

**KIZILBASH/ALEVISM-BEKTASHISM SYMPOSIUM:
New Corpora, Databases, and Digital Tools in Ottoman and Contemporary Contexts**

**Wolfson College, University of Oxford
Friday, 22 May 2026**

Convenor: Yeliz Teber
Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies

The Alevis (historically known as Kizilbash) and Bektashis constitute the largest religious minority in Sunni-majority Turkey, drawing from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Turkish, Kurdish, and Zaza, with diasporas across Europe and North America. Rooted in an esoteric form of Sufi mysticism and the veneration of Caliph Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, the Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashis have often been perceived as 'heretical' and persecuted during both the Ottoman and Turkish Republican periods. Despite the community's marginalisation, Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashi studies have grown rapidly in recent years, challenging some of the dominant narratives in broader Islamic, Ottoman, and Turkish scholarship.

In response to this growth, the *Kizilbash/Alevism-Bektashism Symposium* provides a rare opportunity to bring together established and emerging scholars of Alevi-Bektashi studies from the UK and abroad at the University of Oxford. It is the first of its kind globally to focus on digitally engaged projects on Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashi material culture and heritage in Ottoman and contemporary contexts. Over the past five years, scholarship has increasingly moved towards large-scale digital research methods, including the digitisation of historical sources such as manuscripts and documents, mapping villages and sacred sites, conducting digitally informed ethnographic fieldwork, and documenting intangible cultural heritage such as ritual songs and dances. Given these exciting developments, this timely symposium is organised to showcase and connect new and ambitious projects around several key research questions:

What elements of Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashi history and present-day experiences have only become visible through the digital corpora, databases, and tools we now possess? What do these projects reveal about the historical trajectory of Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashi traditions? How can we assess lost Alevi-Bektashi materials, and what does this loss reveal about power, voice, and memory? How have rituals, cultural practices, and intellectual life shaped the community's collective identity? What traces of violence have marked Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashi history and self-perception? Finally, in what ways has modern scholarship framed and influenced contemporary understandings of the community in Turkey and the diaspora?

Generously funded by Oxford's Khalili Research Centre and Wolfson College, as well as the Past & Present Society, this one-day symposium will convene ten papers to foster collaboration and enhance visibility at the vibrant research environment of Wolfson College on 22 May 2026.

All are welcome.

Places are limited; early registration is strongly recommended.
To register, please contact the convenor at yeliz.teber@ames.ox.ac.uk



SYMPOSIUM PROGRAMME
Buttery, Wolfson College (College minibus service)

09:45 – 10:15: Coffee & Tea
10:15 – 10:30: Welcome and Introductory Words

PANEL 1: Book and Material Culture

Panel Chair: Zeynep Yürekli

10:30 – 10:50: Five Converging Streams through the *Vilayetname* Manuscript Tradition
Mark Soileau

10:50 – 11:10: The Collection of the Hacı Bektaş Shrine: Preliminary Observations
Yeliz Teber

11:10 – 11:30: Articulating the Vocabulary of *Islam in Turkish* with Digital Tools
Gökçen B. Dinç

11:30 – 12:00: Q&A

12:00 – 13:30: Lunch in Haldane Room

PANEL 2: Rituals, Networks, and Sites of Violence

Panel Chair: Özkan Karabulut

13:30 – 13:50: ‘Listening to Images’: How to Research Alevi Visual Culture?
Kumru Berfin Emre

13:50 – 14:10: What Does the Map of Massacre Sites in the Dersim 1938 *Tertele* Tell Us?
Bedriye Poyraz

14:10 – 14:30: Violence, Organisation, and Survival: The Transnational Infrastructure of Alevi
Mobilisation
Ceren Lord

14:30 – 14:50: Documenting the Intangible: Movement Notation, Digital Humanities, and Access to
the Alevi *Semah* as Embodied Archive
Sinibaldo De Rosa

14:50 – 15:30: Q&A

15:30 – 16:00: Coffee & Tea

PANEL 3: ABDA: Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project

Panel Chair: Yeliz Teber

16:00 – 16:20: The Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive: A Project of Cultural Preservation and Scholarly
Research
Ayfer Karakaya-Stump

16:20 – 16:40: Unearthing the Hidden: Literary Diversity, Lost Texts and Poets, and Paratextual
Memory in the Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project
Yasemin Karakuş, online

16:40 – 17:00: Mapping Alevi Literary Culture: Digital Analysis of the *Cönk* Manuscript Corpus in the
Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project
Özkan Karabulut

17:00 – 17:30: Q&A

17:30 – 17:45: Coffee & Tea

17:45 – 18:30: General Discussion

19:00 – 22:00: Dinner at al-Andalus (10 Little Clarendon Street, OX1 2HP)

PANEL 1: Book and Material Culture

Five Converging Streams through the *Vilayetname* Manuscript Tradition

Mark Soileau, Associate Professor, Independent Scholar

The *Vilayetname*, the foundational hagiography of Hacı Bektaş Veli, survives in over a hundred handwritten copies spanning several centuries — a corpus reflecting a manuscript tradition of extraordinary complexity that resists reduction to a simple stemma. This study proposes an alternative framework for understanding its evolution: one that follows the flows of specific textual and paratextual traits as streams through the tradition, and identifies the confluences where multiple streams converge in particular witnesses. Drawing on a corpus of 103 manuscripts, the study selects five particular traits, each rare enough within the corpus to be analytically significant, and each raising distinct questions about the evolution of the *Vilayetname* manuscript tradition. The flows of these traits are traced through a cluster of five manuscripts that represent particularly revealing fields of confluence for observing how streams meet, diverge, and recombine as the work was copied and re-copied over the centuries. In this way, the study shows that the tradition's evolution is better understood as a network of converging streams than as a tree of descent — a model capable of capturing the complexity of change and continuity that characterises such manuscript traditions.

The Collection of the Hacı Bektaş Shrine: Preliminary Observations

Yeliz Teber, Dr, Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford

This paper introduces an ongoing project on the Ottoman-era collection at the Hacı Bektaş shrine, the central shrine of the Alevi-Bektashi community in Turkey. Following the closure of all shrines in the country in 1925, the Hacı Bektaş collection was confiscated, with materials either transferred to public museums and libraries, or sold and destroyed. In 1964, the shrine was reopened as a museum, and a significant portion of the surviving items was returned. Despite its scale and importance, no comprehensive study of this assemblage has yet been undertaken.

This project constitutes the first comprehensive digitisation and analysis of the surviving items in the Hacı Bektaş collection, which comprises around 1,000 objects and paintings, including portraits of saints, calligraphic panels, textiles, and ritual and everyday objects. The collection also includes approximately 300 manuscripts, currently housed at the Regional Manuscripts Library in Konya. Drawing on both displayed and stored materials, the project examines the collection as an interconnected body of textual, visual, and material evidence, adopting a holistic approach. With most of the digitisation work now complete, this paper will present selected items and offer preliminary observations on the collection as a whole.

Articulating the Vocabulary of *Islam in Turkish* with Digital Tools

Gökçen B. Dinç, Dr, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University

Islam in Turkish is a concept I recently coined to capture a vernacular form of religiosity rooted in Anatolia and the Balkans since the thirteenth century, in which Turkish functions as a sacred language. In this presentation, after elaborating on this concept, I introduce our digital humanities project, which aims to articulate the vocabulary of *Islam in Turkish*. Given the vastness of the corpus, we begin with texts that circulated until the 1980s under the label of 'folk books.' Our pilot analysis focuses on major Alevi and Sunni texts, and shared textual mediums. Our initial aim is to identify the core terms of *Islam in Turkish* through selected keywords. Which of them appear most frequently, with which other terms do they cluster in Alevi, Sunni, and common texts, and how do their meanings shift across these corpora? Alongside this, we also ask which terms are most frequently used across the corpus independently of our predefined keywords. I will discuss our initial findings, as well as future methodologies. This presentation seeks to contribute to the terminology of Kizilbash/Alevis, as it becomes visible through digital tools, to illuminate devalued and lost Alevi-Bektashi texts from Republican history and to recover suppressed Alevi voices.

PANEL 2: Rituals, Networks, and Sites of Violence

'Listening to Images': How to Research Alevi Visual Culture?

Kumru Berfin Emre, Dr, Reader in Media and Conflict, University of the Arts London

Alevism has often been defined as an oral culture until recently. While this definition is valid, contemporary research increasingly highlights its written sources, as well as visual materials that may have originated as early as the fifteenth century. However, the complex interplay between different modes of storytelling, and the amalgamation of the visual and the oral, has not received the attention it deserves. Based on this critique, the paper aims at providing a discussion on methodological opportunities and challenges of researching Alevi visual culture. First, the paper focuses on the methodological issues stemming from the material destruction of Alevi culture with a particular focus on photography. Then, it offers an interdisciplinary and intertextual approach which combines written, oral, and visual sources underpinned by decolonial epistemologies.

Drawing on ongoing research on the photographs of Dersim 1937-1938 massacre, the paper makes a case for the urgency of studying Alevi visual culture, developing an interdisciplinary approach in researching visibility and embedding visual practices into history, literature, and anthropology research in particular.

What Does the Map of Massacre Sites in the Dersim 1938 *Tertele* Tell Us?

Bedriye Poyraz, Professor, Faculty of Communication, University of Ankara

Dersim was considered a problematic region by political authorities during both the Ottoman and Republican eras due to its religious beliefs. The 1938 military operation (*Tertele*)—the greatest massacre and taboo in Republican history—is defined by the Kurdish Movement as an act of resistance by the Kurdish national movement; meanwhile, the state, which is responsible for this massacre, has claims from a different perspective but with a similar characterisation that it was an uprising.

However, when examining the stories of the people killed at the 122 massacre sites identified to date (Taş, 2026)—specifically, how people were rounded up and brought to the massacre

sites for each location, as recounted by primary witnesses—it is impossible to speak of an uprising or resistance. In many cases, people are marched in groups for hours, even days, and held in barns or homes. Even while being marched for days to the massacre sites, they did not attempt to escape. Individuals' attempts to flee are rejected by others with objections such as, 'We haven't committed any crime; if we flee, we'll put ourselves in a guilty position.' In this presentation, using a map of the massacre sites, we will discuss the fact that there was no rebellion in Dersim, and that the target of the 1938 Great *Tertele* was the Kizilbash/Alevi.

Violence, Organisation, and Survival: The Transnational Infrastructure of Alevi Mobilisation

Ceren Lord, Dr, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science

Alevi are Turkey's largest religious minority, yet they have faced persistent persecution, state exclusion, episodic communitarian violence, and political marginalisation. Despite this, since the late 1980s they have built an extensive transnational organisational network spanning Turkey, the Balkans, Western Europe, and North America. Yet the architecture of that network, including its structure, evolution, and internal logic, remains opaque even to those who built it.

This paper makes the case for a systematic analysis of Alevi organisations, including federations, associations, and places of worship (*cemevis*), by drawing on network and cluster analysis to map the structural evolution of Alevi mobilisation over time. Engaging with theories of ethnicity, contentious politics, and transnational diaspora literature, it asks two core questions. First, under what political and contextual conditions does communitarian violence trigger durable waves of organisational founding? Second, the extent to which organisational infrastructures tend toward consolidation or structural fragmentation and what institutional and political mechanisms drive that outcome?

The paper argues that such an analysis, grounded in a database designed with the community could recover the institutional memory of a politically marginalised community on its own terms. In doing so, it would offer empirical and visual evidence for how Alevi constructed a transnational infrastructure for cultural survival and rights claims. In making that record visible to Alevi actors themselves, it seeks to provide a resource for ongoing mobilisation.

Documenting the Intangible: Movement Notation, Digital Humanities, and Access to the Alevi *Semah* as Embodied Archive

Sinibaldo De Rosa, Dr, Independent Scholar & Co-Chair at Society for Dance Research

Archival systems are never neutral; they determine who and what becomes part of the historical record and whose practices remain invisible. Starting from this premise, this presentation examines how movement notation (produced through embodied learning, hand-drawn sketching, and design software) generates structured, searchable data that can be integrated into digital research environments. Focusing on my documentation of staged Alevi *semah* adaptations, I address a critical gap: while digitisation has transformed access to Ottoman manuscripts and oral histories, movement-based practices are rarely treated as data that can be systematically archived or integrated with textual sources.

My creation of a Laban Kinetography score of Yeşim Coşkun's *4Kapı 40Makam* (2011), the first such score of a choreography produced in Turkey, offers a case study for addressing this gap. I identify key potentials: movement notation generates structured, comparable data

enabling comparative analysis of transmission histories, hybridisation processes, and the politics of visibility across ritual and staged contexts.

Precisely because of this potential, pressing questions emerge: how can notation avoid fixing or folklorising practices that are deliberately relational and ever evolving? What ethical frameworks govern the circulation of embodied knowledge derived from marginalised communities? And how might digital platforms enable participatory, community-led archiving rather than extractive documentation? By centring access as both a technical and a cultural question, I argue that attending to movement's materiality opens new, accountable directions for transnational Alevi research.

PANEL 3: ABDA: Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project

The Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive: A Project of Cultural Preservation and Scholarly Research

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, Associate Professor, Department of History, College of William & Mary

Since the mid-twentieth century, processes of emigration, urbanisation, and assimilation have led to a significant decline in Alevi-Bektashi communal life. This transformation has placed Alevi villages and sacred sites at increasing risk of disappearance, neglect, or cultural appropriation, while written sources and privately held archives remain especially vulnerable to dispersal and loss.

The Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive (ABDA) responds to these challenges through the creation of a web-based repository that brings together digitised manuscripts and documents, oral histories, and audio-visual materials, developed in close collaboration with community members and cultural practitioners. Spanning the early modern period to the present, the archive not only preserves the cultural and religious heritage of Alevi-Bektashi communities for future generations and for scholarly inquiry, but also provides a curated and context-rich platform that makes these materials accessible to a broader public.

Unearthing the Hidden: Literary Diversity, Lost Texts and Poets, and Paratextual Memory in the Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project

Yasemin Karakuş, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Literature, Istanbul University & Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University

This paper presents findings from the Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project, based on manuscripts from two *ocaks* (sacred Alevi lineages), one in Kütahya and the other in Tunceli, and asks: what elements of Alevi-Bektashi literary culture become visible through a digital corpus?

The manuscripts, based on the findings so far, point to four key contributions. To begin with, they reveal a diverse literary culture beyond the sacred: love stories, war epics, and folk medicine books sit alongside *erkannames* (ritual manuals), challenging the reductive labelling of Alevis as 'illiterate village Bektashis'. Then, previously unknown works have come to light, including an *erkanname* from 1933. The recovery of lost poets is another major outcome: poetry collections (*mecmua*) have brought to light figures like Nebati (sixteenth century), who composed in prosody (*aruz*) and appears in Aşık Çelebi's *Meşairü'ş-Şu'ara*—raising important questions about the folk/divan literature binary in Turkish literary historiography. Finally, paratextual materials—marginal notes, ownership records,

talismanic scripts—offer a window onto family genealogies, book circulation, and ritual performance, including a note that instructs exactly when the *Kırklar Semahı* (the sacred dance of the Forty) should be performed.

What emerges overall is that safeguarding *ocak*-held manuscripts is not merely an archival task but an essential step toward a more complete, polyphonic understanding of Turkish literary and linguistic history.

Mapping Alevi Literary Culture: Digital Analysis of the *Cönk* Manuscript Corpus in the Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project

Özkan Karabulut, PhD Candidate in History and Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University

This paper examines a newly digitised corpus of Alevi *cönk* manuscripts and explores how digital humanities methods can illuminate Alevi history and piety. Compiled mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *cönks* are oblong notebooks containing poetry, hymns, prayers, narratives, medical prescriptions, letter copies, and personal notes. Distinguished by their systematic inclusion of Alevi liturgical poetry (*deyiş* and *nefes*), these manuscripts constitute one of the richest written sources of Alevi religious expression. The dataset currently consists of twenty-four *cönks* digitised from fourteen Alevi families as part of the Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project, complemented by eighteen manuscripts identified in public manuscript libraries in Turkey. The creation of a digital corpus enables comparative and large-scale analysis beyond single-manuscript study. Through mapping, metadata analysis, and digital textual comparison, this study traces the geographical circulation of poems and poets, examines patterns of canon formation, and analyses textual variation across regions and over time. By combining manuscript studies with digital tools, this research demonstrates how digitisation and computational methods open new perspectives on Alevi literary culture, collective memory, and religious history while preserving fragile family archives for future scholarship.