

From Afar to the Mother: Familial Devotion and Gift-Giving in a Late Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Letter

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Context

This letter, dating to the late seventeenth century, provides an intimate perspective on Ottoman domesticity. Within the document, a son expresses profound grief caused by the separation from his mother, framed around a mutual exchange of symbolic gifts. This correspondence is preserved on folios 11a to 12a of the manuscript Cod. Or. 1267, held at Leiden University Library. This manuscript is an untitled miscellany of twenty-seven private letters and legal documents, with most entries dating to 1101 (1689–90). As a collection, these texts provide significant insights into the daily social and commercial activities of Izmir and its hinterland, with subjects ranging from property leases and debt bonds to manumission of slaves and agricultural management.¹

The manuscript's journey to the Netherlands is directly linked to its former owner, Herman van der Horst (1692–1765).² During his tenure as the pastor of the Dutch Protestant community in Izmir between 1718 and 1727, Van der Horst likely acquired these documents as part of his professional and social engagements in the Levant. Following his tenure, the manuscript entered the Schultens Collection, a renowned private library of Oriental manuscripts. In 1781, the Leiden University Library acquired this collection, ensuring the permanent preservation of these private records within an institutional archive.³

The presence of a personal letter to a mother within this miscellany offers a significant perspective on the dynamic nature of the Ottoman *münşe'ât* tradition.⁴ While such familial correspondence, which is often categorized under rubrics like 'a son writing to his mother', appears as a recognized genre in various Ottoman collections, such letters also serve as vivid portals into the lived experiences that informed epistolary culture. The inclusion of idiosyncratic details, such as the dispatch of a

¹ Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 1267.

² Jan Schmidt, "The Travel Notes of a Dutch Pastor in Anatolia, 1717–1727," in *The Joys of Philology: Studies in Ottoman Literature, History and Orientalism (1500–1923)*, Jan Schmidt (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2002), 279–281.

³ Jan Schmidt, *Catalogue of Turkish Manuscripts in the Library of Leiden University and Other Collections in the Netherlands*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Leiden University Library, 2000), 514–515.

⁴ Mustafa İsmet Uzun, "Münşeât," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2006), 32:20–22.

velvet cap via İsa Ağa and the request for a shirt in return, surrounds the text with the weight of ‘actual events.’ Such tangible particulars suggest that the *münşe’āt* tradition was not detached from reality; instead, it provided a dynamic framework where concrete acts of communication were preserved for their ability to harmonize profound individual emotions with established social forms.

Ultimately, this letter stands as a compelling and insightful specimen of late seventeenth-century personal domestic correspondence. It reveals how profound emotions, such as longing and devotion, were meticulously formulated through the conventional yet intimate language of the era. Moreover, the document illustrates that gift-giving was not merely a peripheral act but an integral part of such domestic exchanges, structured within the formal rules of Ottoman epistolary culture. By bridging the gap between rigid scribal templates and the fluidity of lived experience, this correspondence provides a rare window into the material and emotional world of a seventeenth-century Ottoman household.

Transcription

[11a]

‘İzzetlü ve mürüvvetlü ve şefkatlü ve sevgülü // vālide-i ‘azīzem ḥazretlerinüñ ḥuzūr-ı
şerīflerine yüzüm ve // gözüm sürdükden şoñra ḥāl ü ḥātır-ı laṭīflerin su’āl // olunur
dā’imā vücūd-ı şerīfleri ḥazret-i Bārīnūñ // ḥıfz u emānında maşūn u maḥfūz olub bu
oğluñuzu // du ‘ā-yı ḥayruñuzdan ferāmūş buyurmamağa ricā vü niyāz // olunur gıbbezā
benüm mürüvvetlü vālide-i ‘azīzem cenāb-ı // şerīfñüzden müfāraḳat ideli ḳalbümüz
ḡam-nāk ve dīdemüz // nem-nāk olub şeb ü rüz rāḫat n’idügin // [11b] bilmezüz hemān
evḳāt-ı ḥamse-i mefrūzada Ḥudā-yı müte ‘ālden // tazarru ‘ u temennāmuz budur ki murğ-
ı cān ḳafes-i tenden tayerān // itmedin bir daḡı dīdār-ı şerīfñüz görüb şād // u ḫandān
olmaḳ müyesser eyleye āmin yā Mu ‘in ve benüm // sevgülü vālidem mektūbumuz teḥi
olmamaḳ içün ḫāmil-i // mektūb ‘İsā ile bir ḳaṭīfe tarpūş ve bir ṭob // yeşil boḡası ve bir
beyāz peştemāl ve bir çift mesh // ile pābūç irsāl ḳılınmışdur vuşulünde ḳabz idüb //

*ma 'zūr buyurasız ve mektūbuñuzla bize bildirsesiz ve lutfidüb // [12a] bize bir ton gömlek
ve bir maḳrama [ve] bir mu 'temed ādem ile gönderesiz // bāḳī hemvāre 'āfiyetde olasız*

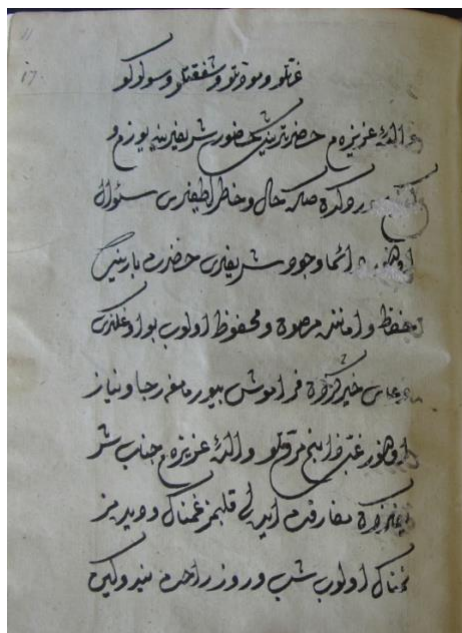
Translation

After offering my deepest respects and greetings at the noble presence of my honorable, generous, compassionate, and beloved mother, I inquire after your gracious well-being. I pray and hope that your noble person remains forever safe and protected under the guardianship and mercy of God, and I beg that you do not forget this son of yours in your blessed prayers. Thereafter, my generous and dear mother, since the day I departed from your presence, our heart has been filled with sorrow and our eyes with tears; we have known no peace, day or night. My only plea and wish from the Almighty God during the daily prayers is that, before the soul-bird flies away from the cage of the body, I may be granted the chance to see your noble face once more and be filled with joy. God be our helper; my beloved mother, so that our letter does not arrive empty-handed, I have sent with İsa, the bearer of this letter, a velvet cap, a roll of green cloth, a white bath towel, and a pair of inner boots with shoes. Upon their arrival, please accept them and forgive our shortcomings; kindly let us know of their receipt through your letter. Furthermore, please be so kind as to send us a set of undergarments and a towel via a trustworthy person. May you remain in everlasting health.

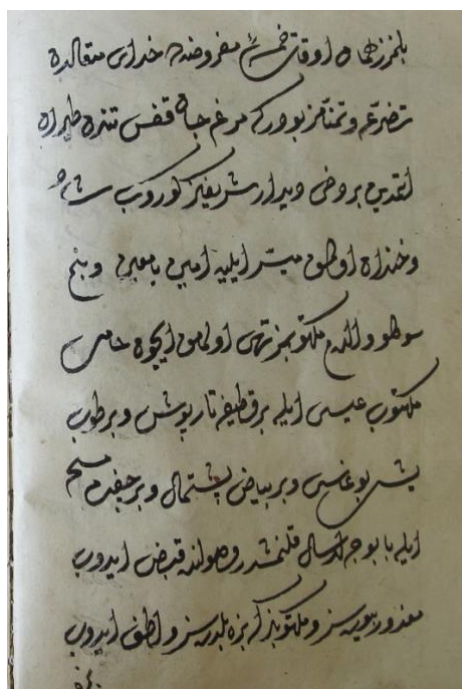
Facsimile

Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 1267, ff. 11a-12a.

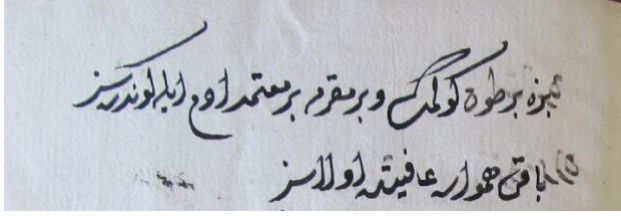
11a



11b



12 a



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