

Sub-project C04

Reading aloud, memorising and note-taking: manuscripts in the Alevi village communities of Anatolia

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Manuscript culture in Alevi villages

Up to the mid-20th century, a large percentage of the population in rural Anatolia enjoyed only limited literacy. This was also the case for villages in which religious communities lived according to Alevi traditions. Alongside the verbal and mimetic traditions that existed there, however, manuscripts also served to preserve and pass on religious beliefs. They contained material relating to cosmological stories in prose form, versified lives of the saints, and words for sung music associated with rituals and other religious gatherings.



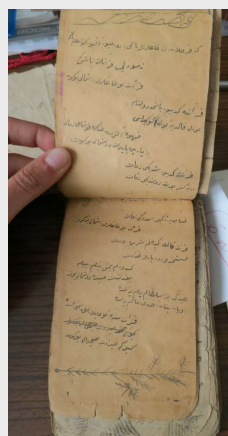
Private collection, Turkey, 2008

Description of the sub-project

In the first phase of this project, it investigated the nature and function of a manuscript genre particular to the Alevites and known as Buyruk. It was also able to look in more detail at the manuscript culture, until then lacking in research, in Alevi village communities on the basis of specific case studies. It thus became clear how varied the characteristics of private manuscript collections are in respect of content, scope and form. It was further discovered that the manuscripts were employed for teaching and learning in many different ways. People regularly read aloud from some of the books, whilst others were only to be consulted by religious dignitaries; yet others served as notebooks for pupils, the use of which lessened as they acquired more knowledge. Whilst it is true that the way in which the manuscripts were dealt with shows that there were similarities between some communities, and several collections are parallel in nature, the project's work with previously unknown individual exemplars, however, means that generalisations cannot be made. For this reason, at the start of the second phase, the project will work with Alevi manuscript collections as one body in order to gain detailed knowledge about their characteristics and communalities. In doing so, this sub-project will concentrate on collections with links to Alevi families or communities. This and various personal interviews will allow us to garner important information about the history of the collections, and the manuscripts and the way they were used.

Aims of the sub-project

The purpose of the sub-project is to examine in greater detail the history and composition of Alevi collections and the circumstances in which they were amassed. It will seek to investigate the role of such collections and individual manuscripts in terms of the retention and dissemination of knowledge contained within them. The sub-project will use fourteen previously examined and partially digitised private collections to illustrate when and how manuscripts came to be collated in Alevi village communities, who wrote which manuscripts and who used them in which ways. Based on the findings of the first phase, this sub-project has additionally postulated a working hypothesis, according to which the previously known manuscripts from the Alevi collections may be divided into four types in respect of their external and internal textual characteristics. To summarise in simple terms here, these include large books with a central narrative and theological texts, notebooks containing poetry, small manuscripts with notes for personal use, and family documents on such matters as lineage or religious training. The hypothesis furthermore suggests that a relationship exists between these four kinds of manuscripts and the three types of uses to which they were put: being read aloud, being used for note-taking, and memorising. A final aim of this sub-project will be to determine additional constants that had an influence on the form, content and use of such manuscripts.



Poetry collection, possibly early 20th century, private collection, Turkey.



Collector reading a manuscript, Turkey, 2013.