

A. TUNÇ ŞEN is Assistant Professor of History at Columbia University, specializing in the social and cultural history of the early modern Ottoman Empire and its place in the wider world. He earned his B.A. and M.A. from Sabancı University in Istanbul, followed by an M.A. and Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. Before joining Columbia, Şen taught Ottoman history and paleography at Leiden University. Şen’s research delves into how Ottoman subjects perceived their world—shaping and shaped by political, social, economic, and emotional frameworks. His first book, *Forgotten Experts: Astrologers, Science, and Authority in the Ottoman Empire, 1450–1600*, published by Stanford University Press in 2025, examines the contested role of astrologers in forming scientific expertise at the Ottoman court. His other published work includes studies on the history of science and divination, manuscript culture, the history of emotions, and the social history of scholarship and education in the Ottoman world. He is currently working on two additional book projects: one on early modern Ottoman education and scholarly life through emotional and microhistorical lenses, and another tracing the journey of Ottoman manuscripts into European collections.

“My brief visit to Rhodes with my family holds a very special place in my heart—not only because of the island’s beauty but also due to the profound connection I felt with its rich historical heritage. Thanks to the unmatched hospitality of Yusuf Kıbrıslı and his wife, Gülten Kıbrıslı, I had the privilege of spending a few unforgettable hours at the Hafız Ahmed Agha Library. The visit became even more meaningful upon learning that Namık Kemal had spent part of his exile at this very library nearly 150 years ago. Walking among the shelves, browsing the manuscripts, and observing the long table and chairs where he once sat made this experience deeply moving, intimately linking me to Rhodes’ Ottoman past.”

A. Tunç Şen

Ottoman Manuscripts as Pirates’ Spoils

Traveling by sea was a perilous and burdensome undertaking for many in pre-modern Ottoman society. As numerous Ottoman readers of Sa’dī Shīrāzī’s (d. 1292) *Gulistan* would have recognized, “in the sea there are good things innumerable; but if you wish for safety, you must seek it on the shore.”¹ Ottoman men of letters also developed their own idioms and expressions on the dangers of the sea. Perhaps the most frequently circulated one declares, “They said to keep water in a glass and see a ship [only] on paper,” cautioning readers against engaging with the sea’s unpredictable and often dangerous nature.² The renowned Ottoman litterateur of the late sixteenth century, Muşţafâ ‘Âlî (d. 1600), took this caution a step further. He asserted that “it is impermissible for an intelligent and prudent man to board a ship and travel by sea except in cases of absolute necessity.”³ The only justifiable reason, he argued, would be to cross from one shore to an island to learn the exalted path of the sharia from a knowledgeable spiritual guide residing there. Or, if one were afflicted with a fatal illness and a cure could be found only in a distant location, then such a journey might be warranted. Otherwise, sea travel was not considered reasonable.

Despite such hesitance and disdain toward sea travel, maritime journeys were certainly not uncommon among Ottoman subjects, particularly among the men of knowledge who were in pursuit of state service, scholarly exchange, or pilgrimage. Scholars, scribes, jurists, and judges frequently sailed from imperial centers, such as Istanbul and Cairo, toward provincial and frontier regions, sometimes carrying with them the cherished copies of books from their personal libraries or treatises in progress.⁴ These manuscripts were not merely sources of knowledge or entertainment—they were also deemed as “talismanic objects,” providing their readers with the much-needed feeling of divine protection and safety vis-a-vis all the perils of traveling by the sea.

The routes that connected Ottoman subjects to their intended destinations often exposed them to the threat of piracy. Catholic pirates sailing under the flags of Venice, Rhodes, Malta, and Spain, patrolled these waters with aggression and opportunism.⁵ The seizure of ships meant not only the enslavement or ransoming of their passengers, but also the appropriation of their cargo—coins, textiles, foodstuffs, and on occasion, books. Once claimed as spoil, these manuscripts entered new trajectories. Many were discarded immediately, out of faith-related anxieties; others were probably

1 Sa’dī, *The Gulistan, or, Rose Garden*, ed. Musle-Huddeen Sheik Saadi (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), 137.
2 “Suyu bardakda dimişler gemiyi kâğıdda.” See, for instance, Seydī Ali Reis, *Mir’âtü’l-memâlik: İnceleme, Metin, İndeks*, ed. Mehmet Kiremit (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 1999). Some other versions of the idiom use “wall” (*divâr*) instead of “paper” (*kâğıd*).
3 Douglas Scott Brookes, “Tables of Delicacies Concerning the Rules of Social Gatherings: an Annotated Translation of Gelibolulu Mustafa Âlî’s *Mevâ’idü’n-Nefâ’is fî Kavâ’idi’l-Mecalis*” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1998), 328.
4 Taşköprülüzâde provides several examples in his *Madînat al-‘ulûm* of scholars (*‘ulamâ*) who carried their books with them while traveling. See İhsan Fazlıoğlu and İbrahim Halil Üçer, eds., *Taşköprülüzâde’de Bilgi, Bilim ve Varlık* (İstanbul: İlem Yayınları, 2020), 179–80. Biographical dictionaries of poets also present several examples of poets writing or reading from their poetry *majmû’as* while at sea. See, for instance, the entry on Nigârî in Kınalızâde Hasan Çelebi’s *Tezkiretü’ş-şu’arâ*, ed. Aysun Sungurhan, electronic resource (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Kütüphaneler ve Yayımlar Genel Müdürlüğü, Ankara, 2017), 864.
5 See, for instance, Molly Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Mediterranean* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2010); Emrah Safa Gürkan, *Sultanın Korsanları: Osmanlı Akdenizi’nde Gazâ, Yağma ve Esaret, 1500-1700* (İstanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2018).

sold in the slave markets of the Mediterranean or shipped northward to enrich the libraries of European notables. Over time, library collections in the Vatican, Florence, Madrid, Leiden, Paris, and elsewhere began to list Arabic-script volumes bearing Ottoman ownership marks that were seized as pirates’ spoils. In their new settings, the very texts once intended to nourish the intellectual and spiritual lives of their Ottoman owners started serving the emerging Western Orientalist scholarship. In what follows, I turn to several case studies that trace the itineraries of traveling Ottoman learned men, the manuscripts they carried, and the episodes of capture that disrupted their journeys. Drawing on surviving manuscripts themselves—as well as the marginalia and miscellaneous notes scattered across folios—I aim to show how these codices became both cultural trophies and silent witnesses to the hazards of maritime mobility in the early modern Mediterranean.⁶

Ottomans’ Texts in Motion

Early modern Ottomans provide us with rich documentary evidence about books and other textual materials carried during travel. First of all, a range of anecdotes recount the presence of books accompanying sultans and soldiers on the march during military campaigns. Some of these items were undoubtedly preferred for their entertainment value, while others were favored for their ascribed talismanic and protective power—such as copies of the Qur’an in various sizes or prayerbooks. For example, one late sixteenth century anecdote about Sultan Selīm I (r. 1512–1520) coming from the son of a courtier of the sultan, describes how, during Selīm’s campaign against the Mamluks, the sultan took pleasure in reading a copy of the *History of Wassaf*.⁷ Sultans—particularly when they still physically led Ottoman armies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—may have had the luxury of reading for leisure and pleasure amid military campaigns. Ottoman soldiers, however, had more immediate and pragmatic reasons for keeping textual materials in their possession. Unfortunately, due mainly to the relative scarcity of early modern Ottoman soldierly writings, we know little about the social, personal, and emotional dynamics of warfare from the perspective of men-at-arms.⁸ Nevertheless, some extant sources indicate that books and other textual objects did, in fact, travel in the baggage of certain fighting troops. A notable example appears in a late-fifteenth-century memoir by Konstantin Mihailović (d. *circa* 1500), a Janissary of Christian Serbian origin who served in the army of Mehmed II (r. 1444–46; 1451–81). Mihailović notes that his fellow Ottoman soldiers frequently carried a particular type of small book he referred to as *hamahely*.⁹ These were,

6 The remainder of this study is adapted from my previously published article: “Manuscripts on the Battlefields: Early Modern Ottoman Subjects in the European Theatre of War and Their Textual Relations to the Supernatural in Their Fight for Survival,” *Aca’ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural* 2 (2021): 77–106.

7 “*merhûm pâdişâh ol nüshaya mâ’iller olub yolda eğlenceleri imiş*,” cited in İsmail E. Erünsal, “Fatih Sultan Mehmed’in İlgi Duyduğu Kitaplar ve Kütüphanesi” in *Düşten Fethe İstanbul*, ed. Coşkun Yılmaz (İstanbul: Üsküdar Belediyesi, 2015), 203–12, at p. 203.

8 Rhoads Murphey had also addressed the absence of literature on the personal motivations and experiences of soldiers in the early modern Ottoman world in his *Ottoman Warfare, 1500-1700* (London: UCL Press, 1999). For an intriguing textual example from the late seventeenth century written by a certain Hasan, who expressed all the hardships he and his peers suffered as guardians in Podolia, see: Orhan Şaik Gökyay, “Kamanîçe Muhafızlarının Çektiği,” *İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Dergisi* no. 32 (1979): 281-300. Also see the memoirs of a certain sailor with the name Talati, who took part in the naval campaign of 1736-7 in the Black Sea against the Russian fleet: Fevzi Kurtoğlu, ed., *1736-1737 Seferine İştirak Eden Bir Türk Denizcisinin Hatıraları: 200 Sene Evvel Yazılmıştır* (İstanbul: Deniz Matbaası, 1935). For an insightful account on early modern soldierly writings in the context of the Hispanic world, see: Miguel Martínez, *Front Lines: Soldiers’ Writing in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

9 Konstanty Michałowicz, *Memoirs of a Janissary*, trans. by Benjamin Stolz, ed. by Svat Soucek (Princeton:

in fact, *hamā’il*—small, amuletic booklets containing Qur’anic verses, inscriptions of divine names or the names of angels, typically fastened to the arm or turban. According to Mihailović, Ottoman soldiers believed these objects provided them with spiritual assistance and protection.

Aside from the hefty sultanic codices and tiny protective booklets carried into combat zones, we also have evidence of works that were drafted or presented during military campaigns. Historians, scholars, artists, secretaries, poets, and other men of learning in the service of sultans and ruling elites accompanied their patrons on such expeditions, often in official capacities. The extensive campaign-narrative literature—*ğazavât-nâmes* and *feth-nâmes*—along with surviving manuscripts in this genre, particularly the messier ones, merit close examination for traces of disarranged notes and rough drafts jotted down during the journeys themselves. In addition to possible sketches of campaign narratives, there are several treatises that were either written or at least presented in the course of military expeditions, as evidenced by surviving manuscript records. For instance, the autograph copy of the fifteenth-century polymath ‘Alī Qushjī’s (d. 1474) astronomical treatise *al-Risāla al-faṭḥiyya*, now housed in the Ayasofya collection of the Süleymaniye Library, reveals through its colophon that it was composed and presented to Qushjī’s new patron Sultan Mehmed II in August 1473 during the sultan’s campaign against the Aqqoyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan (r. 1457–1478), which culminated in the Ottoman victory at Otlukbeli—hence, the treatise is titled *al-faṭḥiyya*, meaning “the victorious”.¹⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, Qushjī’s treatise is not the only astronomical text copied or presented during an Ottoman campaign. In the 1660s, Tezkireci Köse İbrâhîm Efendi (fl. 17th century), a finance bureaucrat in the chancery and translator of a French treatise on Copernican astronomy, reported that, with the encouragement of the military judge at the time, he worked on his translation while stationed in Belgrade during the Ottoman campaign against Habsburg Austria in 1663.¹¹

It should come as no surprise that members of the scholarly establishment and bureaucrats in the imperial chancery constitute the largest group of individuals who composed or consumed texts while on the move. These texts encompass a wide range of genres, from captivity narratives and miscellanies (*majmū’a*) of various sorts—including personal letters, official correspondence, poems, law codes, legal opinions, and medical or magical recipes—to individual treatises on diverse branches of knowledge. With particular regard to captivity narratives, the better-known examples were authored by Ottoman scholars and bureaucrats who were captured by corsairs or other agents of early modern ransom slavery operating in the Mediterranean.¹² One such example is the memoir of Ma’cūncuzāde Muştafâ Efendi (d. after 1602), an Ottoman judge from Istanbul who was appointed in 1597 to a judicial post in Cyprus but was seized en route by the Knights Hospitaller of Malta, the

Markus Wieners Publishers, 2010), 5. For *hamā’il* and its etymological connection to amulets, which Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall had mentioned in the nineteenth century, see: B. Carra de Vaux, “Ḥamā’il,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition (1913-1936)*, online edition; Constant Hamès, “Amulet,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, online edition. For the use of amulets on battlefields, see Maryam Ekhtiar and Rachel Parikh, “Power and Piety: Islamic Talismans on the Battlefield,” in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, eds. Liana Saif *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 420–53.

10 Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi Ayasofya 2733, f. 70a, also cited in Hasan Umut, “Theoretical Astronomy in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire: ‘Alī al-Qūshjī’s *al-Risāla al-Faṭḥiyya*,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, McGill University, 2019).

11 Kandilli Observatory Library 403, cited in *Osmanlı Astronomi Literatürü Tarihi = History of Astronomy Literature during the Ottoman Period* vol. 1, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (İstanbul : IRCICA, 1997), 342.

12 For the socio-economic and cultural significance of early modern ransom slavery from the Ottoman perspective, see the articles in Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor, eds., *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman Borders: Early Fifteenth-Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).

Catholic military and religious order that had relocated from Rhodes a few decades earlier.¹³ As Ma‘cūncuzāde himself recounts, the text was composed during his captivity in Malta.¹⁴ Of course, such authorial claims should not be taken at face value. In many cases, including Ma‘cūncuzāde’s account, the content and surviving manuscript evidence suggest that these narratives were written later as retrospective recollections, often well after the author’s release. Still, regardless of where or under what circumstances they were actually composed, these narratives are especially striking for the quotidian details they offer about life in captivity, conditions aboard ships, and the social role that reading and writing played among those traveling by sea or held as captives.

Captivity narratives, along with the letters that captives sent to their families and others to complain about their conditions and request ransom payments, offer vivid insights into how captives socialized around texts and formed group bonds around shared themes of *gurbet* (longing associated with being in a foreign land) and *miḥnet* (ordeal).¹⁵ Ma‘cūncuzāde’s memoir, for instance, contains frequent references to captives copying or reading texts during their spare time, composing chronograms to mark the release dates of fellow captives, and exchanging papers inscribed with *ghazals* and *qasidas*. Among the books copied, Ma‘cūncuzāde mentions a copy of the Qur’an and a Turkish translation of Ḥusayn Vā’iz Kāshifī’s (d. 1504–5) Persian treatise on ethics and morality, *Aḥlāk-ı Muḥsinī*, completed by a certain ‘Azmi in sixteenth century.¹⁶ Another late-sixteenth-century captivity narrative, written by Hindī Maḥmūd—another scribe in the imperial chancery—portrays how the more learned individuals among travelers and captives would recite verses from the Qur’an and other texts, such as *Mawlid-i Nabī* (used to celebrate the Prophet Muhammed’s nativity), to boost morale aboard the ship.¹⁷

13 Anthony T. Luttrell, “Malta and Rhodes: Hospitallers and Islanders,” in *Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798. Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*, ed. Victor Mallia-Milanes, 255–84.

14 The text was first introduced by İsmet Parmaksızoğlu in the following study: “Bir Türk Kadısının Esaret Hatıraları,” *İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Dergisi* 5, no. 8 (1953): 77–84. Fahir İz then published the text in Arabic script based on the sole surviving manuscript at the Selim Ağa Library in İstanbul. See: Fahir İz, “Macuncuzade Mustafa’nın Malta Anıları: Sergüzeşt-i Esiri-i Malta,” *Türk Dili Araştırmaları Yıllığı-Belleten* 18 (1970): 69–122. For a recent French translation of the text together with an introductory essay on the relevant historical context, see Hayri Gökşin Özkoray, ed., *Le captif de Malte: récit autobiographique d’un cadi ottoman* (Toulouse: Anacharsis, 2019).

15 Salvatore Bono, *Schiavi Musulmani nell’Italia moderna* (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1999); Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, “Muslim Slaves and Captives in Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 6, no. 1 (1995): 5–23; Luca Berardi, “Copying Islamic Manuscripts in Captivity: The Case of the Qur’an of Muḥammad al-Tāzī/Baldassarre Loyola Mandes (1631–1667),” *Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024): 1–16; Güner Doğan, “Napoli ‘Küffarından’ Esir Mektupları ya da Bir Deniz Savaşının/Cenginin Anlatımı,” *Türk Savaş Çalışmaları Dergisi* 2, no. 2 (2021): 159–69; Uğur Demir, “Esir/Esire Mektupları ve Arzuhalleri (1700-1750),” *Uluslararası Türk Savaş Esirleri Sempozyumu Bildiri Kitabı, 14-15 Mart 2017* (İstanbul, 2018), 53–94.

16 İz, “Macuncuzade Mustafa’nın Malta Anıları,” 78.

17 Hindī Mahmūd, *Sergüzeştname-i Hindī Mahmud: İnebahtı gazisi Hindī Mahmud ve Esaret Hatıraları*, ed. Ahmet Karataş (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2013). Crews often included a specific individual called “mu’allim” or “hoca,” a learned person in religious sciences and other branches of knowledge, who offered help to people on the ship to perform prayers properly or pull themselves together in formidable circumstances. In some cases, they interpreted the horoscopes at the moment or consulted books on divination to provide guidance. We know next to nothing about the identities of those *mu’allims* and how they were selected, but both Ottoman and European sources attest to their presence on board. See for instance Emrah Safa Gürkan, *Sultanın Korsanları*, 197, 249.

As a matter of fact, copies of the Qur’an, either full or partial, were essential components of textual interaction among seafarers, fostering both solidarity among peers and hostility across confessional lines. In the autobiographical account of the sixteenth-century Ottoman admiral Seydi ‘Alī (d. 1563), which recounts his adventures in the Indian Ocean and later in present-day India, Afghanistan, parts of Central Asia, and Iran, Qur’an copies appear on several occasions where he and his surviving crewmates perform the art of bibliomancy—divination by books—by randomly opening a page and interpreting the first verse chanced upon to find guidance.¹⁸ In yet another captivity narrative, composed as a long letter by a scribe in the expanding imperial bureaucracy during the early reign of Sultan Süleymān (r. 1520–1566), Christian captors are reported to have seized the books of Ottoman captives—specifically Qur’ans and amulets containing inscribed verses (referred to in the letter as “*ḥamāyil-i ‘aẓīme*”)—and thrown them into the sea or, at times, into a fire. The “infidel corsairs,” the anonymous scribe reports, believed that “the books of the Turks on board were the chief cause of the violent storms at sea.”¹⁹

There is little doubt that many of the texts Ottoman subjects carried to frontier regions and combat zones were lost forever due to such instances of destruction and confessionally driven violence. Yet many others undeniably passed into European hands during episodes of plunder and captivity.²⁰ Through a series of intermediaries, these manuscripts eventually made their way into the court libraries of monarchs, ecclesiastical libraries—including those of the Vatican—and the private collections of European Orientalists. For instance, the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana alone holds at least fifteen Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish manuscripts that were transferred from Malta to the Vatican library by Monsignor Leonetto della Corbara, who served as the Apostolic Delegate and Inquisitor of the Island of Malta from 1607 to 1609. This transfer was carried out under the order of Pope Paul V (d. 1621).²¹ All of these manuscripts—Mss. Ar. 201, 204, 205, 224, 227, 237, 238, 302, 307; Turc 3, 4, 6, 26, 31, 354—bear on their flyleaves an inscription confirming their relocation to the Vatican by Inquisitor Corbara (*portato da Malta da Mons. Della Corbara*).²² Among these manuscripts that must have been seized from Ottoman and North African subjects by the Knights Hospitaller of Malta or their associates operating in the Mediterranean are five copies of the Qur’an (full or partial), collections of prayers and magical incantations, at least three pocket-sized prayer books (*du‘ānāme*), a Turkish epic recounting the legendary holy warrior Seyyid Baṭṭal Ġazī, and miscellaneous compilations of poems.

18 Seydi Ali Reis, *Mir‘atü’l-memâlik*, 87, 102.

19 BnF Turc 223, f. 66a, also cited in Halil Sahillioğlu, “Akdeniz’de Korsanlara Esir Düşen Abdi Çelebi’nin Mektubu,” *İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Dergisi* vol. 13, no. 17 (1963): 241–56, the specific detail is on p. 252. In the letters sent by Ottoman captives to their families in their homelands, one could also find references to copies of the Qur’an and prayerbooks. For instance, in the year 1646, a certain Receb, a *sipahi* from Pécs living under the captivity of the Hungarians, wrote a letter to his mother and asked her to send his “poor father’s prayer book.” See Zsuzsanna J. Újváry, “A Muslim captive’s vicissitudes in Ottoman Hungary (mid-seventeenth century),” in *Ransom Slavery along the Ottoman Borders: Early Fifteenth-Early Eighteenth Centuries*, eds. Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor (Leiden;Boston: Brill, 2007), 141–67, the specific detail is on p. 157.

20 The probable consequences of the many decades of Ottoman-Safavid warfare also deserve to be investigated in this regard.

21 Giorgio Levi della Vida, *Elenco dei manoscritti Arabi Islamici della biblioteca vaticana: Vaticani, Berberiniani, Borgia, Rossiani* (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1935), 260.

22 For Della Corbara’s engagement in Muslim magical texts, see Alexander Bonnici, “Superstitions in Malta: Towards the Middle of the Seventeenth Century in the light of the Inquisition Trials,” *Melita Historica* 4, no. 3 (1966): 154–83; Catherine Rider *et al.*, “Infirmities and Invisible Ink: Enslaved Muslims and Magic in Malta, c. 1598–c. 1608,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (2024): 43–67.



Islamic manuscripts transferred from Malta to the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana by Monsignor Leonetto della Corbara, who served as the Apostolic Delegate and Inquisitor of the Island of Malta from 1607 to 1609. These manuscripts were likely seized from Ottoman and North African subjects by the Knights Hospitaller of Malta or their associates operating in the Mediterranean. Copies of the Qur'an (above), collections of prayers (*du'ānāme*) below. Courtesy of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.



While the majority of scholarship on the accumulation of Islamic manuscripts in early modern Europe has focused primarily on the role of European intellectuals and (proto-)Orientalists in acquiring manuscripts from the Muslim world, there is growing interest in examining the role of warfare and violence in the transfer of these manuscripts into European collections. For example, the recent special issue of the *Journal of Erudition and the Republic of Letters*, titled “The Turkish Wars and the Study of Islam in Early Modern Europe,” highlights numerous manuscripts of Ottoman and North

African provenance that were captured as war booty or through acts of piracy and are now housed in various European collections.²³ However, even within this important revisionist scholarship, which rightly underscores the role of war and violence in the transmission of manuscripts, the focus remains almost exclusively on those early modern Europeans who were so eager to learn Islamic languages and customs by collecting manuscripts.²⁴ There is little comparable scholarly attention to the stories, however fragmented or obscure, of the Ottoman and North African subjects who once possessed these manuscripts, engaged with them in meaningful ways while on the move, and ultimately lost them permanently after their capture.

In his pioneering article on the role of piracy and warfare in the acquisition of Islamic manuscripts in early modern Europe, Robert Jones identifies more than a dozen manuscripts of Ottoman and North African provenance that found their way into various European collections.²⁵ To locate these manuscripts, he primarily relied on inscriptions—written in Latin or European vernacular languages—left on the flyleaves by European hands, sometimes detailing the specific circumstances under which the books were seized. For example, on the flyleaf of Leiden Or. 222, an undated copy of a bilingual (Arabic-Turkish) work on Islamic jurisprudence, there is a note in Spanish by a certain Bernardo de Josa stating that the book was delivered to him in Rome by Don Guillem de San Clemente—a Spanish nobleman, soldier, and diplomat—who had participated in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 and acquired the manuscript at that time, perhaps along with other similar items.²⁶ Unfortunately, Leiden Or. 222 does not contain any inscriptions or manuscript notes from its former Ottoman owner(s) who may have taken part in the battle. As a result, we are unable to reconstruct the particular social history of the book, identify its Ottoman possessor(s), or determine why a text on jurisprudence would have been brought into combat zone. It is worth noting, however, that carrying a heavy volume related strictly to jurisprudence while traveling, especially during sea voyages, was not unheard of in Islamic history. As Joel Blecher points out in his article on Hadith (Prophetic Tradition) commentaries, seafarers often kept copies of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muḥammad al-Bukhārī (d. 870) on their ships as a means of securing protection from harm.²⁷

23 Paul Babinski and Jan Loop, “Looting and Learning: War and the Qur'an in European Oriental Studies,” *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 9 (2024): 239–80; Laura Hinrichsen, “The Circulation of Arabic Books from Ifrīqiya in Europe after the Sack of Tunis (1535),” 281–308; Chiara Petrolini, “Captive Books, Captive Teachers. Spoils of the Long Turkish Wars in 17th-Century Vienna,” 309–35; Asaph Ben-Tov, “The Great Turkish War and the Study of the Qur'an: The Case of Matthias Friedrich Beck (1649–1701),” 336–63.

24 For an overview of the extent of early modern European scholarly and diplomatic interest in gathering Islamic manuscripts and learning oriental languages, see Alastair Hamilton et al. *The Republic of Letters and the Levant* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); Simon Mills, *A Commerce of Knowledge: Trade, Religion, and Scholarship between England and the Ottoman Empire, c.1600–1760* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Paul Babinski, “World Literature in Practice: the Orientalist's Manuscript Between the Ottoman Empire and Germany” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2020); John Robert Jones, ed., *Learning Arabic in Renaissance Europe (1505–1624)* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2020).

25 Robert Jones, “Piracy, war, and the acquisition of Arabic manuscripts in Renaissance Europe,” *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 2 (1987): 96–110. For the intriguing story of the sultan of Morocco's royal book collection's being stolen by French pirates and eventually reaching Spain and later becoming the core of the oriental collection at the Escorial library, see Daniel Hershenzon, “Traveling Libraries: The Arabic Manuscripts of Muley Zidan and the Escorial Library,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 18/6 (2014): 535–58.

26 See the note in Jan Schmidt, *Catalogue of Turkish manuscripts in the library of Leiden University and other collections in the Netherlands* vol. 1 (Leiden: Leiden University Library/Brill, 2000), 25–6.

27 Joel Blecher, “Ḥadīth Commentary in the Presence of Students, Patrons, and Rivals: Ibn Ḥajar and Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī in Mamluk Cairo,” *Oriens* 41, no. 3/4 (2013): 261–87, at p. 262.



Leiden Cod. Or. 222, an undated copy of a bilingual (Arabic-Turkish) work on Islamic jurisprudence, *Wiqāyat al-riwāyah fī masāʾil al-Hidāyah* by Burhān al-Dīn Mahmūd al-Mahbūbī (d. 1346) with a note in Spanish by a certain Bernardo de Josa stating that the manuscript was delivered to him in Rome by Don Guillem de San Clemente—a Spanish nobleman, soldier, and diplomat—who had participated in the Battle of Lepanto in October 1571. Courtesy of Leiden University Library.

Other scholars have also identified manuscripts of Ottoman provenance that were taken by Europeans as spoils of war. A specific research field known as *Türkenbeute* (literally “booty from the Turks”) traces objects—including manuscripts—seized from defeated Ottoman subjects as war trophies. One finds, especially in the manuscript libraries and museums of Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Italy, volumes looted from madrasa and mosque libraries, or snatched directly from the bodies of Ottoman soldiers by troops advancing deeper into Ottoman territories in Central and South-Eastern Europe after the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683.²⁸ Inscriptions and other manuscript notes in Latin or local vernacular languages found in these manuscripts describe—sometimes in graphic detail—when and how the item in question was obtained. One example, held at the Gotha Research Library, is a volume containing prayers and extracts from the Qurʾan. A note on folio 2b states that the book was found on the body of a Turk who was shot when Buda was captured by the Holy League in 1686.²⁹ It is likely that many more were obtained under similar circumstances,

although lacking such explicit inscriptions. In his study on Arabic-script manuscripts in German libraries, Tilman Seidensticker notes that, before the gradual expansion of its Oriental collection, the Gotha Research Library possessed 74 Islamic manuscripts in the eighteenth century, 14 of which are evidently identified by inscriptions as having been acquired as war booty. Seidensticker further estimates that about “a third or even half” of those 74 manuscripts are “instances of *Türkenbeute*.”³⁰ It would be inaccurate, however, to classify all *Türkenbeute* manuscripts as texts seized from Ottoman subjects in transit. Most were looted from rather stationary institutions—madrasas, mosques, libraries, and private residences—in Ottoman towns in Central Europe that fell to European forces from the late seventeenth century onward. Still, numerous textual materials, including bureaucratic ledgers and registers from the Ottoman central administration, were brought to the European theatre of war by Ottoman military and administrative officials—and many of them remained there permanently.³¹

Thus, a systematic inventory of texts that found their way into European collections through processes initially set in motion by early modern Ottoman subjects on the move would substantially enhance the existing body of knowledge. Such an inventory could help identify specific volumes, analyze which particular genres and titles were most widely circulated among different Ottoman social groups in transit, and explore the contents of these books with an eye toward tracking notes of personal and emotional nature by their former Ottoman possessors. This task, however, is daunting. It requires the meticulous labor and collaborative expertise of a broad range of scholars and professionals—librarians, manuscript cataloguers, codicologists, philologists, historians, and others—and spans a vast spatial and temporal landscape, from Western to Eastern Europe and from the early sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The challenge is further compounded by the fact that descriptive manuscript inscriptions on flyleaves—those that clearly document provenance and ownership—are sporadic and limited. Many more manuscripts, despite lacking such explicit notes, were nonetheless part of the textual holdings of mobile early modern Ottoman subjects. Identifying them often depends on little more than good fortune or serendipitous discoveries made through close and patient examination of their contents.

In this light, the manuscript holdings of the Hāfız Aḥmed Ağa Library in Rhodes merit close investigation through the same lens. As a provincial repository situated at the intersection of Ottoman, Mediterranean, and European maritime worlds, the Hāfız Aḥmed Ağa collection may well contain volumes that echo the trajectories traced here—books once carried by scholars, jurists, or pilgrims traveling across the Mediterranean and perhaps seized, displaced, rescued, and re-shelved in the wake of imperial or local upheaval. A focused study of the library’s Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish manuscripts—particularly those bearing ownership notes, travel marks, or devotional traces—has the potential to enrich our understanding of how books traveled, endured, and bore witness to the entangled histories of war, devotion, and displacement in the early modern Mediterranean.

28 See, for instance, Boris Liebrecht, *Arabishe, Persische und Türkische Handschriften in Leipzig: Geschichte ihrer Sammlung und Erschliessung von Den Anfängen bis zu Karl Vollers* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2008), 18–28; Alastair Hamilton, “‘To Rescue the Honour of the Germans’: Qurʾan Translations by Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century German Protestants,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 77 (2014): 173–209; Tilman Seidensticker, “How Arabic Manuscripts Moved to German Libraries,” *Manuscript Cultures* 10 (2017): 73–82; Paul Babinski, “World Literature in Practice: the Orientalist’s Manuscript Between the Ottoman Empire and Germany,” 283–302.

29 Seidensticker, 78.

30 Ibid.

31 For instances of Ottoman bureaucratic registers brought from the Ottoman capital and remained in European hands, see Hans Georg Majer, ed., *Das Osmanische “Registerbuch der Beschwerden” (Şikāyet Defteri) vom Jahre 1675: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. mixt. 683* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984); Atilla Çetin, “Savaşlar ve Arşivler: İstila-yı keferede kalan Osmanlı defterleri,” *Türk Dünyası Tarih Dergisi* 3 (1987): 6–8; Feridun Emecen, “Sefere Götürülen Defterlerin Defteri,” in *Prof. Dr. Bekir Kütükoğlu’na Armağan* to enrich our understanding of how books traveled, endured, and bore witness to the entangled histories of war, devotion, and displacement in the early modern Mediterranean. (İstanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1991), 241–68.