

Ownership, Custodianship, Salesmanship: Trade in Ottoman Manuscripts between Britain and the Ottoman Empire through the Lens of British Library Collections

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Summary:

Today, the trade in cultural heritage – whether licit or illicit – stokes considerable debate in both traditional and new media. Armed conflict and the collapse of states has allowed for individuals to remove objects of great pecuniary, historical and symbolic value from their locations of custodianship, and to sell them to wealthy collectors the world over. Much of the discussion focuses on contemporary movements of items. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is an international treaty introduced to fight the illicit trafficking of such cultural property. But what of those items that were moved well before 1970? How do their stories match modern understandings of the transfer of cultural property?

This CDP project seeks to contribute to the discussion around such questions with a case study of the British Library's Ottoman manuscripts. The vast majority of the Library's nearly 4,000 Ottoman items are only partially catalogued in a series of published and unpublished hardcopy catalogues and handlists. Through an intensive process of research and cataloguing, the CDP will construct new narratives of ownership, transfer and collection that span time and space. The PhD student will make use of the works as physical and intellectual products in order to determine who owned what when; how they were sold or transferred; and which collections they formed a part of, in the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain and elsewhere. This will result in new knowledge and enhanced metadata that will assist the Library in making its collections more visible and accessible to a wide range of scholars and stakeholders.

The research will provide valuable insights into a number of different aspects of Ottoman and British history. The PhD student will be informing the scholarly community of the individuals who collected, bought, sold and transferred intellectual products across the European landmass between the 17th and 20th centuries. They will be partially reconstructing collections, furthering our understanding of how knowledge was classified, organised and disseminated in both Ottoman and British societies, and how such epistemologies changed over time and space.

Areas of Study:

The primary focus of the CDP project will be the Ottoman Turkish manuscripts held by the British Library. As no comprehensive or exhaustive catalogue of these items exists, the PhD student will be required – with the support and guidance of the British Library supervisor – to prepare for primary research through the collation and amalgamation of the various partial catalogues, handlists and acquisition registers relating to the Ottoman items.

We would be looking for the HEI partner to work with us to develop the research theme, providing access to historical and historiographical knowledge and enabling the project to benefit from their research expertise and academic networks. However, we would propose that two key sets of questions provide a logical starting point:

- ***Who was involved in the Ottoman manuscript trade?***

The 'who' in this question can be read in two different ways. The first relates to individuals. Who were the personalities implicated in buying, selling, transferring and collecting manuscripts? Was the trade in manuscripts their primary line of business, or a side activity intended to complement a wider array of commercial, diplomatic, cultural or political endeavours?

The second relates to groups of people, whether defined by profession or ethnicity. What types of people were able to own or sell manuscripts, and how did their social positions affect these practices? Was the sale of manuscripts abroad controlled by a few people, a particular ethnic, social or political group, and how did this impact the manner in which such items were marketed and received abroad? Beyond social histories and biographies, this line of interrogation adds to the burgeoning study of social classes and ethnicity in the Ottoman Empire, as well as contemporary research on the sources of Orientalist knowledge and power within British institutions and society.

- ***How was the Ottoman manuscript trade conducted?***

In addition to people, the PhD research could also problematize the systems within which Ottoman manuscripts were bought and sold. The vast majority of the British Library's Ottoman collections were amassed before concepts of cultural heritage and intellectual property were imbedded into the commercial law of the Empire, or international law governing interactions between European and Ottoman merchants. By tracking the trade in these items, the successful candidate will help to uncover understandings of the role of manuscripts in the construction of culture and national identity, and the role that the written word played in commercialising heritage. Such work would help to supplement extant research on the usage of tangible heritage in commercial, military and political relations between Europeans and the Ottomans.

Benefits and training opportunities for the student:

The PhD student will benefit from privileged staff-level access to this largely uncatalogued and untapped source for research. The collection is a rich and complex representation of Ottoman manuscript tradition, unparalleled in other British libraries or HEIs. Getting to know the material 'from the inside' will provide rich opportunities to undertake original research, while also assisting the wider scholarly community in its understanding of and access to such items.

Beyond the use of catalogue records and handlists relating to the works themselves, the student will also make use of the Library's acquisition registers and corporate archives. These sources of information will assist in determining the people and processes involved in the acquisition and incorporation of Ottoman archives and manuscripts into the various collections that came to form the British Library.

The student will also have recourse to the Library's collections of Western personal papers and archives, particularly those related to travellers, diplomats and businesspeople engaged in trade with the Ottoman Empire. Such sources will enable them to complement the information related directly to each of the Ottoman objects with biographical and other data on the individuals implicated in the transnational trade of Ottoman cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the PhD student will gain valuable insight into the operations of a cultural institution and research outside of the HEI network. This amounts to considerable experience in a field of direct relevance to their studies and research, as well as the acquisition of transferable skills in cataloguing, database management, heritage management and public engagement. Over the course of the project they will also gain insight into conservation/preservation issues, data protection and ethical concerns. Insight into the wider workings of the Library could be gained through shadowing in other departments. There will be numerous opportunities to contribute to the outreach activities of the Library, including through regular posts for the Library's blogs (e.g. [Asian and African Studies](#) or [European Studies](#)).

The cataloguing of Ottoman manuscripts is a highly-specialised skill that requires intensive study of the Ottoman language. The Student Development Funding attached to the CDP studentship could be utilised to enable the student to undertake any necessary training in the Ottoman language.

Application deadline: 23 November 2018. For more information about the call and how to apply visit www.bl.uk/research-collaboration or email Research.Development@bl.uk.