

Hâtime

Hâtime, derived from the Arabic root *ḫtm* and the word *ḫātima* - meaning to seal or conclude - refers to the final section of a manuscript or book in Ottoman literary and scholarly culture. Functioning as a textual closure, the *hâtime* could serve various purposes depending on genre: in scientific or legal treatises, it might summarize key points; in religious or Sufi texts, it often included prayers, moral reflections, or invocations of divine mercy; and in literary works, it could take on a more personal or poetic tone. While it does not correspond exactly to the modern ‘epilogue’, the *hâtime* offered a structured conclusion—a space where authors could reflect or gesture toward the afterlife of the text. In many cases, it marked not only the end of writing, but the beginning of reception, inviting readers to carry the work, or the *Muhabbet*, forward in thought, memory, or practice.



TARIK TÜTEN serves as the deputy *mütevelli* of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa & Ahmed Fethi Pasha Foundation. He is dedicated to raising awareness of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library and securing its recognition as a vital site of Rhodian cultural heritage. His priority is the preservation of the library and its manuscript collection, while fostering access for scholars and all who are interested in the history of Rhodes—including its Ottoman legacy and the broader tradition of Islamic manuscript culture. Tarık Tüten pursued academic studies at Karlsruhe, Stanford, and Berkeley and received a Dipl.-Ing. degree in Mechanical Engineering from Universität Karlsruhe and an M.S. in Energy and Resources from the University of California, Berkeley. He completed his postgraduate work at both Wharton and INSEAD.

*“The making of these volumes has been a journey in its own right. The commitment and intellectual passion of the contributors reached an exceptional breadth and depth. Many engaged in a continuous exchange of comments, fueling the **Muhabbet** through cross-readings and shared reflections. Inspirations sparked across borders and continents, transcending geographies. The spirit of collaboration was marked by genuine generosity, resonating deeply with the foundation’s principles of sharing and collective inquiry. This work salutes all who engage in the patient pursuit of truth—not as a fixed destination, but as a shared horizon. The truth seeker is not merely a collector of facts, but a participant in the **Muhabbet** across time, space, and discipline; someone who listens, questions, and reconsiders. In this spirit, the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library remains a home for those committed to unfolding new narratives of the seas, the islands, and the lands—not to claim final answers, but to keep the **Conversation** and the **Muhabbet** alive, and to seek knowledge in the service of fostering a more convivial and humane world.”*

Tarık Tüten

Conversation in the Library

Kütüphanede Muhabbet

WWW anno 1792: Wars, Wells, and Wills

February 26, 1792, was a Sunday. The Treaty of Jassy, negotiated by Prince Potemkin on behalf of Russia until his death, was finally initialed by the Grand Vizier Koca Yusuf Pasha and Prince Alexander Bezborodko. Just a few weeks earlier, Selim III and Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, had affixed their signatures to formally conclude the Ottoman–Russian–Austrian War. Meanwhile, Enderûn-ı Hümâyûn Rikâbdarı Rodosî Hafız Ahmed Ağa bin Hasan Ağa—the recently retired chief equerry to Sultan Selim III and the son of Hasan Ağa of Rhodes—appeared largely indifferent to the developments on the Russian front. His attention was instead devoted to finalizing the documentation for his charitable endowments. As the Ottoman Empire faced the involuntary loss of Crimea and a significant decline in power, this retired official was resolute in his desire to dedicate a substantial portion—if not most—of his wealth, including the well water from his backyard, to philanthropic causes.

Sunday, February 26, 1792, was destined to be a day of lasting significance for Hafız Ahmed Ağa—a day that would echo through generations of his family, and perhaps, in some quiet way, into eternity. As if bound by fate to history’s stage, Crimea lingers in the limelight—unsettled still, and yearning for peace more than two centuries on, even as the 21st century matures into its third decade with more contradictions than its promises.

Hafız Ahmed Ağa was born on the island of Rhodes, likely in the early 1740s. While the exact history of his family on the island isn’t fully known, we do know that his father, Hasan Ağa (d. 1772), and probably his grandfather, Abdullah Ağa, were buried in the Murat Reis Cemetery in Rhodes—an esteemed burial ground reserved for the Ottoman notables, used until the early 20th century.

As a boy, Ahmed was recruited in Rhodes to join the Enderûn, the elite palace school located at the heart of the imperial court Topkapı. The name *Enderûn* literally means “inner,” derived from the Persian word *andar* and the Latin *inter*. It was more than just a school—it was a rigorous institution that trained future leaders in governance, science, and the military. Many graduates would go on to serve the empire in high offices, including the Grand Vizierate, beginning their careers in junior palace roles.

After completing his education, Ahmed served with distinction under three Ottoman sultans: Mustafa III (r. 1757–1774), Abdülhamid I (r. 1774–1789), and Selim III (r. 1789–1807). He retired in 1789, bringing to a close a long and accomplished career—just as the French Revolution was beginning to reshape the world beyond the empire’s borders. To serve at high levels through three successive reigns was no small feat. It was arguably as challenging as winning three consecutive Olympic gold medals. And to survive them all? That would be like winning a fourth. Hafız Ahmed Ağa came close—but he didn’t quite reach that fourth medal.

That Sunday morning, Hafız Ahmed Ağa left his home in the *Soğanağa* neighborhood to attend a meeting he had likely been waiting for in great anticipation. *Soğanağa*, located along the Divanyolu—the ceremonial avenue that led to the Imperial Palace—was one of Istanbul’s prestigious residential areas in the 18th century. It was home to senior state officials, high-ranking civil servants, respected religious scholars and wealthy merchants connected to the Ottoman court. For Ahmed Ağa, who had spent his entire career either studying at Enderûn or serving in the shadow of Topkapı Palace, *Soğanağa* must have felt like home—both socially and spiritually.

Walking the streets of *Soğanağa* today, it's hard to imagine the elegance and stature this neighborhood once embodied. Unless you possess both a deep interest in history and personal or ancestral ties to the area, it's difficult to conjure the past from what now surrounds you. Rows of drab concrete buildings, hastily and poorly built after the 1950s, dominate the streetscape. Not a sliver of soil remains exposed to support a tree or a patch of green. Shopfronts are crammed into the lower floors, often run by a colorful mix of ethnicities that reflect the region's enduring diversity. Among this architectural disarray, a few tired remnants from the 1920s and '30s stand scattered, abandoned and decaying, their cracked façades and empty upper floors hinting at a time when aesthetics still mattered. Sadly, they are no match for the grandeur that once defined the area. Even the mosque that gave the neighborhood its name—*Soğanağa* Camii—has lost its former dignity. Originally constructed in 1600 and subjected to multiple reconstructions over the centuries, the mosque underwent its most recent restoration in 1997. This intervention, however, introduced design elements—most notably an entrance constructed from polyvinyl chloride—that stand in stark contrast to its historical character. Were there a contest for the most unfortunate architectural alteration in Istanbul, this restoration might well be one of the leading candidates. It stands now as a disheartening symbol of lost elegance.

To catch even a glimmer of the area's former refinement, one must venture further. Walk down towards the sea, past the Armenian Gregorian and Protestant churches, the Syriac Catholic church, and the Greek Orthodox church, until you reach what was once the Byzantine Kontoskalion harbor—now reduced to a mere parking lot. Or turn back and head up towards Divanyolu, where echoes of imperial processions still linger in the stones.

Setting aside the present-day soullessness of *Soğanağa*, with all its concrete monotony and architectural neglect, the adjacent neighborhoods still hold remarkable traces of Ottoman heritage—within a 500-meter distance of the *Soğanağa* Mosque. In Hafız Ahmed Ağa's time, this part of Imperial Istanbul stood as a vibrant crossroads of cultures and histories where one could find a stunning concentration of mosques, churches, madrasas, libraries, fountains, and, of course, the Grand Bazaar—a testament to the empire's layered past and cultural depth.

Amid these architectural palimpsests and historical riches, one building in particular must have captured Hafız Ahmed Ağa's attention: the Köprülü Library. Modest in size but rich in legacy, it still stands with quiet dignity on Divanyolu, just across from the serene tomb complex of Sultan Mahmud II, where notable statesmen like Ahmed Fethi Pasha and Said Pasha also rest.

The library, founded in the 17th century by one of the Ottoman Empire's distinguished statesman lineages, was the vision of Fazıl Ahmed and Fazıl Mustafa Pashas, sons of the Grand Vizier Köprülü Mehmed Pasha. Together, this remarkable father-and-sons trio of Albanian origin held the empire's highest executive office for nearly a quarter of the 17th century. The Köprülü Library was the first independently established *vakıf* library in the Ottoman Empire—an unprecedented move at the time.

Whether or not Hafız Ahmed Ağa was consciously influenced by this pioneering institution, its presence would have resonated deeply with someone of his background and values. It is not unreasonable to believe that the Köprülü Library helped set a precedent, encouraging other philanthropists to establish dedicated *vakıf* libraries not only in Istanbul but across the empire throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

On that quiet Sunday, February 26, 1792, Hafız Ahmed Ağa set out with purpose in his step and reflection in his heart. The streets of *Soğanağa*, once noble and hushed under the weight of imperial history, now bore witness to a man intent on leaving his mark in history not through conquest or command, but through benevolence. His meeting that day was with the esteemed representative of the *Kadı*, Seyyid Abdurrahman *Efendi*—a man entrusted with recording acts that shaped destinies. The *vakfiye* (endowment deed), that sacred charter of giving, had likely already been penned with careful thought and reverence. It was on this very day that the ink would meet paper in finality—unfolding Hafız Ahmed Ağa's vision, a legacy of devotion and generosity destined to resonate far beyond his time.

The object of Hafız Ahmed Ağa's endowment, as inscribed in the lines of his founding *vakfiye*, was a simple yet profound gift: a fountain drawn from the well nestled in the quiet courtyard of his home in *Soğanağa*. This act of charity—opening the flow of his private waters to the public—found its form in a fountain gracing the outer wall of his garden, a silent sentinel offering life to the neighborhood.

To offer water may seem a humble gesture, a trivial legacy. Yet in the Istanbul of the late 18th century, where water was scarce, neighborhood fountains were lifelines. For the many who lived without, Hafız Ahmed's fountain was more than stone and water—it was sustenance, a mercy carved in marble.

Only a year and a half after the founding of the *vakıf* (foundation), his manuscript library opened its doors on the island of Rhodes. The closeness in time suggests that the library's construction had already begun when the endowment was sealed on the 26th of February, 1792. The design of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library, later solidified through an amendment (*zeyl vakfiye*) dated November 18, 1793, bore traces of the serenity of the Köprülü Library in Istanbul—a likely muse for his architectural vision.

It is believed that soon after his retirement in 1789, Hafız Ahmed returned to his birthplace, the island of Rhodes, and set in motion the construction of his library. In the same *vakfiye*, a constellation of properties—real estate in Izmir—was listed, pledged to sustain the *vakıf* across time. The scale of this endowment speaks to a future-minded generosity, ensuring that the library, its caretakers, and its charitable works would be nourished in perpetuity long after he passed away from the world.

Izmir, a city far from both Istanbul and Rhodes, served not only as a waypoint on his journey—likely part of a long route by land, perhaps leading to the harbor at Marmaris—but also as a wellspring of income. His most valuable properties there lay in the Greek quarters. Chief among them was the *Rumhane*, a building where Greek families lived as tenants, and which served as the heart of his financial foundation. This choice reveals a careful mind—diversified, strategic, and attuned to the rhythms of risk and return.

In Ahmed Ağa's days, travel across the empire's vast lands was a privilege few could afford or attempt. The roads belonged to merchants with firmans, judges on the move, pilgrims heading for sacred soil, ambassadors, state-appointed physicians, soldiers, and those escorting the condemned. For others, the journey was not allowed or steeped in hardship. Men journeyed on foot or horseback, sometimes for months. Women, rarely, followed only for pilgrimage, in the company of kin. The wealthy traveled with retinues and guards, their passage marked by heavy costs and weary nights.

To choose Rhodes, far from the heart of the capital, as the home for his library, was no small decision. It meant arduous voyages and a deeper, recurring sacrifice. Yet Hafız Ahmed Ağa, in his quiet wisdom and determined devotion, pressed forward.

He was a man of vision—a soul drawn not to ease but to purpose, not to grandeur but to goodness. His heart was vast enough to carry the weight of legacy, and generous enough to share it with the world. Well, almost... or rather, not entirely.

As we learn from the diligent archival sleuth and Ottoman historian Efthymios Machairas (Volume I, pp. 126-139), the venerable great-great-great-grandfather Ahmed was not solely a man of ideals but also an insatiable entrepreneur—a kind of tycoon of his era. His web of influence stretched from the Balkans to Haifa, from the Black Sea to Rhodes. He amassed considerable wealth through concessions granted by virtue of his closeness to the inner circles of the Sublime Porte, wielding such power that, perhaps inevitably, the gods—or fate, or politics—saw fit to bring his meteoric rise to an end.

A Gentleman's Guide to Immortality

If one were to inquire into the Leitmotif--the ethical and intellectual motivations--behind Hafiz Ahmed Ağa's endowment of a manuscript library on the island of Rhodes, an insightful entry point might lie in a well-established principle within Islamic ethical thought: the *zekât* of knowledge.

Just as material wealth in Islamic jurisprudence is subject to *zekât*—an almsgiving intended to purify one's possessions and support communal welfare—scholars across Islamic intellectual history have extended this concept to the realm of knowledge. That is, knowledge, like wealth, is seen not as a private commodity, but as a virtue entrusted to individuals with the obligation to share and disseminate it.

Through this lens, Hafiz Ahmed Ağa's act of founding a library in the late 18th century can be interpreted not solely as an elite or philanthropic gesture, but as the institutionalization of an ethical obligation or conscious preference. By endowing a library, he opened private erudition into public access—offering future generations texts in literature and across disciplines including theology, jurisprudence, medicine, astronomy, logic and history. The library, therefore, functioned not merely as a physical collection of manuscripts, but as a vehicle of ethical continuity and epistemic justice.

Furthermore, placing the library in Rhodes—geographically peripheral yet strategically and culturally significant—echoed the Ottoman tradition of decentralizing knowledge production beyond the imperial center. In this respect, Hafiz Ahmed Ağa's project aligns with the broader logic of *vakıf* institutions, which aimed to democratize access to education across the empire.

The Hafiz Ahmed Ağa Library welcomes the visitor with a dignified, living silence. For those familiar with manuscripts, it is a known silence—not absence, but presence; not emptiness, but reverence. For the novice, this stillness becomes quickly sacred, a hush in which the soul listens before the eyes begin to see.

To hold a manuscript is to touch a fragment of civilization, a sliver of humanity preserved in ink and parchment. Each folio carries the breath of the devout, the brilliant, and the patient. Some of these works are so exquisitely composed—so refined, so luminous in their artistry—that one cannot help but be moved. Emotion rises not only from beauty, but from the sheer continuity of hands and hearts that have passed through time to meet you in the margins.

It begins with the calligraphy—not mere writing, but architecture in motion. A sacred geometry of letters unfolds across the page. Naskh (*Nesih*), Thuluth (*Süliis*), Nasta'liq (*Ta'lik*), Riq'ah (*Rik'a*), Dīwānī (*Dīvānī*), Siyāqat (*Siyākat*), Kufic (*Kūfi*): each script a visual rhythm, a choreography of discipline, elegance, and devotion. To the untrained eye, these lines may appear decorative or ornamental; to the initiated, they are breath made visible, language raised into liturgy. The pen does not simply write—it reveals.

A manuscript is not merely a courier of content. It is an opus of body and soul, where word meets form, and form meets spirit. The paper bears the scent of age and ink, the edges singed softly by time. The leather binding, masterfully hand-crafted, holds more than pages—it holds centuries of care and it holds

values that never deteriorate. The copyist's precision, his marginal *muhabbet* with the author, the reader and himself, the illuminator who did not write words but made the ones written by others shine with gold leaf from Egypt or Sudan, lapis lazuli, the brilliant ultramarine pigment from Badakhshan, and saffron from Khorasan or Kashmir—all converge to create an object that breathes between worlds: textual, visual, spiritual.

To be in the presence of such a work is to witness the refinement of human expression into something near divine.

In a time when we scroll and swipe, the manuscript reminds us of slowness, of devotion and of care. A manuscript has a meaning that takes time and a truth that takes respect.

And so, we see and read—not just with the eye, but with our whole being. We enter the page like we step foot in a sanctuary. We go through the text, the lines and the verses like we walk in a flower garden. We listen to the voice of the scribe, the breath of the calligrapher, the whisper of gold and lapis lazuli in the margins.

This is not just history. This is inheritance of timelessness.

Continuity in Custody: A Library Unbound

Remarkably, the library has endured through multiple political regimes—from Ottoman to Italian, German, British, and lastly Greek sovereignty. Its persistence affirms the strength of the founding idea: that knowledge, like wealth, fulfills its highest purpose not when it is preserved, but when it is shared.

The Hafiz Ahmed Ağa Library, like the city of Rhodes itself, stands as a witness to the complex and often turbulent history of the island's multicultural society in the twentieth century. Over the course of several decades, Rhodes underwent a series of profound political transformations, transitioning from Ottoman to Italian, German, British, and ultimately Greek rule. These changes were not merely shifts in governance; they had far-reaching implications for the identities, affiliations, and daily lives of the island's inhabitants.

One of the most devastating consequences of these historical upheavals was the destruction of the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos during the Second World War. On 23 July 1944, under Nazi occupation, the entire remaining Jewish population of the Dodecanese was deported to Auschwitz. The outcome was catastrophic: only 151 survived, marking the near-total eradication of a once-thriving Sephardic community.

To comprehend the magnitude of these transformations, one might consider the hypothetical life trajectory of a Rhodian born at the turn of the twentieth century. Such an individual would have commenced schooling under the Ottoman Empire (*Devlet-i Aliyye-i Osmâniyye*), pursued secondary education under the Italian administration (*Regno d'Italia*), experienced the trauma of the Nazi occupation, lived briefly under British military governance, and entered retirement in the Kingdom of Greece (*Βασιλειον τῆς Ἑλλάδος*), ultimately witnessing the consolidation of the modern Hellenic Republic. This singular life course encapsulates the broader historical arc of Rhodes—marked by imperial collapse, fascist expansion, genocide, and the eventual emergence of democratic governance. The island's history in this period thus reveals not only the fragility of co-existence but also the enduring resilience of its communities amid the dislocations of modernity and shifting political and legal regimes of the empires and the nation-states.

This passage through successive sovereignties left imprints not only on political affiliations but on cultural memory, linguistic practice, and historical consciousness—traces that remain inscribed in the palimpsests of the city and in the quiet and humble endurance of places like the Hafiz Ahmed Ağa Library.



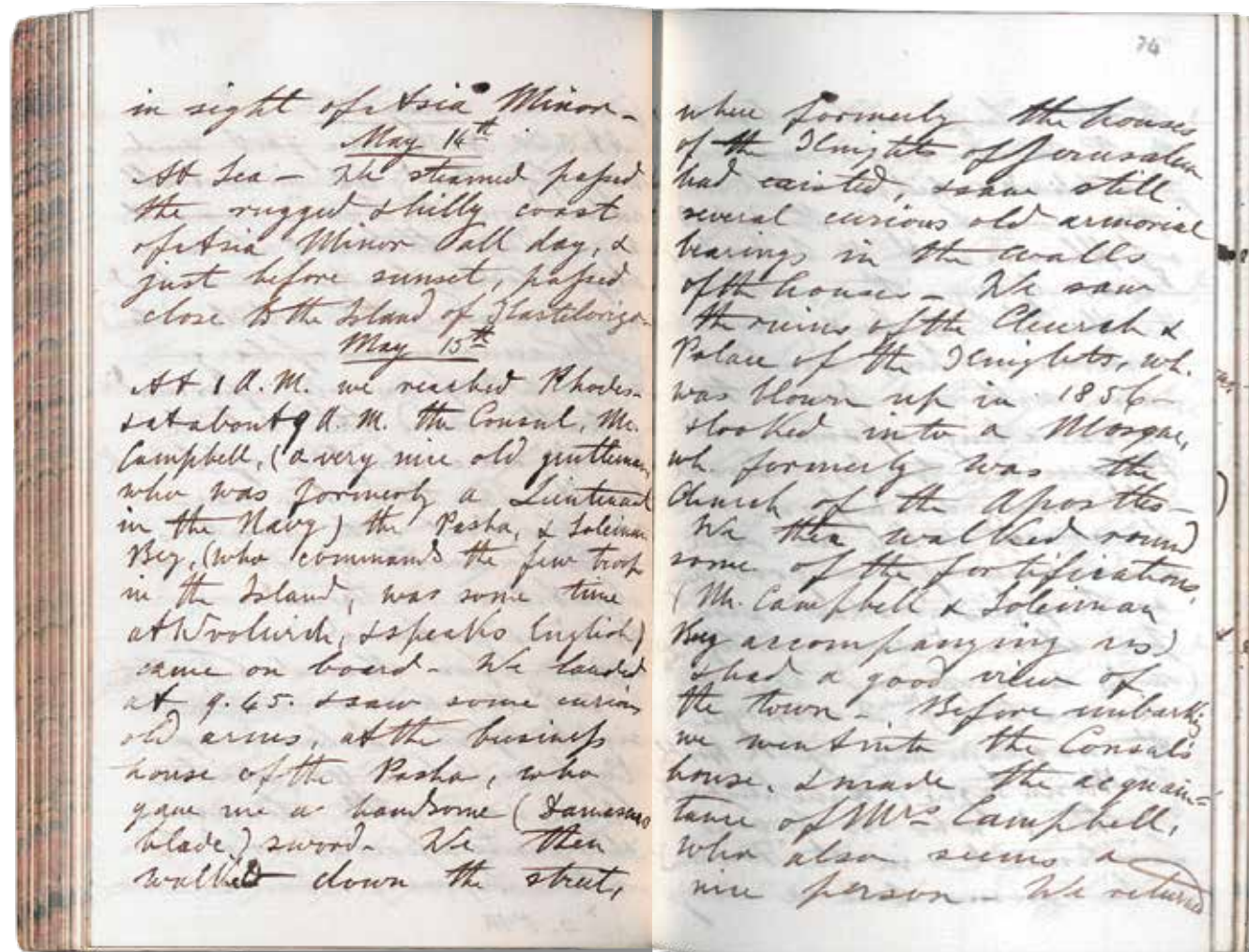
Ottoman-era postcards sent from Rhodes to Amsterdam, 1904, 1905 feature Rhodian landmarks such as Agios Nikolaos, Fethi Pasha's Clock Tower, and the Street of the Knights. Notably, the postal markings include stamps from Chios and Istanbul, indicating the itinerary taken en route to the Netherlands. Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library archive.



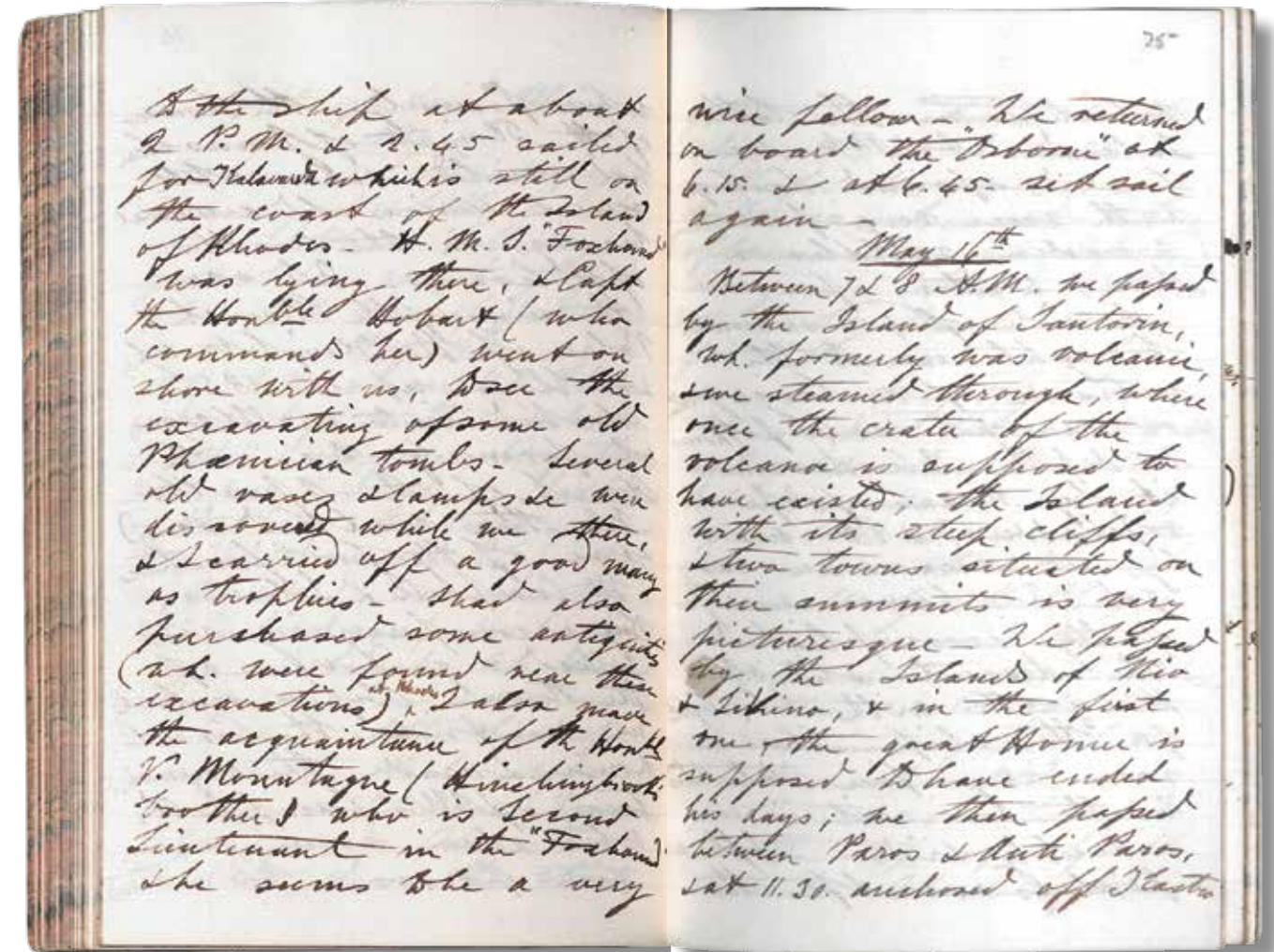
Postcard with the iconic Il Grande Albergo delle Rose, with Italian postmark and Italian stamps, 1933 (top). Letter posted from Rhodes, still with the Italian postmark but with British stamps, 1945 (middle). Postcard from Rhodes to the US with a Greek postmark and Greek stamp, 1950 (bottom). Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library archive.

A flashback to the nineteenth century in Panagiota Psarri's article draws us into a magnificent panoramic photograph taken in 1862 from the de Naillac Tower, overlooking the harbour of Rhodes (pp. 156-157). This now-lost tower bore the name of Philibert de Naillac, the influential Grand Master of the Knights Hospitaller who led the Order from 1396 to 1421. In 1402, de Naillac famously 'repurposed' stones from the Mausoleum of Halikarnassus—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—for the construction of the Sanctum Petrum, today known as *Bodrum Kalesi*. The iconic tower in Rhodes, a legacy of his tenure, suffered extensive damage during the twin disasters that struck the island in 1856: the earthquake of October 12 and the gunpowder explosion of November 6. The Ottoman administration ultimately dismantled it in 1863.

The singular photograph taken from this vantage point—striking in both composition and historical resonance—prompted an inquiry into its origins, revealing a remarkable intersection of photography, diplomacy, and imperial travel. That same year, 1862, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (1841-1910)—known familiarly as “Bertie” and later crowned King Edward VII—embarked on a grand tour of the Eastern Mediterranean. His mother, Queen Victoria, whose June 1838 coronation Ahmed Fethi Pasha was expected to attend as Ottoman representative, orchestrated the voyage as a formative experience to prepare her heir for the responsibilities of imperial rule—a role he would eventually assume four decades later.



Excerpt from the travel journal of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, 1862.
p. 73b-74a
Courtesy of the Royal Archives | © His Majesty King Charles III, 2025.



Excerpt from the travel journal of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, 1862.
p. 74b-75a
Courtesy of the Royal Archives | © His Majesty King Charles III, 2025.

The journey was undertaken aboard *HMY Osborne*, the first steam-powered royal yacht, originally launched in 1843 as *HMY Victoria and Albert*. The itinerary began in Trieste in February 1862 and included stops in Venice, Alexandria, Baalbek, Cyprus, and Rhodes before reaching Constantinople. Among the royal entourage was Francis Bedford (1815–1894), one of Britain’s leading early photographers, specially commissioned to document the tour. This marked the first official instance of a royal or state representative being accompanied by a designated photographer.

Bedford captured more than 190 images over the course of the voyage, including three in Rhodes, each a striking convergence of documentary precision and artistic expression. He employed the wet collodion process, then at the cutting edge of photographic technology. This involved coating glass plates with collodion—a viscous solution of nitrocellulose—mixed with light-sensitive silver salts. The plates had to be exposed while still wet, typically within 10 to 15 minutes of preparation, and developed immediately in a portable darkroom, which was installed in a compartment aboard the *Osborne*.

On May 15, 1862, *HMY Osborne* anchored off Mandraki Harbour for an overnight stay. During his time on the island, the Prince of Wales toured the medieval Old Town, still bearing the scars of the 1856 disasters. He was accompanied by the British consul, Mr. Campwell, and an Ottoman officer identified as *Binbaşı* (Major) Süleyman Bey. He also met with the Ottoman governor of Rhodes, who presented him with a sword of Damascus steel—a gesture both symbolic and diplomatic. Through the research of historian Abdulhamit Kırmızı, the governor has been identified as Tayyazâde Atâ, an accomplished administrator and historian in his own right.

Bertie’s reflections on Rhodes, including his meetings and observations, were recorded in a travel journal he maintained throughout the journey. Preserved in the Royal Archives, the journal was first published in conjunction with the *Cairo to Constantinople: Early Photographs of the Middle East* exhibition at The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, curated by the Royal Collection Trust. With their permission, four pages from Bertie’s Rhodes entry are reproduced in this volume. In his own hand, the Prince offers a restrained yet perceptive account of his brief stay—an emblematic moment in his personal development and a valuable lens into British perceptions of the late Ottoman world.

Thus, the photograph taken from the de Naillac Tower in 1862 is more than a historical image; it is a portal into a richly layered moment that weaves together the memory of Rhodes, the emergence of photography as imperial documentation, the aspirations of the British monarchy, and the enduring presence of late Ottoman provincial governance.

*

It is the twenty-first century now. John Robert Barnes is in a quiet conversation within the aged walls of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library. His voice, steady and reflective, carries the weight of years spent among manuscripts, marginalia, *defters* and dust—years devoted to studying the library’s collection on behalf of the Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese. Across from him, his listener remains attentive, not only to the words themselves but to the presence behind them. Jean de La Bruyère once wrote that the true charm of conversation lies less in the brilliance of one’s own ideas than in the ability to awaken the wisdom of another. To his companion, John is not merely an expert; he is a living conduit to the library’s soul. His deep, comparative study of the *defters*—the inventory registers—their classification systems, the taxonomies of knowledge embedded in their pages, and the subtle biographical traces of the library’s founders, all render him more than a researcher. He is an interpreter of legacies, a quiet steward of intellectual heritage. The manuscripts, long silent,

seem to speak again through his readings—echoing the aspirations of those who first gathered them, categorized them by the branches of science, and preserved them for future seekers. In this exchange of minds and memories, the past is not distant. It is present, palpable, and alive. On several occasions, John would come from Lindos, and we would sit together in the library—where I listened to his humble wisdom. Gülten Hanım, whose cooking John remembered well from decades past when he spent long days working in the library, would prepare meals for us once again.



John Robert Barnes at his desk in Lindos, 2024.

Photo: T. Tuten

Thanks to Christos Maliarakis and Erik Bruns, Savvas Pavlidis, and Ioannis Papageorgiou—Rhodian friends and scholars—we gradually developed a shared sense of purpose. Through thoughtful conversations, a collective vision emerged for how best to support the foundation and revitalize the library.

And then, one December evening in Istanbul, in a quiet exchange with Cemal Kafadar about printed books and manuscripts, something crystallized. I realized that my conversations—with John, Christos, Erik, Savvas, and Ioannis in the library, and with Cemal about the library—were no longer just moments of reflection. They were a call to action, a seed of something tangible.

In June 2024, it found its name: *Conversation in the Library* and *Kütüphanede Muhabbet*. Over two thousand emails and a year later—thanks to the generous contributions of seventy distinguished scholars and a storyteller—the publication you now hold was conceived and brought into being.

Gendered Legacies in the Margins

Hafız Ahmed Ağa may well be considered a feminist of his time, or at the very least, a man unusually progressive in his views on women’s authority and stewardship. In his *vakfiye* dated 1792, he explicitly stipulated that, should he predecease his mother, the administration of his *vakıf* should pass to her. And should his mother pass away before him, governance would fall to his wife. In an era when women were rarely granted formal leadership roles, Hafız Ahmed’s testament stands out as a remarkable recognition of female agency, autonomy, and capability.

Whether due to his express wishes or to the enduring strength of the women connected to the foundation, it is striking that the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library and its associated charitable activities have historically been shaped by women. This legacy has served as a personal source of inspiration for my involvement in various initiatives under the foundation’s auspices, including the production of these very volumes.

Three women in particular—Ayşe Hatun (Hafız Ahmed’s mother), Saliha Hanım (his wife), and Şemsinur Hanım (his daughter-in-law, the wife of Ahmed Fethi)—played formative roles in the narrative of the foundation, either in its inception or during its early years. Their lives, though shaped by the limitations and injustices of their time, were marked by resilience, influence, and a quiet but undeniable power.

Nektaria Anastasiadou, in her characteristically subtle and evocative storytelling, brings to life the figure of Şemsinur Hanım (Volume I, pp. 36-53). Her story is one of both trauma and transformation. A survivor of the 1822 Chios massacre—a tragic and brutal episode during the Greek war of Independence—Şemsinur was among the tens of thousands of islanders from one of the most cultivated societies of eighteenth-century Greece who were enslaved or slaughtered. Whether the massacre was framed as retaliation for the terrible Tripolitsa massacre of Muslims and Jews in 1821 or as a punitive lesson to other insurgent communities, it remains a historical atrocity—a stark violation of human dignity.

Şemsinur, then a child or a young girl, was sold into slavery in Istanbul, where she entered the household of Saliha Hanım. From that moment, a new chapter began—not only for her, but for the family whose story would eventually intertwine with that of the foundation. Her marriage to Hafız Ahmed’s son, Ahmed Fethi Paşa, an Ottoman diplomat and statesman of considerable renown, positioned her within a different social reality. Yet she never entirely escaped the imprint of her early experiences. In her person, the histories of war, displacement, survival, and adaptation are deeply inscribed.

It is worth reflecting on the irony and beauty of a foundation rooted in scholarship, memory, and civic virtue having been shaped in such intimate ways by the lives of women—some born to privilege, others to suffering, but all defined by an enduring sense of presence and purpose. The Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library stands today not only as a repository of knowledge, but as a quiet monument to the often-unacknowledged labor of women in shaping cultural institutions.

Their stories—fragmented, sometimes veiled, but unmistakably vital—continue to guide the foundation’s spirit, offering a model of governance rooted in dignity, wisdom, and care. In recalling and honoring them, we recover not just names, but values, and affirm the foundational place of women in the historical and ethical architecture of this institution.

Muhabbet as Quiet Ethics of Narration

Hafız Ahmed Ağa’s seed, planted in Rhodes, blossomed into something greater than he could have imagined. And yet, even then, he seemed to speak across time, stirring the hearts of those not yet born. It is he who, centuries later, draws the authors of these volumes together—not merely to honor his memory in word and page, but to build bridges across salty waters, rising above the confines of national narratives. In our *Conversation*—or *Muhabbet*, we have chosen a path that avoids prejudice, manipulation, and the dehumanization of the other, embracing instead, a language that unites and a will not to conquer or win, but to heal.

Healing is not an afterthought; it is a necessity woven into the fabric of co-existence. When it comes to historical traumas—those fractures born of massacres, enslavement, forced migration, deportations, war, pogroms, ethnic erasure, genocides, and silence—the path to healing becomes both more complex and more essential. Much like a forest after a fire, the charred ground conceals seeds of renewal, but the ecosystem must rebalance with care and time.

Wounds of historical traumas linger in the cracks of villages, in the landscapes and buildings—schools, mosques, churches and synagogues, and libraries included—that once bore witness. They persist in broken spirits, in what is remembered, and in what has been forgotten.

Too often, we find solace in the idea that the responsibility for healing lies elsewhere—in the state or in the government who are supposed to be our agents and of whom we become subjects, or in political parties, Gramsci’s mediators of hegemony, or perhaps in the future itself. This is a comforting illusion. True healing cannot be subcontracted. It is not a service to be rendered, nor a hashtag to be shared. It is an intimate labor, a collective act of courage—undertaken not by those who seek to rule, but by those willing to remember, to remain grounded and ‘cool’.

The work of reckoning with the past must be borne by those who are open to read and listen—close to the ground, close to the archives, close to the stories whispered between generations. It is often those without institutional power who make the meaningful gestures, acts of awareness, remembrance and recognition. And then there are those who dedicate themselves to the long labor of truth-seeking—scholars who bring to these volumes not only their knowledge and analytical rigor, but a quiet refusal to surrender to the seductive pull of forgetting. Their work is a form of resistance—measured, persistent, and essential. The authors in these volumes are caretakers—of memory, of culture, of heritage and of each other. In that role, there is dignity. In that labor, there might be healing.

In her 1958 treatise *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt wrote:

“Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but anti-political, perhaps the most powerful of all anti-political forces.”

Drawn by the vision and humble generosity of Hafız Ahmed, the authors of the articles in these volumes have gathered like kindred spirits around an 18th-century manuscript library on the island of Rhodes. From this place steeped in memory and meaning, they send forth ripples of *Muhabbet*—that tender communion of hearts and minds—towards shores far beyond the reach of printed pages. For *Muhabbet*, like love, may well be the most powerful of all anti-political forces.