanied by) gifts or other material objects.⁴⁷ Even collections of exemplary letters can reveal important information on networks.⁴⁸ Actual private letters may be more difficult in this respect, since they are often found in loose leaves without context, but they also often contain greetings to acquaintances of the receiver that reveal valuable information on networking.⁴⁹

An important aspect concerns the evolution of the genre, closely connected to the evolution of Ottoman rhetoric.⁵⁰ In the *inşâ* level, a letter as an alternative for poems in some cases, and vice versa: they share the style, the vocabulary and the tropes of high-level rhetoric and they could serve similar purposes as they both could be used to display one’s skills or affection.⁵¹ It has been noticed that *inşâ* manuals present little difference in terms of language and style throughout the Ottoman period,⁵² something noted also in early modern France.⁵³ Woodhead notes that the same has been remarked for Ottoman poetry;⁵⁴ however, as a matter of fact Ottoman poetry does present significant changes between the 15th or 16th and the 18th centuries.⁵⁵

and H. İnalçık (eds), *Türkiye’nin sosyal ve ekonomik tarihi*, Ankara 1980, 179-186. On Ottoman cryptography, see İ. H. Uzunçarşılı, “Âmedî Galib Efendi’nin murahhashıgı ve Paris’ten gönderdiği şifreli mektuplar”, *Belleten* 1 (1937), 371-430.

44 C. Woodhead, “Puff and Patronage: Ottoman *takriz*-writing and Literacy Recommendation in the 17th Century”, in C. Balim-Harding and C. Imber (eds), *The Balance of Truth: Essays in Honour of Professor Geoffrey Lewis*, Istanbul 2000, 395-406. Such letters are related to the texts recommending literary or historiographical works (*takriz*), a sub-genre in its own right; on these see F. Rosenthal, “‘Blurbs’ from Fourteenth Century Egypt”, *Oriens* 27-28 (1981), 177-196.

45 R. Rees, “Letters of Recommendation and the Rhetoric of Praise”, in R. Morello and A. D. Morrison (eds), *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, Oxford 2007, 148-168.

46 On friendship and sociability cf. M. Sariyannis, “Sociability, Public Life, and Decorum”, in Sh. Hamadeh and Ç. Kafescioğlu (eds), *A Companion to Early Modern Istanbul* (Brill’s Companions to European History 26), Leiden 2021, 473-502.

47 For the Byzantine case, cf. A. Karpozilos, “Realia in Byzantine Epistolography”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 77 (1984), 20-30.

48 Woodhead, “The Ottoman Art of Word-Painting”, 894-899.

49 See e.g. Fekete, *Türkische Schriften*, 152-153.

50 Cf. C. Ferrard, “The Development of an Ottoman Rhetoric up to 1882. Part I: The *Medrese* Tradition”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 3 (1982), 163–88 and idem, “The Development of an Ottoman Rhetoric up to 1882. Part II: Contributions from Outside the *Medrese*”. *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 4 (1984), 19–34. On the evolution of scribal writing style and language, see Matuz, “*Über die Epistolographie*”; Woodhead, “Ottoman *İnşa*”; Riedlmayer, “Ottoman Copybooks of Correspondence”; L. T. Darling, “Ottoman Turkish: Written Language and Scribal Practice, 13th to 20th Centuries”, in B. Spooner – W. L. Hanaway (eds), *Literacy in the Persianate World. Writing and the Social Order*, Philadelphia 2013, 171-195; Tuşalp Atiyas, “Political Literacy”, 138ff.

51 Woodhead, “Ottoman *İnşa*”, 157-159 and eadem, “The Gift of Letters”, 979.

52 Gökyay, “Tanzimat dönemine değin mektup”.

53 R. Chartier, “*Secrétaires* for the People? Model Letters of the *Ancien Régime*: Between Court Literature and Popular Chapbooks”, in R. Chartier et al. (eds), *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing From the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, London 1977, 59-111.

54 Woodhead, “Circles of Correspondence”.

55 See e.g. F. Turan, “Synthesizing the Novelities Within Old Structures: Voicing New Trends in Old Genres in the 18th Century Ottoman Poetry”, *Archivum Ottomanicum* 25 (2008), 151-171.

36 R. Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi*, Leiden 2001, 77-78.

37 Schmidt, “First Person Narratives”.

38 See e.g. Fekete, *Türkische Schriften*, 203.

39 A. Niyazioğlu, *Dreams and Lives in Ottoman Istanbul: A Seventeenth-Century Biographer’s Perspective*, London 2017, 24-25.

40 Cf. S. Peksevgen, “Secrecy, Information Control and Power Building in the Ottoman Empire, 1566-1603”, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, McGill University 2004.

41 For instance, one may take the common tropes and even verses in funerary inscriptions throughout the Empire (E. Eldem and N. Vatin, *L’építaphe ottomane musulmane (XVI-XX^e siècles). Contribution à une histoire de la culture ottomane*, Paris 2007; A. Anastasopoulos, “The Islamic Gravestones of Ottoman Rethymno: Preliminary Remarks and Thoughts about Them”, in idem (ed.), *The Eastern Mediterranean under Ottoman Rule: Crete, 1645-1840 (Halcyon Days in Crete VI, A Symposium Held in Rethymno, 13-15 January 2006)* (Rethymno 2008), 317-329), or the spread of the Kadızadeli movement all the way to Sarajevo even one century after its original rise in Istanbul (K. Filan, ‘Life in Sarajevo in the 18th Century (According to Mulla Mustafa’s *Mecmua*)’, in V. Costantini and M. Koller (eds), *Living in the Ottoman Ecumenical Community: Essays in Honour of Suraiya Faroqhi*, Leiden 2008, 335-337).

42 N. Shafir, *The Order and Disorder of Communication: Pamphlets and Polemics in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire*, Stanford 2024.

43 C. Heywood, “The Ottoman *menzilhane* and *ulak* System in Rumeli in the Eighteenth Century”, in O. Okyar

What seems to have remained intact is the internal structure of letters, containing several sections or “pillars” (*rükün*) which have to be of similar length and power of expression (hence the name “pillar”). Thus sections such as the beginning (*ibtida*), the praise of the receiver (*senâ*), the prayer (*du‘â*) and so forth were more or less formulaic, although they had a variety of forms according to the rank of the correspondent or the content of the letter.⁵⁶ Non-literary letters had a less composite character, as expected. At any rate, every letter would contain the *invocatio* (*elkâb/ḥiṭâb*), addressing the receiver according to their rank and relationship to the author, the introduction (*ibtida*), containing prayers for the receiver and expressions of respect (*‘arż-ı ḥulûş*), the *narratio* or main text (*beyân-ı maḡmûn*)—after a short sentence, *budur ki* or “[the cause of the letter] is the following”, named “salvation” or “escape” (*taḥalluş*)—followed by the completing sections and the signature (*imza*), usually preceded by an expression of respect (e.g. *bende*, “your slave”). The name and other information on the addressee would be written in the verso of the document.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most important aim of the study of private letters would be its contribution to the history of emotions and of private life. History of emotions, while a field considerably studied by now in European history,⁵⁸ is a topic that only recently started to be explored by Ottomanists and which is still in a very early stage of development.⁵⁹ As Woodhead remarks, letters collected as model examples were written in what has been termed the “language of fidelity”,⁶⁰ which functioned per se as an indicator of the author’s feelings: in other words, the very use of bombastic expressions of friendship was part of a “language game”, just as the function of gifts in the court or diplomatic practice.⁶¹ This was a feature that Ottoman culture shared not only with previous Arabic tradition⁶² but also with other medieval and early modern traditions of Europe.⁶³ No collection of Ottoman letters can be understood without taking this fact into account.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that a meticulous study of emotions displayed will not be extremely fruitful for cultural history. For one thing, the very inclusion of private letters into collections shows a tendency to exhibit one’s emotions, even in a formulaic form; the absence thereof in some cases indicates a different attitude (e.g. when al-Nabulusi states that he got bored of such “friendly letters”).⁶⁴ Not only affection, but also fear, anxiety, insecurity or joy are visible in

private letters.⁶⁵ On the other hand, from the early 17th century on the predominant epistolographers became more inward-looking than their predecessors, who had given more importance to official letters.⁶⁶ Even if we exclude the various private letters existing in archives, Sufi correspondence is much less formulaic and gives precedence to content; in its context, expressions of affection, but also of fear, awe, trouble and so forth must be taken as having a sincere content, albeit expressed in established forms of speech. In this respect, private letters may compensate for what has been described as the “absence of emotions in Ottoman self-narratives”.⁶⁷

56 On official letters see M. S. Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı belgelerinin dili (diplomatik)*, Istanbul 1994, 221-229.

57 For an analysis of the sections see Fekete, *Türkische Schriften*; Procházka-Eisl and Römer, *Osmanische Beamtenschreiben*.

58 Among the numerous publications, see B. H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca 2006; J. Liliequist (ed.), *History of Emotions, 1200-1800*, London 2012; J. Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, tr. by K. Tribe, Oxford 2015.

59 W. G. Andrews, “Ottoman Love: Preface to a Theory of Emotional Ecology”, in Liliequist (ed.), *History of Emotions*, 21-47; E. G. Ambros, “Emotivity as a Stylistic Marker in Ottoman Lyric Poetry of the 15th and 16th Centuries”, in C. Czygan and S. Conermann (eds), *An Iridescent Device: Premodern Ottoman Poetry*, Bonn 2018, 33-48; I. Ben-Ami, (2019). “Wonder in Early Modern Ottoman Society: A Case Study in the History of Emotions”, *History Compass* 17/7 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12578>; M. Sariyannis, « “Nous étions tous stupéfaits et effrayés”. Émotions ottomanes face au surnaturel ». *Turcica* 53 (2022), 277-306; N. Tekgöl, *Emotions in the Ottoman Empire: Politics, Society, and Family in the Early Modern Era*, London 2023.

60 A term coined by A. L. Herman, “The Language of Fidelity in Early Modern France”, *Journal of Modern History* 67/1 (1995), 1-24.

61 Woodhead, “Writing to a Grand Vezir”.

62 Gully, *The Culture of Letter-Writing*, 1-23.

63 Woodhead, “The Gift of Letters”, 972-973.

64 Akkach, *Letters of a Sufi Scholar*, 26-28; Woodhead, “The Gift of Letters”, 974.



65 A. T. Şen, “Letters of an Insecure Scholar”, in H. Karateke and H. Anetshofer (eds), *The Ottoman World. A Cultural History Reader, 1450-1700*, Oakland 2021, 1-7.

66 Woodhead, “Ottoman İnşa”, 146.

67 Tekgöl, *Emotions in the Ottoman Empire*, 38-40.