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THE SAINT ABERCIUS INSCRIPTION**

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## **A GIFT TO THE POPE FROM THE IMPERIAL MUSEUM IN ISTANBUL: THE SAINT ABERCIUS INSCRIPTION**

*Arkeoloji Müzesi'nden Papa'ya Hediye: Aziz Abercius Kitabesi*

**Fatma ÜREKLİ, Kasım HIZLI**

**Abstract:** The Saint Abercius inscription discovered in 1883 by Scottish archaeologist William Mitchell Ramsay in Afyon Sandıklı is known as the oldest inscription that can be dated in the history of Christianity. This inscription was transferred to the Müze-i Hümayun (Imperial Museum) (currently Istanbul Archeology Museum) in Istanbul, and after a while, it was taken under protection, Patriarch Azarian, the leader of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate suggested that it is given as a present to Leo Pope XIII on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary in his profession. Subsequently, this inscription is dispatched to Rome on behalf of the museum as the decree of Sultan Abdülhamid II and the consent of Museum Director Osman Hamdi Bey (February 1893). The interesting thing is that at the same time, Louis Sabuncu, one of the imperial translators, submitted a report to Sultan Abdülhamid II through Monsignor Bonetti, the Pope's envoy in Istanbul, claiming that Patriarch Azarian and Osman Hamdi Bey were acting in collaboration to send the inscription to the Pope. This paper tries to reveal the intriguing case through the archival documents lately found.

**Keywords:** Saint Abercius Inscription, Imperial Museum, Osman Hamdi Bey, Sultan Abdülhamid II, Patriarch Azarian, Louis Sabuncu, Leo XIII

**Öz:** İskoç arkeolog William Mitchell Ramsay tarafından 1883 yılında, Afyon Sandıklı'da keşfedilen Saint Abercius kitabesi, Hıristiyanlık tarihinin tarihlenebilen en eski kitabesi olarak bilinmektedir. Bu kitabe, İstanbul'da Müze-i Hümayun'a (günümüzde İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzesi) nakledilerek muhafaza altına alındıktan bir müddet sonra Ermeni Katolik Patrikhanesi lideri Patrik Azarian, Papa XIII. Leo'ya mesleğe intisabının ellinci senesi dolayısıyla hediye edilmesi teklifinde bulunur. Akabinde bu eser, Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in iradesi ve Müze Müdürü Osman Hamdi Bey'in muvafakati üzerine, müze namına papaya hediye olarak Roma'ya gönderilir (Şubat 1893). İşin ilginç tarafı, bu sırada Mabeyn-i Hümayun mütercimlerinden Louis Sabuncu'nun, papanın İstanbul'daki temsilcisi Monsenyör Bonetti vasıtasıyla Sultan II. Abdülhamid'e sunduğu bir raporda, kitabenin papaya gönderilmesi konusunda Patrik Azarian ile Osman Hamdi Bey'in işbirliği içinde hareket ettiklerini iddia etmesidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Saint Abercius Kitabesi, Müze-i Hümayun, Osman Hamdi Bey, Sultan II. Abdülhamid, Patrik Azaryan, Louis Sabuncu, Papa XIII. Leo

### **Introduction: The Role of Osman Hamdi Bey in Ottoman Museology**

In the late eighteenth century, Europeans who were lovers of antiquities, especially the French and the British, either loaded the pieces they wanted to take from the Ottoman lands onto ships without being subjected to any formal procedures or mobilized through a demand mechanism that could reach the Sultan through their ambassadors and consuls. As a result of these "unrefutable" demands, which were generally not rejected, the habit of releasing old artifacts out of the country gradually became a de facto situation.<sup>1</sup>

During the nineteenth century, Europeans believed the artifacts left by the Greeks and the Romans to be the legacy they must inherit, and even began collecting them with a sensation of

<sup>1</sup> Edhem Eldem, *Osman Hamdi Bey Sözlüğü* (Ankara: Turizm ve Kültür Bakanlığı Yay., 2010), 53.

ownership. Through those moves, the collecting and exploitation of the historical artifacts belonging to the multi-layer history of the territory under the Turk's sway gained momentum.<sup>2</sup>

While this was the case, the growing interest of Europe in the historical artifacts revealed in the Ottoman lands led the Ottoman government to change the methods used in the collection and evaluation of these artifacts. A legal regulation was prepared that focused on the methods to be applied by state officials in the protection of historical monuments. Âsâr-ı Atıka Nizamnamesi (The Antiquities Act),<sup>3</sup> which came into force in February 1869, is a regulation that binds excavations to the permission of the Ministry of Education and prohibits the removal of found antiques abroad as an important regulation with its provisions. However, this regulation was replaced by a new regulation in 1874 and the provision stating that "discovered ancient artifacts cannot be taken abroad" was also overridden.<sup>4</sup>

The value given to the works increased with the appreciation of historical works and gaining European-style institutional framework. There was a need to revise the regulation and increase inspection. Osman Hamdi Bey, who had been a member of the museum commission since 1878, was appointed the director of the Museum (September 4, 1881).<sup>5</sup> Osman Hamdi Bey,<sup>6</sup> who had spent eight years in Paris and had a comprehensive culture thanks to his relations with the world of art and culture, had been a good choice for this duty, which had employed foreigners for twenty-one years.

Osman Hamdi Bey, who ensured the scientific preparation of the catalog of the museum in 1882, also showed the world that the Ottomans could contribute to archeology. He made some plans regarding the financing of excavations by gathering a reliable team. He started an "archaeological mobilization" in the country as of 1883.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Osmanlı Müzeciliği, Müzeler, Arkeoloji ve Tarihin Görselleştirilmesi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yay., 2020), 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> For the regulation dated 1869, see BOA, İ.Ş.D. 547, 22 Ramazan 1285 (January 6, 1869).

<sup>4</sup> Edhem Eldem, "From Blissful Indifference to Anguished Concern: Ottoman Perceptions of Antiquities, 1799-1869," *Scramble for the Past. A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914*, eds. Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, and Edhem Eldem, (İstanbul: SALT, 2011): 281-283.

<sup>5</sup> BOA, İ.DH. 835/67168. On September 4, 1881, Hamdi Bey, who was appointed as the director of the museum with a monthly salary of five thousand cents, was assigned to a high civilian rank, *Rütbe-i Bala* (BOA, İ.DH. 894/71168). In 1884, his salary was increased to nine thousand cents (BOA, İ.DH. 629/73648).

<sup>6</sup> Osman Hamdi Bey, the son of Grand Vizier İbrahim Edhem Pasha, was born in Istanbul in 1842. In 1857 he was sent to Paris for his law education. After studying law for a while at the University of Paris, he started taking art classes at the Fine Arts School, as he was prone to art. He worked in workshops of well-known painters of the period such as Gerome and Boulanger. He was the Ottoman State Commissioner of the International Exhibition opened in Paris in 1867. In 1887, he participated in the excavations of Sayda, which brought him international fame. He pioneered the construction of the new Imperial Museum building, known as the Istanbul Archeology Museum, opposite the Tiled Pavilion within Sûr-ı Sultani (Royal Walls) to house the increasing number of ancient artifacts from the excavations. For detailed information on this subject, see Eldem, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Alpay Pasinli, "Osman Hamdi Bey'in Müzecilik Yönü ve İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri," in *1. Osman Hamdi Bey Kongresi Bildiriler 2-5 Ekim 1990*, ed. Zeynep Rona (İstanbul: Mimar Sinan Üniversitesi Yay., 1992), 149-151; Edhem Eldem, "An Ottoman Archeologist Caught Between Two Worlds: Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910)," *Archeology, Anthropology and Heritage in the Balkans and Anatolia: The Life and Times of F. W. Hasluck, 1878-1920*, ed. David Shankland, vol.1 (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2004), 121-149; Halil Ethem Eldem, "Müzeler," in *Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi Konferanslar Münakaşalar* (Ankara: T.C. Maarif Vekaleti, 1932): 558, 563; While Osman Hamdi Bey was endeavoring to keep the archaeological finds in the country, he was also aware that the public should be made aware of the value of fine arts and historical artifacts. The *Sanâyi-i Nefîse Mektebi* (Faculty of Fine Arts) which he founded and directed in 1882, served as the center for determining and directing the value of art. See Fatma Ürekli, "Sanayi-i Nefîse Mektebi'nin Kuruluşu ve Türk Eğitim Tarihindeki Yeri", (PhD. Thesis, İ.Ü. Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 1997).



Fig. 1: Director of Imperial Museum Osman Hamdi Bey ( I.U. Rare Works Library, Yıldız Albums nr. 90851/16)



Fig. 2: Imperial Museum ( I.U. Rare Works Library, Yıldız Albums nr. 90632-1).

In the late nineteenth century, major foreign excavation owners realized that they could circumvent the law using diplomatic pressure and strong political maneuvers. Despite the meticulousness of the museum administration, the owners of the excavations could directly reach ambassadors, ministers, the grand vizier and even the Sultan, regardless of the museum administration. There are many examples in this regard, but it is worth mentioning briefly without digressing from the main subject.

They found various ways to take the archeological pieces revealed from historical sites out of the country and sometimes the regulations were disregarded. There are many examples for the case, yet it is enough to touch the matter in a few words.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, some of the ancient artifacts found in the museum were given as gifts to the European monarchs by the Sultan, and sometimes rare historical artifacts were brought out from the museum for gift purposes. The inscription of Saint Abercius, one of the oldest inscriptions in the history of Christianity that was transferred to the Imperial Museum, was sent as a gift to the Pope.

### 1. A Gift To Be Sent To Pope Leo Xiii From Istanbul: The Saint Abercius Inscription

Scottish archaeologist William Mitchell Ramsay made one of his important discoveries in the first months of 1883 around the Hüdai Hot Springs near Afyon Sandıklı. The interest and research of Ramsay in the *âsâr-ı atîka* (ancient artifacts) in this region, namely the Konya province and the ancient city of Pisidia Antiokheia near Afyon, and the surrounding area, had continued since 1880 when he made his first trip to Anatolia. It is known that this interest and enthusiasm for research did not wane when these major works were found, but continued to increase until 1927.<sup>9</sup>

Ramsay<sup>10</sup> received his first research permit from the Ministry of Education in 1890. The letter written to the provinces of Konya, Sivas, Ankara, and Adana, said, “British citizen Professor Sir Ramsay has been given permission to explore ancient artifacts in Konya, Adana, Sivas and Ankara with his two colleagues, and to take pictures, if necessary and he is to be facilitated during this trip.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Shaw, *Osmanlı Müzeciliği*, 155-157.

<sup>9</sup> For the excavations of W. M. Ramsay in the ancient city of Antiokheia in the Yalvaç district of Hamidâbâd Sanjak, which was connected to Konya Province and Konya Province between 1890-1927, see Süreyya Eroğlu, “Arşiv Belgeleri Bağlamında, W. M. Ramsay’ın Pisidia Antiokheia Çalışmalarının Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi,” *SDU Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Journal of Social Sciences*, no. 25 (2012): 125-138.

<sup>10</sup> William Mitchell Ramsay (1851-1939), Scottish Archaeologist. Because of his travels covering Anatolia after 1880, he became an authority on “Regions of St. Paul’s missionary journeys” and “Christianity in the Ancient Roman Empire.” For Ramsay and his activities, see Ahmet Tahir Dayhan, “Yıkılış Döneminde Asya Ve Kuzey Afrika’daki Osmanlı Topraklarını “Keşfeden” Oryantalistler”, 38. *ICANAS Uluslararası Asya ve Kuzey Afrika Çalışmaları Kongresi*, eds. Zeki Dilek et al., (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 2007), 63-94.

<sup>11</sup> BOA, DH.MKT. 1731/1.



Fig. 3: The current version of the Saint Abercius Inscription (Vatican Museum).

The Saint Abercius inscription discovered by Ramsay is one of the oldest inscriptions in the history of Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Abercius or Avercius, whose life turned into a legend in the Christian world, was a Christian cleric who lived around Sandıklı during the second century A.D. The inscription in Abercius' tomb dates to a period between 193–216 A.D.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the inscription is the oldest Christian inscription that can be dated. Because of its importance, the inscription has been named the “Queen of the Christian Age Inscriptions.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> BOA, Y.PRK.TKM. 27/2.

<sup>13</sup> W. M. Ramsay, “The Tale of Saint Abercius,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, no. 3 (1882): 339-353; see also Louis Duchesne, *Saint Abercius Evêque d'Hieropolis en the Phrgie. I L'építaphe d'Abercius*, *Revue des questions historiques* (Paris: 1883), XXXIV: 5-33 (*Revue des questions historiques / Marquis de Beaucourt | 1883-07 | Gallica* (bnf.fr)); Louis Duchesne, “L'építaphe d'Abercius”, in: *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire*, tome 15, 1895: 156-157 (<https://doi.org/10.3406/mefr.1895.6133>); Henri Leclercq, “Abercius”, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, I, 66-87 (*Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie : Cabrol, Fernand, 1855-1937 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive*); Peter Doyle, *Buttler's Lives of the Saints*, (Minnesota: Burns & Oates The Liturgical Press, 1997), 152; Paul McKechnie, *Christianizing Asia Minor: Conversion, Communities, and Social Change in the Pre-Constantinian Era*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> H. Malay and C. Tannıver, “Sandıklı'da Yaşamış Olan Bir Hristiyan Önderi: Aziz Aberkios.” <http://www.hasanmalay.com/index.php/din/aberkios> (Date of Access: 02.07.2021)



The inscription includes sections from Abercius' life and testament:

“As a citizen of an elite city, I built this tomb in my health, so that it would be a resting place for my body. My name is Aberkios. And I am a student of Aziz Çoban (Sacred Shepherd). He grazes his sheep in the mountains and plains. And he has all-seeing large eyes. He is the one who teaches me true things. And he is the one who sent me to Rome; to see the kingdom, the queen with the golden dress and the golden shoes. I saw the rulers carrying the magnificent seal there. I even saw Nisibis (Nusaybin) by crossing Fırat (Euphrates) and the plain of Syria and all its cities. Paul became my companion and guided me through my faith and offered me fish from the great and clear spring where a holy virgin caught fish and offered his friends a glass of wine and bread. I Aberkios, personally ordered this to be written in stone. Actually, I am 72 years old at present. Let everyone who understands and believes in this pray for Aberkios. Let nobody bury another body in my grave. The person who violates this must pay 2000 coins to the treasury of the Romans and 1000 gold coins to my beloved homeland Hieropolis.”<sup>15</sup>

This work, which was brought to Istanbul by the Imperial Museum directorate and preserved in the museum, was regarded as the most appropriate gift to the Pope on his fiftieth anniversary in his spiritual task. The inscription was sent abroad as a gift to the Pope in 1893 with the will of Abdülhamid II and the approval of Osman Hamdi Bey.

The relations between the Ottomans and the Papacy were more positive during the era of Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) than during the era of his predecessor Pope Pius IX. The friendly relations between Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) and Pope Leo XIII also attract attention. Abdülhamid II, invites Pope Leo XIII who finds himself in dire straits in the Vatican and is thinking about leaving Rome to Ottoman territory through Grand Vizier Mehmed Kamil Pasha and Monsignor Stephan Bedros X. Azarian. During this period when the friction between the state and the church was extremely high, Abdülhamid II sends a letter to the Pope and states that instead of escaping to another country, Istanbul is the most suitable place for him. The letter of the Sultan, dated December 1, 1888, containing peaceful messages, is sent to the pope by the leader of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate, Patriarch Azarian (Azaryan).<sup>16</sup> Abdülhamid II pursued a policy aiming to benefit from the competition and conflicts between states during this period when interstate competition focused on the Ottomans.

<sup>15</sup> Malay and Tanrıver, *Aziz Aberkios*.

<sup>16</sup> For a study on this subject see Canan Parmaksızoğlu, “Sultan II. Abdülhamid’in Papa XIII. Leo’yu İstanbul’a Daveti,” *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları* 228, no. 116 (2017): 145-157.





Fig. 4: Sultan Abdülhamid II (BOA, Y.MTV, 260/124).

The year 1893 was the fiftieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's episcopacy. Abdülhamid II who had been in close diplomatic relations for a while and was planning to appoint an ambassador wanted to send a gift to the Pope and had taken steps in this regard. A snuff box was commissioned to be produced as a gift to the Pope on the occasion of the jubilee to be carried out (January 10, 1893). The imperial order of the Sultan regarding the commissioning of a snuff box by the Treasury to be presented to the Pope on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his papal appointment at the jubilee to be held at the end of February 1893 reads as follows (January 6, 1893):

“Yıldız Palace, Chief Clerk's Office, 4975

An imperial order has been issued regarding the commissioning of a snuff box by the Treasury to be presented to the Pope on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary at the jubilee to be held at the end of next month. The imperial orders regarding this matter, as with all matters are issued by our Sultan.

17 C 1310 / 6 January 1893.”<sup>17</sup>

Two of the boxes with an average value of 200 and one for 350 Ottoman liras were commissioned and the one liked by the Sultan would be sent.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> BOA, İ.HUS. 7/38.

<sup>18</sup> BOA, BEO. 139/10392.



Fig. 5: Armenian Catholic Patriarch Azaryan Efendi (Malumat, 20 March 1312, No: 76).

Eleven days after the Sultan, who was about to declare his will about snuff boxes, a surprising proposal, or rather a request was received. The request was made by Armenian Catholic Patriarch.<sup>19</sup> Azarian Efendi asked for permission to take a marble stone (Saint Abercius inscription) to the Pope brought to Istanbul by the director of the Imperial Museum, Osman Hamdi Bey that was inscribed with nine lines of Greek text specific to Christianity and the discovery of which he had instigated personally near Sandıklı.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Armenian Catholic patriarch Azarian (1826-1899) was born in December 1826 in Istanbul. He was a member of a prominent family of Istanbul Armenian Catholic leaders. He studied Turkish, Armenian, Greek, Latin, French, Italian and English languages at schools. He received religious education in Rome. He was admitted to the clergy class in 1850. He engaged in literature. He has many works and also published a Turkish, Greek, Italian and Armenian dictionary. In 1871, he became archbishop and was appointed deputy patriarch. Four years later, on the demise of the Armenian patriarch Hasun, he was unanimously granted the title of Constantinople Armenian Catholic Patriarch and Cilician Cathogi. Azarian established a large school for teaching Christian theology near the Patriarchate in Sakızağacı. He also established a school in Çeşme street in Beyoğlu, and a boarding school for orphaned girls as well as a vocational school for girls. He possessed the First Class Mecidi and Osmani orders, as well as major orders of the European states. The sixteenth Armenian Catholic patriarch Azarian passed away in Istanbul in 1899. For details, see, "Ermeni Katolik Patriği Azarian Efendi Hazretleri," *Malumat*, no. 76, (20 March 1312).

<sup>20</sup> BOA, BEO. 141/10570.

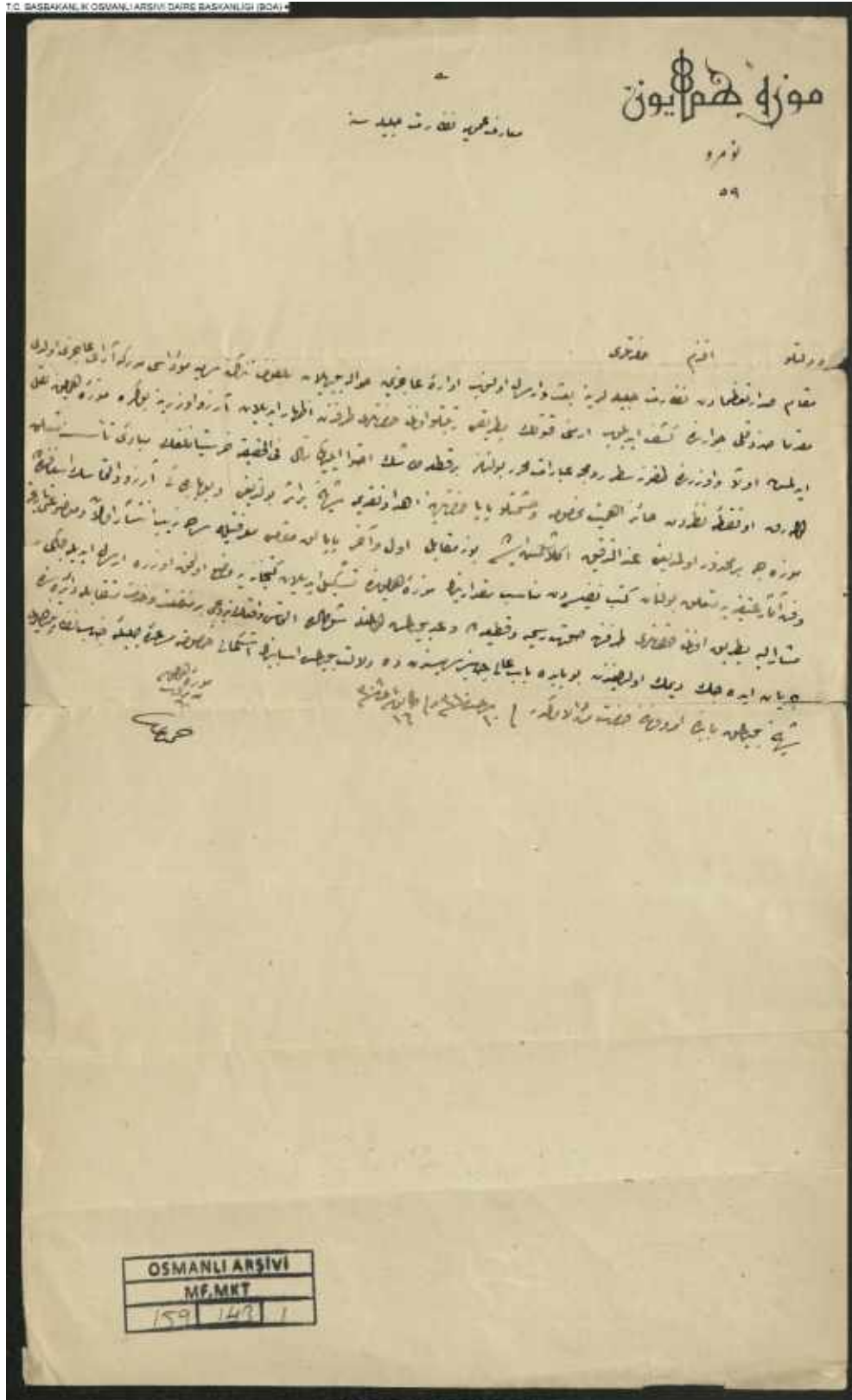
In the letter written from the Grand vizierate to the Ministry of Education on the same day, the above request of Azarian Efendi was voiced and the director of the Imperial Museum, who was a part of the Ministry of Education, was urgently asked to comment on this matter.<sup>21</sup> One week later on January 28, 1893, Osman Hamdi Bey, director of the Imperial Museum, reported his assessment regarding the marble stone that Azarian Efendi had personally discovered:

“The meaning of the nine lines written in Greek words on the stone discovered in the vicinity of Sandıklı is of particular importance regarding the first establishment of Christianity. This stone is a gift that is worth giving to the Pope, the museum indicates that according to the research that has been carried out indicates, sending this artifact to the Pope is not problematic. In return for this work, the patriarch [Azarian] promised in a definite and official way, by means of the papal seat, to send an appropriate amount of history books and *asâr-ı atîka* to be included in the library established in the Imperial Museum. Since this request of the Patriarch will take place within an understanding of interest and service exchange, I recommend that this wish is honored and request the Minister of Education to fulfill the request in this matter and that the Sublime Porte also fulfills this request.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> BOA, BEO. 141/10570.

<sup>22</sup> BOA MF.MKT. 159/143.



MF.MKT.00159.00143.001

Fig. 6: Consent letter of Osman Hamdi Bey about sending the inscription to Rome as a gift (BOA, MF.MKT, 159/143).

Osman Hamdi Bey's above assessment was sent to Grand Vizier Cevad Pasha. Cevad Pasha stated in his reply that he wrote two days later that it would not be appropriate to send this stone on behalf of the Sultan, and that it should be a gift on behalf of the Imperial Museum. There is a question in the grand vizier's statement that needs an answer: Why is Abdülhamid II sending the stone on behalf of the Museum and not on his own behalf? It does not seem reasonable that an autocratic administrator would refrain from sending an artifact of the Imperial Museum because he is afraid of the consequences arising from the relevant provision in the regulation. It seems more plausible to be concerned about the religious and diplomatic problems that would arise from presenting a gift with a religious characteristic to the highest representative of another religion as an Islamic caliph.

After the decision, Cardinal Rampolla was informed about the gift to be sent to the Pope. Three days after the letter of consent by Osman Hamdi Bey to the Ministry of Education, the letter written to the Museum and the Administration Head Office on January 31, 1893 contained the following orders: *"It has been decided to send the stone in the name of Museum-i Hümayun to the Pope on the orders of the Sultan by way of the Catholic Patriarchate Doorkeeper Aşçıyan Efendi. Furthermore, please organize the transfer of the specially manufactured housing for the stone's storage onto the ferry."*<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Allegation Regarding The Submission of The Saint Abercius Inscription

Approximately one month before the Patriarch Azarian's proposal, consent letter of Osman Hamdi Bey and sending the gift to the Pope on behalf of the Imperial Museum as the will of Abdülhamid II, Imperial Translator Louis Sabuncu presented his report<sup>24</sup> containing various allegations. In the report, Louis Sabuncu, who emphasized the importance of the inscription and added a drawing, claimed that Azarian and Osman Hamdi Bey had made a secret pact on this inscription and that they planned to smuggle the inscription to Rome together:

"My views on the shrine of Abercius, one of the most important ancient works which is located in Konya are as follows:

In addition to my comments I presented through Arif Bey on December 7, 1892 on the occasion when Patriarch Azarian went to Rome to congratulate the Pope on the anniversary of the episcopacy and present a gift on your behalf:

The efforts of our pro-education Sultan to advance education and science are well known, the work he has undertaken for the discovery and preservation of ancient artifacts in his country is admirable. The famous tomb of St. Abercius is such a valued discovery.

St. Abercius was a scholar bishop who lived in the second century AD. At that time, he was very keen about visiting the recognized places and made many trips. He also wrote a travel book containing his observations during his travels. When he came to his hometown,

<sup>23</sup> BOA MF.MKT. 159/143.

<sup>24</sup> Doctor Louis Sabuncu (1838-1931) was born in 1838 in Derik, Mardin. He belonged to a Syriac family. The family became famous with the nickname "soap" because of the soap manufacturing profession that his father was engaged in. Louis Sabuncu, at the age of 12, learned Arabic, Syriac and Italian from the professors of the Al-Sharfa school in Kisravan mountain in Syria. In 1854, the Assyrian Patriarch of Antakya, Agathios Anton Bahir sent Sabuncu to Rome, where he received education at the Propaganda School. After studying Arabic, Turkish, Syriac, Greek, Italian, Latin, French and the English languages in this school, he professed in the science of rhetoric, logic, wisdom, history, theology, law and medicine within ten years in the Roman school, and subsequently he was appointed as an academy member named 'Arkadya' in Rome. He completed his doctorate in philosophy in 1864 and returned from Rome. Between 1865 and 1969, he served in the Syriac Catholic Order Leadership in Beirut. He operated against the Ottomans with newspapers and magazines that he published in Beirut and London. In 1890, he came to Istanbul to get a railway concession to the company he was consulting for. Here, he met Sultan Abdülhamid II by means of Münif Pasha, and stopped working against the Ottoman Empire and was appointed to translate and evaluate the news and comments for the sultan about the Ottoman media in the foreign press in Yıldız Palace as Imperial Translator. He remained in this position for nearly twenty years, his duty was terminated upon the declaration of the Second Constitutional Monarchy. Spending his life in Egypt, England and America, Sabuncu passed away in Los Angeles in 1931 at the age of ninety. Kasım Hızlı, "Louis Sabuncu ve Sultan II. Abdülhamid'e Sunduğu Layihalar" (master's thesis, Mimar Sinan Güzel Sanatlar Üniversitesi, 2014).

Hieropolis, he commissioned the engraving of his own scientific knowledge, the technical information that had been reached at that time, historical information such as how Christianity emerged and the phases he had lived through in Hellenic characters on the walls of the tomb he commissioned for himself. His body was buried in this tomb after his demise. This tomb was buried underneath the ground in time and was discovered ten years ago by English archaeologist W. Ramsay in the Sandıklı valley in Konya. Here are some replications of the writings on the tomb: (Here are examples)

Archaeologists assert that this inscription is very important among the works of history and ancient sciences. This tomb is considered as a collective record of travel books, religion, natural and historical sciences that existed at that time. It is understood from this that the person who did this was thinking about replicating the pyramids in Egypt. If the British had found a way to take this piece to the London museum, they would have spared no costs and sacrifices.

The reason I present this information to our Sultan: I received information that the Armenian Catholic patriarch Azarian and Museum Director Osman Hamdi Bey were going to deliver the inscriptions that are a part of this ancient work, containing information about the history of Christianity and popes, when they went to Rome to congratulate the Pope's Episcopacy anniversary the following February.

Although Azarian said that he was going to present the works to the Pope on the occasion of his anniversary, according to the information I have obtained he intends to sell the work to European archaeologists. It is a grave mistake to remove some valuable pieces of this work and take them elsewhere. This is tantamount to cutting out some pages of a precious history book and leaving the book incomplete, and this is a very brutal move in the opinion of scientists. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire must never allow such treasures to be removed from the country by treacherous and corrupt officers; moreover, the state should pay attention to their good preservation.

Partik Azarian, who is the spiritual leader of a big congregation and accepted as one of the important men of the Ottoman Empire, and a civil servant's stealing such an irreplaceable valuable work is a major impunity and beyond bewilderment in an era that is accepted as the century of justice and progress.

In summary there is no doubt that

1. Patriarch Azarian tolds his friends that he would be taking these ancient works to Rome,
2. they would take them to Izmit in cooperation with Osman Hamdi Bey,
3. Hamdi Bey gave the orders for the transfer of these works to Izmit.

The imperial orders regarding this matter, as with all matters are issued by our Sultan.

Louis Sabuncu

27 December 1892.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> BOA Y.PRK.TKM. 27/2.



Fig. 7: Drawing of the Saint Abercius Inscription being presented to Abdülhamid II by Louis Sabuncu (BOA, Y.PRK.TKM, 27/2).

### 3. Who is the “Trusted Source” of Imperial Translator, Louis Sabuncu?

Sabuncu’s claims as much as the source that gave him this intelligence was surprising. The person who informed Sabuncu about this issue and tried to prevent the artifact from going to the Pope by informing the Sultan was none other than the representative of the Pope in Istanbul, Monsieur Bonetti:

“December 24, 1892– I received a telegram from the Deputy of the Pope, Monsignor Bonetti, who invited me to visit. 25 December 1892– I went to the Deputy of the Pope, Monsignor Bonetti. He told me the story of Ayacıyos (Abercius) and that he had agreed with the Armenian Patriarch Azarian’s Museum Director Osman Hamdi Bey to transfer a



historical stone from this holy man's grave to Izmid and transfer it to Rome. He asked me to prevent Azarian Efendi from sending these precious works to Rome."<sup>26</sup>

It appears that Sabuncu, upon meeting with Bonetti, whom he met frequently on December 25, 1892, grabbed his pen without delay and presented his report to Sultan Abdülhamid II two days later, based on his ideas about the history of religions that he specialized in and their discussions.

It is possible to understand what happened up to now. However, when we learn that Sabuncu's intelligence source is the Pope's representative in Istanbul, the issue becomes even more complicated. Since Bonetti was a Christian cleric, never mind spreading intelligence to try to prevent the Sultan from sending the artifact which is said to be very important in terms of the history of Christianity, to the Pope that he was affiliated with material and spiritual ties, under normal conditions he should have been helping to send the artifact. Instead of doing this, he prefers to inform the Sultan through Sabuncu, with whom he is in constant contact. Does he do it because he is an "honest" diplomat and cleric who would not be willing to send the work illegally? Or are there other issues between Sabuncu, Osman Hamdi Bey, Bonetti, and Patriarch Azarian?



Fig. 8: Imperial Translator Louis Sabuncu (BOA, FTG, 562).

<sup>26</sup> Sabuncuzade Louis Alberi, *Yıldız Sarayı'nda Bir Papaz* (İstanbul: Selis Kitaplar, 2007), 140.

Three main elements remain apart from Osman Hamdi Bey. All three are Christians and occupy important positions. The two (Sabuncu and Bonetti) are in cooperation. Patriarch Azarian is the targeted man. It is understood that Sabuncu mediated for Bonetti by taking advantage of his position in the palace. We are made aware of a conflict between the two clerics (Bonetti and Azarian) through a report submitted to Abdülhamid II. Sabuncu states that Azarian wants to go to Rome to obtain the title of cardinal and a cardinalship would be damaging to the Ottoman Empire in both internal affairs as well as Christian minorities and foreign affairs and protocol.<sup>27</sup>

More serious claims follow in the continuation of this study. It is claimed that Azarian was lobbying with the ambassadors and the press by presenting separate reports to the envoys in Istanbul, and in these reports the envoys were encouraged to try and gain some rights for the Armenians by bringing the Armenian issue on the agenda of the Ottoman government. Stating that he received this information from a “solid” source, Sabuncu does not neglect to explain his source as he ends his report: “*This narration was transferred from Le Temps newspaper’s informant to Monsieur Cambon [French ambassador] and thoroughly induced the Pope’s deputy [Monsignor Bonetti]*”<sup>28</sup>

Once again, we clearly understand that Bonetti does not want Azarian to establish warm relations with Rome and be a cardinal. He is enthusiastic enough about preventing Azarian’s cardinalship to sacrifice the Saint Abercius inscription. Aware of Azarian’s enthusiasm to become a cardinal, intelligence reported that Azarian Efendi, who took a gift to the Pope would stop by Jerusalem on his return from Rome, and to obstruct this the Ottoman government notified that Azarian was to return without any diversions.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. The Inscription is in Rome

Despite the efforts of Sabuncu and Bonetti before the Ottoman Sultan, the Saint Abercius inscription went to Rome accompanied by Azarian.<sup>30</sup> On February 23, 1893, a letter of thanks came from Rome on behalf of the Pope, signed by Cardinal Rampelli: “*On the twenty-first day of February Azarian Efendi was received by the Pope and he presented the Sultan’s gift and declared the Sultan’s feeling. Please advise the Sultan that the Pope accepts this precious gift with gratitude, and in the hope that it will give pleasure ...*”<sup>31</sup>

#### Conclusion: Why did Osman Hamdi Bey Consent to The Submission of The Artifact?

Finally, it is necessary to focus on Sabuncu’s claims about the Imperial Museum Director Osman Hamdi Bey. After all, Sabuncu claims that Osman Hamdi Bey is in cooperation with Azarian in order to get the Saint Abercius inscription abroad.

As we understand from the commissioning of the snuff boxes, in the beginning, Abdülhamid II has no mind to send the inscription as a gift to the Pope. The inscription is sent with Azarian’s request, the letter of consent of Osman Hamdi Bey and the will of Abdülhamid II. The intelligence given by Sabuncu at a critical time before the artifact was sent is not taken into consideration by Abdülhamid II. Instead, the request of Osman Hamid Bey and Azarian is fulfilled, both of whom are esteemed in the opinion of the Sultan.

We know that most of the reports and opinions of Imperial Translator Louis Sabuncu he presented during his tenure (1891–1908), did not reach Abdülhamid II. It is evident that his

<sup>27</sup> BOA Y.PRK.TKM. 34/4.

<sup>28</sup> BOA Y.PRK.TKM. 34/4.

<sup>29</sup> BOA HR.SYS. 1768/47.

<sup>30</sup> The inscription, which was preserved in the Lateran Museum until 1963, is currently exhibited in the Vatican Museum. Malay and Tanrıver, *Aziz Aberkios*.

<sup>31</sup> BOA HR.TO. 538/43.

“sinister” past has a share in this. Due to the incompatible personality of Sabuncu, who was employed to be kept under observation was out of sorts with some of the employees at the Imperial Office as well as Serkâtip Tahsin Pasha, one of Abdülhamid II’s favorites. The Pasha was very fastidious about delivering Sabuncu’s reports to the Sultan.<sup>32</sup>

Osman Hamdi Bey consents to the submission of the inscription in terms of museology after Azarian stated that the Papal Authority would reciprocally send works related to history and antiquities to the Ottoman Museum as promised by the Azarian. This may be due to the fact that he recognized that museums were research centers above all and he was trying to build a library on the upper floor of the museum.<sup>33</sup>

During this process, it was also determined that some accusations were being made that would cause Osman Hamdi Bey trouble. Abdülhamid II initiated an inquiry when he became aware that allegations were being made about various works coming to the Imperial Museum being sent to European museums under various pretexts. This grieved Osman Hamdi Bey profoundly, he declared that such unfounded rumors, which left him and his organization under suspicion were unacceptable and submitted his resignation to the Ministry of Education. After extreme efforts, the government was able to persuade Hamdi Bey to review his decision (1895).<sup>34</sup>

It should be noted that a claim similar to Sabuncu’s claim was brought to the agenda recently.<sup>35</sup> The inscription in question was sent within the knowledge and order of the Sultan,

<sup>32</sup> Sabuncuzade Louis, *Yıldız Sarayı’nda*, 208-212.

<sup>33</sup> Arif Müfid Mansel, “Osman Hamdi Bey (Ölümünün Ellinci Yıldönümü Vesilesiyle),” *Belleten* 94, no. 24 (1960): 291–322.

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<sup>34</sup> BOA, A.MKT.MHM. 534/13; BOA, İ. HUS. 1312/66.

<sup>35</sup> “Hamdi was the grand vizier’s son and he was a person directly appointed by Sultan Abdülhamid II. He was the only authority on antiquities. Humann always kept his relationship with him cordial. He often visited his waterfront mansion. They were such good friends that Humann had posed for his portrait in his studio at Hamdi Bey’s request for days. The 1884 Antiquities Law, which was prepared by a delegation he was a part of after the 1869, 1874 Antiquities Law (Regulations for the Âsar-i Atîka), strictly forbade the export of artifacts, however it was not enforced. He did not object while the looting continued. Despite the law that Osman Hamdi Bey was responsible for enforcing, the Works from Priene, Magnesia and Miletus were taken and filled the museum halls during his tenure. He often failed to warn the Sultan or the council that it was not correct and legal to export artifacts. He was helping the French who carried artifacts in Baghdad province. So much so that the French bought Osman Hamdi’s painting at an exhibition in Paris, for 4000 francs, and gave him an honorary doctorate.” Yaşar Yılmaz, “Mösyö Humann, Humann’ın Bergama Raporları ve Osman Hamdi Bey,” *Aktüel Arkeoloji*, no. 47 (2015): 33.

“The great powers who wanted to facilitate their steps in archeology were trying to ensure their friendship with the director of antiquities. For example, France flattered Osman Hamdi Bey for his success in both archeology and painting to achieve this. Among the different methods used by France to strengthen their relations with Osman Hamdi Bey were to give him the title of correspondence of the French Institute, publish his articles and buy his paintings. The Count of Motebello, who was the French ambassador in Istanbul at the time, wrote to the Foreign Affairs Directorate on 18 June 1891 about Osman Hamdi Bey’s paintings: ‘The artistic value of his works is actually not very interesting, but the Germans and Americans who seem to be very interested in the subject, have praised Osman Hamdi’s value and merit and commissioned a few paintings that they paid for in excess. This caresses the pride of the artist and at the same time secretly fulfills many needs.’” Frédéric Hitzel, “Osmanlı Arkeolojisinin Başlangıcı Osman Hamdi Bey,” *Aktüel Arkeoloji*, no. 47 (2015): 43, 45.

Ethem Eldem makes the following statement on the above claims of Yaşar Yılmaz and Frédéric Hitzel: “As much as it is true that the archaeological richness of Anatolia and the Ottoman territory in general were looted throughout the nineteenth century, it would be simplifying and misleading to depict Osman Hamdi Bey as taking part in this looting or someone who turned a blind eye on it. It is a well-known fact that his paintings were bought by foreigners to flatter him, but that does not mean that he accepted this as a bribe and allowed looting in return.

In 1899, the Germans gained entitlement to half of the finds contrary to the 1884 regulations with a secret agreement they made with Abdülhamid. Other countries smuggled many artifacts with diplomatic suitcases. In short, with all his shortcomings and human weaknesses, Osman Hamdi is one of the rare people who made serious and permanent efforts to protect the works and sites and to establish an institution that deserves to be called a museum in an atmosphere of indifference from the palace to the public. Be that as it may, it cannot go beyond a simple sensational iconoclasm to portray him as a self-seeking person in the service of the looters.” Kurthan Demir, “Osman Hamdi

and the thanks of the Pope in return for the gift was addressed to the Sultan himself. It is clear that Abdülhamid wanted to send a gift that would influence the Pope in this period when the Ottoman state faced pressures inside and outside and was seeking support and balance for his diplomatic activities. Osman Hamdi Bey, who was knowledgeable about international relations as well as an official of the Ottoman State and a museum administrator, declared that he did not object to the submission of the artifact and that it was appropriate.

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Edhem Eldem states that in 1893, the French government bought a painting by Osman Hamdi in a hopeful and calculating way in order to facilitate excavation permits. He states that Osman Hamdi’s achievements in archeology contributed directly to his recognition as a painter as follows: “This method, which was later used by Americans, British and possibly Germans, was not a bribe, but a way to influence by complimenting a person by letting him know that his artistry was appreciated. Osman Hamdi Bey’s achievements in archeology and especially the power he gained as the director of the museum contributed directly to his recognition as a painter.” Eldem, *Osman Hamdi*, 53.

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