Râgib Mehméd Paşa and His Library

Nezvat Kaya

Râgib Mehméd Paşa lived between 1111-1176/1699-1763. His father, Mehméd Şevki Efendi, was a scribe in the Office of the Registry (defterhâne). Râgib Mehméd, who was born into a learned family, must have drawn attention with his training, intelligence and diligence, for he started working in the Office of the Registry at a young age. Showing significant progress in a short period of time, he was only twenty-five years old when he was assigned to the survey of the lands occupied during the war against Safavid Iran. Râgib Paşa, a scholar, poet, writer, was to become a powerful statesman of his age, serving as the finance minister (defterdar), secretary-in-chief (rettâ'-kâtîb), and vizier. He was also appointed to the governorships of Egypt, Saida, Aleppo and Damascus, and ultimately became grand vizier in 1756. He was the seventh and last grand vizier of Sultan Osman III (r. 1754-1757), and the first in Muštafi III’s (r. 1171/1757-74) reign. Until his death on 24 Ramazân 1176/8 April 1763, he managed to remain in that office. He is buried in the tomb he built in the garden of his library in the Laleli-Koska quarter of Istanbul. The sources mention him as “the highest scholar among the Ottoman grand viziers and the last to acquire the quality of a great statesman.”

His Works

1. The Divân-i Râgib

It was Râgbî Paşa’s contemporary Ottoman scholar and calligrapher Müştâkin-zâde Süleyman Sa’îdettin Efendi (d. 1202/1788) who collected Râgib Paşa’s poems in a Divân. There are 176 ghazâls, seven quatrains (rubâ’î), and three couplets (hâyât) in his Divân. Like the poetry of Necâti (d. 914/1509) and Nâbi (d. 1124/1712), his poems also contain certain verses that have acquired proverbial quality:

Maşâeffe, vahe-i firsatta adlîdan inatlam almaz
Mârîvvet-nâdet olan vâ-kûnd-i düşmende hûm almaz

The victorious one does not take revenge from the enemy when opportunity arises
The generous one does not find pleasure in the downfall of the enemy

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Together with Râşib Paşa’s Münse‘ât the Divân-i Râşib was published by the Bâlâq press in 1253/1837 in Cairo, testifying to its great popularity.2

2. The Münse‘ât-i Râşib (Telbişât)

Prepared by Ahmet Nuzhet, the Münse‘ât-i Râşib consist of telbişes written when Râşib Mehmed Paşa was the secretary-in-chief of Mahmut I (r. 1730-1754), as well as his later official writings and letters.

The Münse‘ât contain samples related to almost every aspect of daily, official and private life. They contain a variety of items ranging from the padişâh’s şehre drinking to his moving to the summer residence, or invitations issued on the occasion of the completion of certain galleys with various names. As mentioned above, the Münse‘ât were published in 1253/1837 by the Bâlâq press in Cairo.

3. The Mecmi‘-i Râşib

The Mecmi‘-i Râşib is a selection compiled from various divans and literary works. It contains many literary pieces and pamphlets both in verse and in prose in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. There are around 65 qasidas.3

4. The Safinat al-Râşib wa dafinat al-matâlib

The Safinat al-Râşib wa dafinat al-matâlib is a work mainly in Arabic, with some Persian texts, and was first published in 1255/1839. It deals mainly with Qur’anic exegesis, Islamic doctrines, and philosophy.4

5. The Tahâkk ve Tevfîk

The Tahâkk ve Tevfîk, written in Ottoman Turkish, comprises an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion, and is about the differences between the Sunni and the Imamî paths written with the aim of bringing the members of those paths together. Mostly based on observation, it contains correspondence and valuable information about the negotiations between the Ottoman and Safavid envoys. It was only recently published for the first time.5

6. The ‘Arâz Risâlesî (A pamphlet about proseody).

7. The Tercüme-i Maṭla‘u‘-l-Sâ‘deyn

This is an incomplete translation into Ottoman Turkish of ‘Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi’s (d. 887/1482) work about the history of the Chinggisids and the Timurids during the period 704-854/1307-1450.6

8. The Hüsnüyye ve Tâ’ifiyye

The Hüsnüyye ve Tâ’ifiyye deals with the campaigns of the Prophet Muhammad and specifically the conquests of Mecca and al-Ṭâ‘if. It was printed in 1253/1837 by the Bâlâq Press together with his Münse‘ât.

9. The Fethiyye-i Belâqât

The Fethiyye-i Belâqât is about the Ottoman re-conquest of Belgrade which again was printed by Bâlâq.7

10. The Futubi‘l-Haremeyn

His Library

The Hungarian François Barone de Tott (1733-1793), who worked in Istanbul from 1755 to 1763 as the secretary of the French ambassador Vergennes, refers to the library in the following manner:

Among the Turks enlightened men are rare, except for Râşib Paşa. He built a large building with a dome spending his own money in order to annihilate ignorance and to leave for future generations a lively example of his taste and love for culture. In this building he established a large public library. There had not been such a library in Istanbul before. He endowed 1000-1200 Arabic and Persian manuscripts to this library which he had collected before.8

2 Selections of Râşib Paşa’s poems were also recently published by Hüseyin Yonulmuze under the title Koca Râşib Paşa, Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 1998.
3 See I, 9, 597. Murad Molla Kpr. 1468 and Bayezid Kpr. 833.
4 The 680 page long Safinat al-Râşib wa dafinat al-matâlib was published a second time, with notes revised by Muhammad al-Sâbûhî at Bâlâq: al-Maṭla‘ al-Khidirwiyiyya, 1282/1866. See also the following, recent publication, which attests to its popularity until today: Münse‘ât ui muqaddam ad-ma’âût fi Safinat al-Râşib wa-dafinat al-matâlib; taqsim wa-širrât wa-murâja‘at Rafi‘ al-A‘zami; talîqy ‘Ali iDahrû‘i; nasîh al-lâb al-Fânsî ilâ al-‘Arabiyya ‘Abd Allah al-Khâlîlî. Beirut: Maktabat Luhûnî Nazhirîn, 2000. As this version contains both the original Arabic and Persian texts, as well as the Arabic translations of the Persian texts (as the editors explain, the Arabic translation was highlighted through special fonts, and the Persian original was moved into the footnotes (p. xi)), this edition is 913 pages long.
6 According to Bahinger, p. 290, there are no known manuscripts of this work.
7 Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Nr. 220 (Petersch, Katal. 2488).
8 Mémoires du Baron de Tott, sur les Turcs et les Tartares. Amsterdam: [s.n.], 1784, vol. 1, 164.
The Italian monk Giambattista Toderini (1728-1799) opposed Baron de Tott’s opinion. In De la Littérature des Turcs he expressed that Baron de Tott did not investigate and read about the issue sufficiently, and that libraries had existed in Istanbul before Râşîb Paşa. The first library was opened during the reign of Fatih Sultan Mehmed (r. 1444-46, 1451-81), and in the later periods the number of these “decorations of peace” increased greatly due to the grants of generous rulers, viziers and intellectuals.

Toderini related his meeting with the librarian during his visit to the library in the following manner:

The librarian whom I talked to was a very polite man. He showed me the catalogue and some of the rare manuscripts. It was May, an hour past noon. There were nine Turks in the library, seven occupied with reading, two with copying out manuscripts.

The Library’s foundations were laid on 8 Muharram 1175/9 August 1761, and it came into service on 15 Shaw’bân 1176/1 March 1763. The square-plan structure, still situated in a wide garden today, has a lead-sheeted dome and a basement consisting of a central hall surrounded by five chambers. Each side of the building is 14 m long. The walls are covered with 18th century European style tiles, above which there is a marble surrounding-inscription of the Qasida-yi burda in thuluth style. There are 34 windows located on the walls in two rows. Nine small domes surround the large dome in the center under which a bronze cage of 5.70 m width and 3.50 m height protects the storage space (hisâne-i kuâni) for the books (see plate 5). The books are kept here in original three-shelf cupboards with glass panes. There are 7,198 volumes in the library, 1,274 of them are manuscripts, 1,074 printed works in Arabic script, and 4,220 printed works in Latin script.

The endowment deed (süfâyâ) is the primary source of information about the Râşîb Paşa library. The following is a summary of the most important points laid out in it.9

The library was established in Laleli-Koska on a lot of 5,497 cubits (çir’a). This piece of land was to host a library, a school, a house, four rest-rooms, ten shops, five under-ground store-rooms, five taps for ablutions, a big fountain and two public fountains.

Staff [and their wages are as follows]:

- The first librarian (hâfiz-i hastâb) 120 âkçe daily
- The second librarian 100 âkçe daily
- These should be from the learned or pious people (‘ulama’ ve sühbîdân), without any trouble, peaceful, praised among the people and trustworthy. They should not have duties anywhere else.
- Assistant librarian 15 âkçe daily
- These assistants will help the librarians every day. They will take the books out from their locations and put them back once they are done with them. These should be trustworthy, capable of moving quickly.
- Teacher 40 âkçe daily
- Assistant Teacher 20 âkçe daily
- Calligrapher 10 âkçe daily
- Door-keeper (hawdâb) 10 âkçe daily
- Sweeper (ferâsî) 3 âkçe daily
- Keeper of the tomb (târîbedâr) 5 âkçe daily
- If he also does cleaning, opens and closes the doors, takes the fountain cups at night and puts them back in the morning, then 28 âkçe daily
- Upkeeper of the water-channel 6 âkçe daily
- A certain amount of water (müsûr‘e of water) is brought over from Küçükçöy through the water-channel of the Bayezid endowment for six kurush annual maintenance fee. [He is responsible for] the constant flow of a specified amount of water, preventing cut-offs day and night.
- Upkeeper of the fountain 4 âkçe daily
- Sweeper (of the rest-rooms and the outer gates, tornus) 7 âkçe daily
- Secretary (hâlâb) 10 âkçe daily
- Calculates the income and the expenditure of the endowment.
- Rent collector (câh) 5 âkçe daily
- Inspector 4800 âkçe annually

At the beginning of each year in the month of Muharram the superintendent of the endowment summons an inspector, gathers the trustee (mütevelli), secretary and the employees (hâdemeler), and in the

9 De la Littérature des Turcs, par Mr. l’Abbé Toderini; traduit de l’italien en français, par Mr. l’Abbé de Courmain, Paris: Poinçot, 1789, vol. II,33. The original, La Lettres turques, was first published in 1787 in Venice.

10 For a publication of the original in romanized letters, see Ahmet İhsan Türek, "Râşîb Paşa Kütüphanecisi Vakfıyesi," İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Arşiv ve Araştırma Dergisi 1 (Elkım 1970), 65-78.
presence of [the inspector] they count the endowed books one by one comparing each volume to the register.

Each student

The stipends should not be handed out through the teacher, his assistant, or an employee. At the beginning of each month, a trustee should deliver them to the boys directly.

For trashing the waste

No specific person should be appointed for carrying the waste collected by the sweepers. Whoever is available should do it.

Each spring, the trustee should spend for taking the students to the countryside 2400 akçe daily

Books should not be taken outside [the library], not a single volume. [Things should be facilitated] for the reader; he should be able to read comfortably whichever book he wishes, no prohibitions should be imposed on him. The reader should be encouraged, not made weary. It is even stipulated that the librarians should respect the reader and greet him.

The library opened an hour after dawn, and closed an hour before sunset, six days a week, except for Fridays. Even if nobody comes to the library, the library should not close until an hour before sunset, and the staff should not quit their duties. They should be swift in their jobs, and should not leave them either by taking turns [for each other] or leaving a deputy behind. If one has a good reason then he should be granted leave; if these conditions are not obeyed then he should be dismissed.

When the first librarian quits the job, the assistant librarian should be promoted to that position, and a new person should be employed for his position. When a librarian dies, his son should be appointed if he is qualified. If he is not qualified, he should not be appointed. In the two rooms at the back, a librarian should be on duty each night in shifts.

Slides of the Library Building

Let me illustrate several of the above points with the help of plates. The Râgib Paşa Library is a building in two parts. In the front, there are shops on the lower level, and what was formerly a school on the upper level is now a children’s library. At the back, there is the Library building in the middle of the garden (Plate 1).

The main gate displays inscriptions (Plate 2), and so do the tiles on the inner walls, with ibâdât style surrounding-inscription (Plate 3). Some of the tiles represent bundles of flowers on the tiles as well (Plate 4). The storage-room for books surrounded by a bronze cage has already been mentioned (Plate 5). The vaults of the dome and the chandelier also feature aphorisms carved on wood on each side. (Plate 6). The writings include such phrases and expressions as bism Allah, mâ sha’llâ, uwa mâ ta’âufi illâ bi-Allah, ya hârome.

Râgib Paşa did not acquire for his library whatever work he could find, but he bought books selectively, and when he was not able to find a required work, he had copies done. Among these are,

Selected Books

Fakhr al-Din Râzî’s (d. 606/1210) famous work Mu’tahâ al-qâbîy, registered under nos. Ms. 85, 86, and 87 for the three volumes respectively. The work comprises 686 folios. The naskh-style copy was prepared by a copyist named Jalâl in 1175/beg. 2 August 1761.

Ms. 694 is the Mishbah al-qâlî (Sharh Mishbah al-Qâbi) of Osman Faizi Ilahi at-Atpazari (d. 1102/1691). The naskh-style and 245-folio work was copied by Muhammed Shâkir b. Mustafâ al-Umarî in 1174/13 August 1760.

Ms. 100 is Mu’in b. Sâîf’s Jami’ al-ahdâm fi tarîkh al-Qur’an in naskh-style, in 454 folios. It was copied by a certain Muhammed in 1171/15 September 1757.

Ms. 405 is Shams al-Din Muhammed b. Hamza al-Mullâ Fânî’s (d. 834/1431) Hâshîya ‘ala fiqih al-ahdâm fi usul al-sâriy, 274 folios in naskh style, copy by Isma’il al-Halabi in 1175/2 August 1761.

Ms. 97 is Niqâm al-Din Hasan al-Nishabûrî’s (wr. 15th c.) Ghara’îb al-Qur’an wa râqibîhî al-Furqân in 665 folios. It was copied by a certain Hâfir ‘Uthmân in Râmâdan 1165/13 July 1752, in jâhil style. The Qur’anic verses in it are written in jâhil-style, sometimes with interlinear Persian translation. At the end there is a collation note which goes: "wa qad bulaghat al-‘unwâbî ‘ala al-tâshâh du khitam ‘ala yad Abî Kâbirî fi Aya Allahî, Râmâdan, 1165."


This Mishbah al-Qâbi is, of course, Saïd al-Din Qumâni’s (d. 673/1274) famous work. The autograph of the Mishbah al-Qâbi is found as well in the Süleymaniye Library (Rihûlûtât no. 215/12).


11 This thirty-volume work was published by Ibrahim ‘Awad in Egypt (Mustafâ al-Bâbi al-Halabi wa awlûdhu, 1962-1970).

111 This is the first time that we see work at night, and six days per week.

Manuscripts dedicated to prominent statesmen are also part of the collection. Among these are:

Ms. 16, Fakhr al-Din Abu 'Abd Allah b. 'Ali 'al-Muazzazah fi wa'yub al-qir`at, comprising 293 folios. Copied in 551/beg. 25 February 1156, this work was dedicated to the Saljuqid Amir Sunghur b. Mawdud.

Ms. 285, Yusuf Efendi-zade Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah's Necmi’-i-kari’ li-Sabhi'i-Bahari/Necmi al-qari’ li-Sabhi al-Bahhari, dedicated to Ahmet I (r. 1603-17), 742 folios.

Ms. 692/3, Muhammad b. Qutb al-Din's Sehe hazin min cesami'ul-kelam, 226-230 folios, copied in 863/1459, and dedicated to Grand Vizier Maimu't Pasha.

Ms. 1418, Ebiz Bekr Muhammad al-Anbari's Kitab el-sahih, 314 folios, copied by Abdulhakii Sahir Efendi in 1109/beg. 20 July 1697. Koprulu-zade Abdullah Pasha commissioned its copying.


Ms. 524, Ibn al-Sa'at's (d. 694/1295) Mughna' al-bahrayn wa mulasaq al-nagrayn, 315 folios. This was copied in 715/beg. 7 April 1551 by 'Ariza bin 'Ali b. Tha'lab al-Sa'at; the copyist is the sister of the author.17

Ms. 1094, Jamal al-Din Ilyas b. Yusuf's Khamsujiy氮i Nizami of Niẓami Ganjavi, 390 folios in ta'liq style. Muhsin al-Katib al-Shirazi copied it in 934/beg. 27 September 1527. It is a perfect manuscript in terms of the arts of the book. It has 36 miniatures; its binding, gilding and the calligraphy are exceedingly beautiful. It contains the Mahzam al-ara'is, Khusraw va Shirin, Layla va Majnun, the Hafiz Paykar, The Islander-Nama, and the Ishkil-nama.18

17 For more information on Ibn al-Sa'at, who received less than four lines in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, see Ahmet Ozel, "Ibn's-Sa'at, Muzafferuddin," DVLA 21 (2000), 190-192.

Ms. 1106 contains the divan of Si'dib Tabrizi, comprising 430 folios. It was copied by 'Ali b. Dervis el-Kesmuri, in ta'liq style, in 1068/beg. 8 October 1657. It has lacquered binding with artistic gilding of high quality.

Ms. 34, Kamal al-Din 'Abd al-Razzaq Kamal al-Din al-Kashani's (d. 736/1335) Ta'wilat ta'fis al-Qur'an. 321 folios, copied in nasib by Sayyid Hasan b. al-Hafiz in 1174/beg. 13 August 1760. The title and inisa headings and the conclusion have excellent gilding. All the border lines are in gold accompanied by a fine binding. The back of the manuscript carries an alternative title.

Ms. 37, Ta'wilat al-Qur'an of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. ca. 333/944), 716 folios. Composed in nasib style in 1164, 'Abd Allah al-Shahavi is the copyist. It has an outstanding binding and gilding.

Ms. 910 is Ibn Sina's (d. 428/1037) famous work Kitab al-shifa'. The headings of all four sections are in different styles and colors with superb gilding. The binding is also artistic.

Ms. 789 is the Sharh al-faqih al-akbar of Bahâ' al-Din-za'da Muhammad b. Bahâ' al-Din b. Luf Allah al-Bayrami. This 196 folio long work which was written in 925/beg. 3 January 1519 might be an autograph copy. The commented text is in nasib style as opposed to the ta'liq style of the commentary.

Ms. 929 is an astrolabe produced by Muhammad 'Ali b. Khalil Usay in the shape of a heart. It is useful for calculating the position of the stars and the beginning of day and night. It is also convenient in estimating the distance of an inaccessible place, the height of a building, or the depth of a well.

All in all, the Ragip Pasha Library and the collection contained in it, while small in size in comparison to some of the other libraries located in Istanbul, bear the distinct impact and vision of its founder, and hosts numerous gems of Islamic writing, both in form and contents. The endowment deed which is still in our hands provides excellent insights into the workings of an 18th century Ottoman library founded by a private patron, and in its spirit can still be taken as a model for libraries today.