



5th joint event Levantine Heritage Foundation with the Royal Asiatic Society
gathering in London with guest speaker Dr Nil Palabiyik



Silent Teachers: Turkish Books and Oriental Learning in Early Modern Europe

On 15 October 1607, a frustrated Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609) wrote from Leiden to a friend in Paris, complaining about his Turkish manuscripts. Scaliger, the most celebrated humanist of the late Renaissance and a fine linguist, struggled to decipher the Turkish explanations for Arabic and Persian words in his Ottoman dictionaries. These books ‘are written in the most elegant and distinguished way’, he explained. Yet, despite his best efforts, he did not understand even the foreword to one of the dictionaries ‘as if it were written in Gaelic or Finnish’. Concluding that books from the Islamic world need to be explained orally by native speakers, Scaliger termed his Turkish books ‘silent teachers’.

Palabiyik’s research gives voice to the many and varied Turkish-language books circulated in early modern Europe yet remained silent until now. Taking these manuscripts and early printed books off the shelves, she brings them into the core of the discourse on early modern scholarship and erudite culture.

The lecture will take us on a scholarly excursion through the challenges of learning Turkish in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Providing a vivid account of the many failures, misfortunes, successes, and accomplishments of orientalist scholars at the centres of European learning, including Paris, Oxford, Tübingen and Vienna, Palabiyik will show that learning languages was a cumulative and collaborative activity then, as it is now. Scholarship required and benefitted from the participation of a diverse set of actors from the East and West.

Oriental learning in Europe was shaped by the contemporary cultural, intellectual, and literary developments and fashions in the Ottoman Empire, as much as the humanist fascination and in-depth engagement with texts from the Islamic world. Arguing that, until the 1630s, the European project of Turkish learning was one of grandiloquent claims and little achievement, she counters the traditional narrative of European scholars conquering the knowledge of the East. Instead, she shows that Ottoman modes of learning and teaching, especially the trilingual methods of the madrasah curriculum, had a profound and lasting influence on European scholars during the formative period of oriental studies.



Fragment from the Prospect of Constantinople (1559) by the Danish artist Melchior Lorck, Leiden, University Library, BPL 1758 / 11.



Dr Nil Palabiyik is a Lecturer in Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Queen Mary University of London. Her research is at the crossroads of religious history and manuscript and print culture, focusing on the interactions between the Ottoman Empire and Europe in the early modern period. Her love of manuscripts and rare books took her to the finest libraries worldwide. She was British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Rylands Library in Manchester and held visiting fellowships at the Scaliger Institute in Leiden and Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel. She worked at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich as a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and completed her Habilitation there in 2022. In 2023, she was named the winner of a Philip Leverhulme Prize. Her new project focuses on Ottoman Sufi literature and the impact of diverse materials, from popular legends to philosophical texts in Turkish, on political thought, theology, and university education in seventeenth-century British Isles and Ireland. She believes that historical research unearthing lesser-known cultural and intellectual connections between Europe and the Islamic world is increasingly relevant in the current political climate, defined by rising tensions between the West and the Middle East.

24 April 2025, 6.30pm

Royal Asiatic Society, 14 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD

Booking essential: <https://nil-palabiyik-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk>

For Zoom link Matty Bradley by e-mail: mb@royalasiaticsociety.org

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