

Analyzing 19th Century Ottoman Religious Culture
LAURE Reflective Essay
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Five weeks ago, I began an independent study research project with the help of Dr. Klosowska. The two objects that Dr. K wanted to work with were a medieval French book of hours and an Ottoman Islamic prayer book. Immediately, my stomach fell to my toes—I felt so underqualified. Dr. Hamlin recommended me for the research apprenticeship, and I felt like a disappointment to her and myself. I don't know French, Arabic, or anything about Islam! Usually, I research 19th-century to modern public health history, so this was out of my wheelhouse.

However, my fears were lessened after speaking with Rachel Makarowski, whom I already knew from UNV101. The Ottoman manuscript was virtually a puzzle to be solved. Apart from a paragraph from the bookseller and specialized knowledge of book construction from Rachel, the tiny book was a mystery. The Islamic prayer book stood out because of its unique form and unknown function: was it a personal protection amulet? A talisman placed in a gold box atop a battle standard for the soldiers' protection? A prayer book used for mental pilgrimages to the holy sites?

After the initial meetings, Dr. K and I researched the late Ottoman Empire and the uses of Quranic prayer books. I had little knowledge of Islam, the Ottoman governmental structure, and the relics associated with the religion. I spent many hours curled up in a comfy chair in the corner of King Library, reading online articles or skimming through books on Ottoman Islamic practices. Some online library databases I found particularly helpful in starting my research were JSTOR, the Islamic Studies database with access to Brill, Ixex, Islamicus, Academia, and Oxford Bibliographies Online. I also frequently used the OneSearch function on the library website and

utilized EBSCOhost to find relevant articles. As for print sources, I discovered that the BookEye scanners in the library were a lifesaver because I didn't have to check out a book to continue reading it; I could read a PDF document from my laptop instead.

For this project, I was particularly interested in the iconographic elements of the medallion manuscript. It was meticulously crafted using watercolor, gold illuminations, and calligraphic writing. The book is circular, only 48mm in diameter, and has a concertina format that can be unfurled to be over a foot long (although nearly all others are codices). After hours of analyzing the manuscript in Special Collections, I concluded that I would explore the spiritual purposes that the iconographic elements served— what was the desired effect, and why was the document created?

The most relevant text I found supporting my thesis is Christiane Gruber's chapter "A Pious Cure-All: The Ottoman Illustrated Prayer Manual in the Lilly Library." Another helpful source is a PhD dissertation by Alexandra Bain called *The Late Ottoman E'nam 'i Serif: Sacred Texts and Images in an Islamic Prayer Book*. The glossary of terms has been an excellent resource for me as a non-Arabic, non-Muslim researcher. Later in the research process, Dr. K and I found an applicable document called the Harvard *An'am-i Sharif*, a related manuscript to the one we are working with. We realized there was a typo on their website because the recto and verso sides of a folio are flipped in Arabic. This week, I plan to report the error on their website so future researchers can understand the content.

When creating my project for this application, I also used the online reference resources to learn how to use the Chicago Author-Date style instead of the N/B style that I'm accustomed to. Although I did not use the Howe Writing Center for this project due to time constraints, I plan to in the future because they were a huge help my freshman year as I learned how to edit my own

work with a critical eye. I also digitized the document for my reference using Canva's online graphic design tools, and it came out beautifully. In the future, I hope to share this document with other researchers to prevent copious handling of the manuscript. I hope it will be a good addition to the Special Collections Islamic archives.

This is not my first experience with archival research, and I have learned that oftentimes, the archive seems to hold secrets from you. When conducting historical research, it is easy to get discouraged as you sift through mountains of information. It can feel overwhelming, as though you are reaching into the void of the past and feeling so close, but it slips away. Sometimes, you don't find the source you are looking for either because it was destroyed, blocked behind a paywall, or the physical document resides in a foreign country and isn't digitized.

The most important thing I have learned after conducting research this past year is to enter an archive with an open mind. I started with three ideas for this project: prayer books in Christianity and Islam, tracing the provenance of a French book of hours, or analyzing the iconographic elements of the Islamic medallion prayer book. The wonderful thing about historical research is that you are free to rework and reanalyze your thesis as often as necessary. My thesis will likely develop throughout this project, as well.

I learned that the most valuable resource in research is librarians. They are experts in helping others with their inquiries and know how to find the best resources without the endless hours of clicking it would have taken me. Without the resources of Special Collections, this project would not have been possible. I have also learned that research is for everyone. It is a personalized process that can be crafted, workshopped, and perfected over time. It requires no prior knowledge, only a willingness to learn and a stomach for failure.

I still have so much work to do and things to learn regarding this project, but I thank everyone for their time, consideration, and patience. I look forward to presenting my findings at the Undergraduate Research Forum this April.