

ГОРОД В ИСТОРИИ | THE CITY IN HISTORY

[https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2025-5\(1\)-79-95](https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2025-5(1)-79-95)

Signs of transition from scholastic thought to the age of Enlightenment in Anatolia in the second half of the nineteenth century: The case of Balıkesir Province

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KEYWORDS

Balıkesir
Enlightenment
nineteenth century
modernization
Western Anatolia

ABSTRACT

Balıkesir is a province in Western Anatolia, bordered by Manisa and İzmir to the south, the Sea of Marmara and Bursa to the north, the Aegean Sea to the west, and Uşak and Kütahya to the east. Known as Mysia in antiquity, the region has historically exhibited a multilingual, multicultural, multinational, and polyphonic character. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the population of Balıkesir included Muslim Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, and a small number of Jews. The Muslim and Christian communities tended to adhere to religious doctrines and scholastic worldviews. However, the rationalism and scientific inquiry promoted by the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century only began to influence Balıkesir with a delay of nearly a century. This delayed influence manifested in education, publishing, printing, religious perception, and a turn toward new forms of artistic expression. Among the diverse populations, the Greeks of Ayvalık appear to have benefited more substantially from the Enlightenment's legacy than the Turks and Armenians. Nonetheless, the processes of change and transformation among Muslim Turks and Armenians unfolded in parallel. This article briefly examines the signs of modernization that emerged in Balıkesir under the influence of the European Enlightenment in the late nineteenth century, drawing on sources such as newspapers, *sale names*, and memoirs.

For citation:

Ozsari, M. (2025). Signs of transition from scholastic thought to the age of Enlightenment in Anatolia in the second half of the nineteenth century: The case of Balıkesir Province. *Urbis et Orbis. Microhistory and Semiotics of the City*, 5(1), 79–95. [https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2025-5\(1\)-79-95](https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2025-5(1)-79-95)

Introduction

Balıkesir, a province in Western Anatolia, has long served as a crossroads of civilizations, cultures, religions, and worldviews. Bordered by the Aegean Sea to the west, the Marmara Sea to the north, and provinces such as Manisa, İzmir, Kütahya, and Uşak, Balıkesir has historically been shaped by its geographical proximity to both conservative inland Anatolia and the more cosmopolitan centers of İzmir and İstanbul. Balıkesir has developed as a culturally layered and strategically crucial urban center along major land and rail transport routes.

The province's vast geography and multicultural composition have made it a microcosm of the broader historical dynamics of Western Anatolia. Civilizations spanning over two millennia have left their mark on Balıkesir, endowing it with what may be called a "laboratory of signs", a space where cultural, religious, and ideological shifts can be closely studied.

Although much of the existing research has focused on Balıkesir's role in the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1922), leading to its popular image as a "kuva-yi milliye" (national forces) city, this study seeks to move beyond nationalist historiography. The historical and cultural depth of the province extends well beyond the last century. Non-Muslim communities such as Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, and Jews, alongside Muslim Turks, have all contributed to Balıkesir's identity. However, their presence and roles are often overlooked in mainstream Turkish historiography.

This paper examines the social and cultural structure of Balıkesir in the nineteenth century, particularly in light of the delayed reception of Enlightenment ideals. Using a synchronic and semiotic approach, it aims to analyze how the values of the European Enlightenment – reason, science, and secularism – began to affect the daily lives and intellectual landscape of Balıkesir's diverse communities in the late Ottoman period.

This study investigates the signs of modernization and ideological transformation as they appeared across different cultural groups through the analysis of newspapers, salnames (provincial yearbooks), memoirs, and archival documents. Particular attention is paid to the semiotic implications of Balıkesir's polyphonic and multilingual makeup, where Muslim Turks, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Bulgarians coexisted and, to varying degrees, participated in the empire's modernization efforts.

However, the historical identity and cultural image of Balıkesir province extend far beyond the past hundred years. Regardless of the lens through which one views it, Balıkesir possesses a deep-rooted and multilayered historical presence. This legacy has contributed significantly to the cultural richness of the region. Diverse communities, including Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, and especially the Muslim Turkish population, have all played essential roles in shaping this heritage.

Despite this diversity, most academic research on Balıkesir in Turkey has concentrated predominantly on the history of its Muslim Turkish inhabitants. Non-Muslim communities such as Greeks, Armenians, and Bulgarians, who lived in the province for centuries, have been largely overlooked by Turkish scholars, with only a few notable exceptions. Interestingly, even the historical narrative concerning Muslim Turks in Balıkesir remains relatively underexplored. Most existing studies, especially those published over the past two decades, have focused narrowly on the period from the end of the First World War to around 1950.

However, the ontological existence of a city should be understood as a structural totality. Like any such totality, a city comprises interrelated elements, and to grasp its nature, one must identify these elements and uncover the relations between them. This principle applies to Balıkesir as it does to any urban formation.

Taking these realities into account, we sought to understand the social and cultural composition of Balıkesir province during the final century of the Ottoman Empire, that is, in the nineteenth century. Through archival research, newspaper analysis, and other sources, we formed the impression that Balıkesir was, at the time, a polyphonic, multilingual, and multicultural society composed of Muslim Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and even Bulgarians. Based on this intuition, we used a synchronic methodology to examine the province's nineteenth-century social and cultural structure.

Having identified the diverse and multilayered structure of Balıkesir society, we examined how the transformations associated with the European Enlightenment, particularly those emphasizing reason, science, and progress, manifested in the region. More specifically, we aimed to explore how these signs of change, introduced through the Ottoman reform movement (Tanzimat and later), resonated in a western Anatolian province like Balıkesir. How did Enlightenment ideals influence the everyday lives of ordinary residents? What forms of resistance, adaptation, or reinterpretation did the local population demonstrate in response to these reforms?

This paper employs original historical documents and approaches them through the lens of semiotics, utilizing semiotic terminology and methods to analyze the traces of Enlightenment thought in nineteenth-century Balıkesir.

Throughout this investigation, we closely examined the distinguishing features of Balıkesir's demographic composition. The province was far from ethnically homogeneous in the second half of the nineteenth century. A significant Greek population resided along the western coastline and in the northern port towns such as Ayvalık, Bandırma, and Erdek. The provincial capital, Balıkesir city, was home to a substantial Armenian community. Additionally, around 3,000 Bulgarians and Jews also lived in the province. This ethnoreligious diversity gave Balıkesir a distinctive character, rendering it a particularly fertile ground for semiotic analysis.

In the nineteenth century, Balıkesir Province functioned as a sanjak (sub-province) of the Hüdavendigar Vilayet, whose administrative center was Bursa. In Ottoman archival sources, this sanjak is called Karesi Sancağı (Salname-yi Devlet-i Âliye-i Osmaniye, 1315/1899-1900, 406-409). The Karesi Sanjak encompassed Balıkesir, the administrative center, along with the districts of Ayvalık, Burhaniye, Edremit, Erdek, Bandırma, Gönen, Bigadiç, and Sındırgı. Present-day districts such as Balya, İvrindi, Savaştepe (formerly Giresun), Kepsut, Susurluk (formerly Fırt), and Dursunbey (formerly Balat), which were smaller administrative units (kaza) in the nineteenth century, have since evolved into township centers (Salname-yi Devlet-i Âliye-i Osmaniye, 1315/1899-1900, 406-409).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Balıkesir's administrative status fluctuated. At various times, it functioned as an independent province, as a sanjak within the Hüdavendigar Vilayet, or as a directly administered sanjak under central authority (Hüdavendigar Vilayeti 1318 Salnamesi, p. 340).

According to data from the Salname of the Hüdavendigar Vilayet published in 1900, the total population of the Balıkesir sanjak was recorded as 370,798, with 284,835 Muslims and 85,963 non-Muslims. Among the non-Muslims were 7,081 Armenians, 3,681 Bulgarians, and 359 Jews (Özsarı, 2007, p. 186). These figures indicate that approximately one-

quarter of the population was non-Muslim, while the remaining three-quarters were Muslim, primarily ethnic Turks. This demographic distribution reflects a notable degree of religious and ethnic coexistence within the province during this period.

The city of Balıkesir, now with a population nearing 400,000, remains the region's industrial, commercial, and cultural hub. Historically, it has consistently retained its strategic and economic importance, both in the Ottoman period and throughout the Republican era.

As is well known, Westernization in the Ottoman Empire accelerated significantly during the second half of the nineteenth century. Significant reforms were undertaken under the leadership of prominent modernist and pro-Western Ottoman statesmen such as Mustafa Reşit Pasha, Âli Pasha, Keçecizade Fuat Pasha, and Ahmet Cevdet Pasha. This reform process was officially initiated with the proclamation of the Tanzimat Edict on November 3, 1839, under the direction of Reşit Pasha. Initially, the Tanzimat reforms had a direct impact on the non-Muslim communities residing in Istanbul, and soon thereafter, their effects extended to Muslim communities in the capital. From the 1850s onwards, Istanbul witnessed substantial social transformations as both state and society sought to leave behind their traditional "circle of civilization" and align themselves with the values and institutions of Western modernity.

This wave of reform and transformation began to influence the daily lives of individuals beyond the capital within a relatively short time. Due to its proximity to Istanbul and its multi-ethnic composition, the province of Balıkesir emerged as one of the Anatolian centers most affected by the Ottoman modernization process. In this context, the social and cultural shifts observed in Balıkesir between 1850 and 1900 offer a valuable case study of how a typical provincial city experienced the broader transformations of the Tanzimat era.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Muslim Turks and Armenians residing in Balıkesir generally followed the cultural and social developments of the capital. Although somewhat delayed, the intellectual and artistic currents originating in Istanbul gradually began to shape Balıkesir's cultural environment. This cultural transmission did not occur linearly or unilaterally. The influence of Istanbul's scientific, literary, and artistic atmosphere was first felt in the provincial capital of Balıkesir and subsequently diffused to surrounding districts and smaller towns. Conversely, Balıkesir also contributed to the cultural life of the capital, as illustrated by the case of the poet and intellectual Müstecabizade İsmet, who emerged from Balıkesir and later became known in Istanbul's literary circles (Özsarı, 2007, p. 186).

The mutual exchange between the center and the provinces gained further momentum with the establishment and proliferation of printing presses and the growing accessibility of the media. The founding of provincial printing houses and the publication of semi-official provincial newspapers were particularly significant in enhancing the circulation of ideas and cultural production (Kocabaşoğlu & Birinci, 1995, pp. 101–102).

In the historiography of the Ottoman Empire, the nineteenth-century reform era and its societal impacts have typically been studied with a predominant focus on the imperial capital, Istanbul. With the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, Ankara also entered scholarly discourse as a central site of transformation. However, cities beyond Istanbul and Ankara were generally relegated to the category of *taşra*, which is rural or peripheral areas, and remained largely absent from critical academic inquiry. As the prominent scholar of local literature and culture, Ömer Faruk Huyugüzel has emphasized, cultural

relationships and interactions do not unfold in a unidirectional flow from the center to the periphery; instead, they constitute a dialectical process grounded in mutual exchange (Huyugüzel, 2000, p. 2). In light of this, any attempt to understand the shifting civilizational axis of Turkey, both in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, must extend its gaze beyond the traditional metropolitan centers to include other regional hubs of cultural vitality.

Balıkesir, situated geographically between major cultural capitals such as Istanbul and Izmir and characterized by its ethnically and religiously heterogeneous population, presents a particularly compelling case. In this regard, Balıkesir may be viewed as a semiotic laboratory for modernization studies within the Ottoman context. Imperial reforms and cultural transformations were simultaneously received, interpreted, and rearticulated in this liminal space.

1. Educational Institutions

The earliest manifestations of modernization and reform within the Ottoman Empire were most prominent in its educational institutions. As the reform movements advocating for Westernization gained momentum, the lifestyles and educational paradigms of Muslim and non-Muslim communities residing in Anatolia and Rumelia underwent significant transformations. Thus, the academic institutions of Balıkesir province serve as a key site where the first signs of this broader cultural shift can be observed.

In this context, “educational institutions” encompass traditional and modern structures that emerged during the Ottoman Enlightenment period. Among the most notable conventional educational institutions for the Muslim community were the *madrasas* (Islamic religious schools) and mosques, which served as religious worship and education centers. In addition to these, Christian communities also operated their institutions, such as churches, church schools, and monasteries. These institutions were vital in maintaining religious and cultural traditions while educating their followers.

Simultaneously, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of modern educational institutions in the Empire. Following the start of the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman state began to establish new schools that adhered to modern pedagogical methods influenced by Western models. This shift was particularly evident in how educational institutions adapted to new social, political, and cultural needs. While the Muslim community continued sending their children to traditional *madrasas*, they also began enrolling them in modern schools established post-1845. Similarly, non-Muslim minorities, such as Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, sent their children to a combination of traditional religious schools and private schools run by their respective communities. In addition to these local institutions, foreign powers such as France, Germany, and the United States established modern schools in the Empire. These schools, primarily attended by Greek, Armenian, Bulgarian, and Jewish children, offered education based on Western pedagogical models.

This complex educational structure significantly impacted Balıkesir, which mirrored the broader educational trends of the Empire due to its geographical location and cultural diversity. The schools in the province can be categorized into two main groups: the traditional academic institutions and the newly established modern schools that emerged particularly in the latter half of the century.

For the Muslim population of Balıkesir, traditional educational institutions were primarily *madrastas*, religious schools that taught Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and other religious sciences. These institutions played a central role in the intellectual and spiritual life of the Muslim community. Mosques also functioned as spaces for informal education, where religious instruction was provided to the general public. These traditional educational systems, which focused heavily on spiritual knowledge and moral teaching, continued to coexist with the newer, more secular educational models introduced during the reform period.

Church schools and monasteries were the leading educational institutions for the Christian communities – Greek, Armenian, and Jewish. These institutions focused on religious instruction and preserving linguistic and cultural traditions. Church schools, for example, offered education in Greek, Armenian, and Hebrew, while monasteries provided both religious education and vocational training.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of modern schools in Balıkesir, particularly after the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), which aimed to introduce Western-style educational practices. These schools were initially concentrated in the provincial capital, Balıkesir, but eventually spread to other towns and villages. The introduction of these schools marked a shift towards secular education, with curricula that included subjects such as mathematics, science, literature, and foreign languages.

In addition to state-run modern schools, foreign powers established private schools. For example, French, German, and American missionaries opened schools in Balıkesir, which were primarily attended by non-Muslim minorities, such as the Greeks, Armenians, and Jews. These schools offered a Westernized curriculum and promoted the cultural and religious values of the foreign powers that established them. These institutions further contributed to the diversity of the educational landscape in Balıkesir, offering an alternative to the traditional academic structures of Muslim and Christian communities.

The simultaneous operation of traditional and modern schools in Balıkesir exemplified the cultural and educational transformations within the Ottoman Empire. It was a period of coexistence between the old and the new, where various educational models influenced each other, laying the groundwork for the broader modernization efforts of the late Ottoman period.

1.1. Traditional Educational Institutions

1.1.1. Mosques and Madrasas

In the Ottoman Empire, the traditional educational institutions for the Muslim community were mosques and madrasas. Typically, a madrasa was located next to each mosque, creating a symbiotic relationship between religious worship and education. In Balıkesir, this model remained prevalent, especially among the Muslim-Turkish population. According to the *Karesi Vilayet Salnamesi* (1887), there were 83 mosques and masjids in Balıkesir and its villages. Each mosque typically housed a madrasa, which played a central role in the educational structure of the region.

The clerics, imams, and *mudarris* (scholars), collectively called the *ulama*, were the key figures in these institutions. They not only led religious worship and guided the community in matters of faith but also delivered sermons (*maw'izes*), managed the mosque libraries, taught students, and authored works on religious subjects

(Huyugüzel, 2000, pp. 1–2) as both centers of worship and education, mosques and madrasas were crucial to the intellectual and spiritual life of the Muslim community.

The Yıldırım Beyazıt Madrasa and Mosque, still standing in Balıkesir today, exemplify the continued existence of these traditional educational institutions. The madrasa, alongside the mosque, serves as a reminder of the centrality of religious education in the region.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, madrasa education remained widespread in Balıkesir. By this time, 21 madrasas were operating in the city center alone, with notable examples including the Sultan Yıldırım Bayezid, Alaybey, Hacı Halil, Hacı Ali, Hacı Yahya Efendi, Inciroğlu, İğneci, Darünnafia, Tevfik, İbrahim Bey, Hoca Sinan, Keşkek, Hacı Kaya, Mevlevi Hane, and Kaleli Madrasas. These madrasas were associated with a mosque, emphasizing the continued interdependence of religious and educational activities.

It is also noteworthy that private madrasas in Balıkesir offered specialized education in specific fields. For instance, the *Karesi Vilayet Salnamesi* (1887) records that Ahmet Nurettin Efendi, a graduate of the *Darüşşafaka* (a prestigious Ottoman school), opened a private *Literature Madrasa*, which enrolled 20 students (Karesi Vilayet Salnamesi, 1887).

The period also saw the rise of notable madrasa scholars in Balıkesir, many of whom played significant roles in the intellectual and educational life of the region. Ali Şuurî Efendi stands out for his religious scholarship and academic contributions. He founded the Darünnafia Madrasa in 1852 and studied under Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, a prominent scholar of the era. Ali Şuurî also served as the mufti of Balıkesir for 15 years, authored books on Sufism, and compiled a dictionary (Özsarı, 2005, pp. 213–219).

In summary, during the second half of the nineteenth century, madrasas in Balıkesir remained vibrant learning centers. Some provided specialized education, while others focused on religious and theological studies. The madrasas mentioned above were located within the city center of Balıkesir. However, it is also known that traditional madrasas continued to operate in district centers such as Edremit, Bandırma, Burhaniye, Kepsut, Bigadiç, and Dursunbey (Balat). Notable madrasa scholars from these areas include Emir Hafız Esat Sadi Efendi (Mufti of Edremit) and Hoca Mehmet Bey (Mufti of Burhaniye), both of whom were students of Ali Şuurî Efendi. The Alemizâde Madrasa and Şerif Pasha Madrasa in Edremit were among the institutions that continued to provide education using classical methods (Türer et al., 1998, p. 13). However, these institutions' exact educational quality, number of students, and teaching staff remain poorly documented.

1.1.2. Metropolitans, Churches, and Monasteries

In Balıkesir, a province historically marked by its religious and ethnic diversity, non-Muslim communities maintained their traditional educational institutions. As mosques and adjacent madrasas functioned as spiritual and academic centers for Muslims, Christian communities, particularly the Greek Orthodox population, established church schools adjacent to their places of worship. These institutions were especially prominent in areas with significant Greek populations, such as Ayvalık, Bandırma, and Erdek, where churches and monasteries played a central role in the cultural and educational life of the local communities.

After the Muslims, the Greek Orthodox community was the most visibly active in integrating religion into daily life. Greek religious institutions in Balıkesir operated

under the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. During the late Ottoman period, three metropolises served as the highest religious authorities for the Greek population in the region: the Metropolitanate of Marmara (renamed the Metropolitanate of Paşalimanı in 1873), the Metropolitanate of Kapıdağ, and the Metropolitanate of Kuşadası. Each metropolitanate corresponded to a particular geographic area: the Marmara Metropolitanate served Marmara Island and its satellite islands; the Kapıdağ Metropolitanate served Erdek, Biga, and Karesi; and the Kuşadası Metropolitanate oversaw Ayvalık and Saruhan (Manisa).

Numerous Greek Orthodox churches were established in connection with these ecclesiastical jurisdictions, particularly in the Ayvalık region. According to available records, by 1875, there were two churches in the center of Balıkesir and six in Burhaniye (Mutaf, 2003, p. 28). In addition, various Greek Orthodox churches were active in the second half of the nineteenth century across the region, including in Dut Limanı (Bandırma), Marmara Island, Meryem Ana (Balıkesir and Balya), Evciler (Edremit), multiple locations in Erdek (e.g., Aya Nikola, Asmalı, Yapuci, Hark, Hektel, Papuşcu), as well as in Elbezlik (Gönen), Alaşehir (Gönen), Dereköy (Burhaniye), Kümeci (Edremit), Kelek (Edincik), Bayır (Balya), Tümeni (Edremit), and Kocapınar (Balya).

Ayvalık, in particular, stood out as the district with the most vibrant and institutionally rich Christian religious life. According to the research of historian Kemal Özer, who studied Ayvalık and Burhaniye in the 1930s, the center of Ayvalık alone housed eleven major churches in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These included Aya Dimitri, one of the wealthiest churches in the region, located in the upper quarter; Taksıyarfon Church, also in the upper quarter; and Hagia Yani, in the town market area. The Church of the Virgin Mary the Urucu, situated in the courtyard of the metropolitan residence; Ay Yorgi, centrally located within the town; Zoodohos Pigi, constructed by Ekonomos; Aya Haralambos, part of the local hospital complex; Hagia Trias, in the eastern sector of the central neighborhood; Aya Nikola north of the Hagia Trias; Hagia Vasilios; and Profitelion, located on the eastern hills of the town (Özer, 1937a; Özer, 1937c).

Beyond these, eight additional churches were operating on Alibey Island and its surrounding settlements, underscoring the breadth and vitality of Greek Orthodox religious and educational life in the Ayvalık area during this period.

1.1.3. The Armenian Patriarchate and Other Christian Communities

Another crucial Christian presence in Balıkesir was the Armenian community, whose religious affairs were organized under a separate ecclesiastical structure. The Bandırma Patriarchate served as the spiritual center for Armenians in the region. By the year 1880, this institution had expanded its jurisdiction. It was renamed the Balıkesir-Bandırma Patriarchate (Mutaf, 2003, p. 29), reflecting the existence of a significant Armenian population in both the city of Balıkesir and Bandırma. According to Murat Öntug, who conducted a comprehensive study on Armenian churches and educational activities in Balıkesir, the first Armenian church in the region was established in the seventeenth century. This church was severely damaged during the 1898 earthquake but was restored and reopened for worship under the governorship of Ömer Ali Bey. In the same period, Armenian churches were also active in Bandırma and Edincik (Öntug, 2006, p. 344). Thus, by the second half of the nineteenth century, there were at least three functioning Armenian churches in the region: two in Bandırma and one in the center of Balıkesir.

In contrast to the Armenian and Greek communities, the Jewish population of Balıkesir was relatively small and did not possess a dedicated religious institution in the city. Similarly, although the province was home to over 3,000 Bulgarians, a Christian group, the presence of any Bulgarian educational or religious institutions remains undocumented. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to infer that many of the churches mentioned above were accompanied by parochial schools, providing spiritual and primary education to the children of their respective communities.

1.1.4. Monasteries as Religious and Educational Institutions

In addition to churches and church-affiliated schools, monasteries held an essential role as traditional educational and spiritual institutions for the Christian communities in the region. Numerous monastic establishments are known to have existed in the environs of Ayvalık, the Kapıdağ Peninsula, and Edremit. According to the *nineteenth-century Salname* (provincial yearbooks), six monasteries were recorded in Ayvalık alone. Most of these date back to the Byzantine period and are located on the island of Kunda. They include: Lekapania Monastery, situated near the port of Ayvalık; Taksiriadis Monastery, located at the center of Kunda Island within a dense pine forest; Monastery of Saint Demetrius, on the northern shore of Patrice Island; Monastery of Ayia Iorga, positioned in Patrice Bay; Aya Yani Monastery, on the right bank of the Bosphorus at the entrance to Ayvalık's harbor; Monasteries of Profiti Ilyas and Ai Apostol, located near the entrance of the governmental buildings complex (Özer, 1937d).

These monastic institutions functioned as centers for religious worship and served as residences and training centers for the Christian clergy, highlighting their dual role in spiritual and educational life.

A particularly prominent monastery is the Kirazlı Monastery, situated in the Kapıdağ district. It holds a special religious significance for the Greek Orthodox population throughout Turkey. Every year on August 15, pilgrims from cities such as Istanbul, Bursa, Balıkesir, and İzmir travel to Kirazlı to participate in religious festivities. As such, the Kirazlı Monastery cannot be viewed solely as a local religious institution; it also serves as a regional center addressing the broader religious needs of the Greek Orthodox community in western Anatolia.

1.2. Modern Educational Institutions

The nineteenth century was a turning point for the Muslim Turks when the foundations of their civilization began to shift. For centuries after converting to Islam, the Turks lived under the influence of the Persian-Arab cultural sphere, shaped by religious traditions and Eastern intellectual heritage. However, by the mid-1800s, that long-standing orientation began to change. Step by step, the Turks turned toward the West.

Kenan Akyüz, a scholar of Turkish literature, puts it succinctly: A change in civilization begins with a shift in mentality, and that change, in turn, starts with education (Akyüz, 1979, p. 6). For reformers like Mustafa Reşid Pasha, one of the chief architects of the Tanzimat, Westernization was not just a political or technological goal. It was a matter of transforming the mind through schooling.

Beginning in the 1840s, the Ottoman government began opening new schools that reflected this ambition. These institutions offered primary, secondary, and higher education based on modern methods, taking the French system as a model. Even at the primary

level, French was taught as a foreign language, opening the door to direct contact with Western thought, especially that of France.

This educational shift did not bypass Balıkesir. The wave of reform reached here, too. Muslim Turks and local minorities alike took part in the drive to modernize education, establishing new schools with up-to-date curricula and modern pedagogical methods. These schools played a crucial role in the cultural and social transformation of the region, spreading new ideas and creating a generation that is more at ease in the modern world.

The state-run schools opened in the Tanzimat period were typically divided into three levels: *iptida* (elementary), *rüşdiye* (middle), and *idadi* (high schools). Let us begin by looking at the *iptida* schools.

According to the *Balıkesir Vilayet Salname* (Provincial Yearbook of Balıkesir) published in 1887, four *iptidaî* (primary) schools serving the Turkish population were active in the city: Hacı Mehmet, Hanımzâde, Hasan Çelebi, and Vafirzâde¹. At the time, religious teachers staffed these schools: Elhac Ahmet Efendi and Elhac Hafız Osman Efendi at Hasan Çelebi School; Emin Efendi and Mehmet Hilmi Efendi at Hanımzâde School; Osman Efendi at Hacı Mehmet School; and Tevfik Efendi at Vafirzâde School. These institutions together educated around 250 students.

In addition to these, a girls' primary school (*iptidaî-i inas*) was operating in Balıkesir in 1886, as confirmed by a report in the *Karesi* newspaper (issue no. 5, 9 Recep 1303/April 2, 1302/April 14, 1886). Its teacher at the time was Hafiza Siddika Hanım, who later resigned for unknown reasons and was succeeded by Havva Hanım. However, the number of students enrolled and the school's founding date remain uncertain. Moreover, its absence from the 1887 *Salname* suggests it may have closed shortly thereafter.

The *Rüştiye* School, a secondary-level institution introduced after the Tanzimat reforms, to bridge primary and high school education, opened its doors in Balıkesir in 1864. Its first headmaster and teacher was Mehmet Nuri Efendi (İskender, 2005, p. 262). According to the 1887 yearbook, the school's faculty included Sadrettin Efendi, Hafız Abdülaziz Efendi, İbrahim Zihni Efendi, and Hafız Mehmet Emin Efendi. Sadrettin Efendi, who may have migrated from Iran, was an active contributor to the *Karesi* newspaper, Balıkesir's first Turkish-language publication, where he published poems and essays under the pen names Sadr-i Şirvani and Sadrettin. Another teacher, Abdülaziz Efendi, also published poetry in the same newspaper, reflecting a vibrant intellectual environment. Admission to the *Rüştiye* School was by examination, and the institution soon earned a reputation for academic quality. Balıkesir High School, in turn, emerged as one of the city's most respected schools, known for its capable teaching staff and academically strong student body.

In Balıkesir, *Rüştiye* schools were opened for Muslim-Turkish children and served the city's Christian communities. According to the 1899 *Salname*, two such schools operated in the center of Balıkesir: one established in 1851, the other in 1876, offering education specifically for non-Muslim students. The educational network expanded with the foundation of *Rüştiye* schools in Edremit (1873) and Erdek (1889), and eventually, a school was also opened for the Greek population in Bandırma. However, its founding date remains unclear. Together, these efforts reflect a parallel process of educational modernization for both Muslim and Christian populations in Balıkesir during the late Ottoman period.

¹ Karesi, 21, 4. Zilkade 1303 / July 23 1302 / August 4 1886.

The first high school within Balıkesir province was opened not in the capital city but in Ayvalık. Established in 1884, the Ayvalık Greek High School followed the official Greek educational curriculum. However, the institution had already existed since the early 1800s under the name *Gymnasia*, and it appears that the name was formally changed to Ayvalık High School in 1884. Its library, enriched with volumes imported from Greece, and its modern facilities – including two laboratories, nine classrooms, a physics lab, a library, administrative offices, a student support bureau, a savings fund, an observatory, and even a gymnasium, made it one of the most prestigious Greek-language schools of the region (Özer, 1937b). At its peak, the student body surpassed 600, drawing learners from Ayvalık and across Greece, giving the school a unique status among Greek educational institutions in the Ottoman Empire.

What set Balıkesir apart in the education of Muslim Turks, and allowed it to rival larger cultural centers like İzmir and Bursa while standing out from nearby cities such as Manisa or Denizli, was the founding of the *İdadi*, or preparatory high school, in the town. When İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı served as the principal of the Karesi İdadi (later Karesi High School), he prepared a school yearbook in November 1923, in which he notes that *İdadi* schools began to be established around 1884–1885 (1300 AH). The Karesi İdadi was officially founded on February 11, 1301 (February 23, 1886) and soon began offering instruction (Uzunçarşılı 1342/1340/1925, p. 10). It was a seven-year boarding institution. Its building was set in one of the city's most prominent locations: a symbol of Balıkesir's growing ambition as an educational and cultural hub.

Historian İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı provides valuable insights into the establishment of the Karesi İdadi (Balıkesir High School). Starting in 1885, higher education institutions began to be established across the provincial centers of the Ottoman Empire. Balıkesir's *İdadi*, later known as Balıkesir High School, officially opened its doors in Celalzade Han on February 11, 1886. However, as the school grew, the original building soon proved insufficient. The school administrators sought a more suitable space to address this, eventually converting the Uncu Adil Efendi mansion near the Zaganos Pasha Mosque into a new educational facility. By 1895, the school had moved into a purpose-built building designed specifically for the *İdadi* (Uzunçarşılı 1342/1340/1925, pp. 13–15).

In short, Balıkesir High School, one of the city's most influential modern educational institutions, opened on February 11, 1886 (1301 in the Islamic calendar) and has remained operational ever since. Compared with similar institutions in other provincial capitals, such as İzmir and Bursa, which also opened their high schools in the same period, it becomes clear how Balıkesir competed with significant educational and cultural centers in the second half of the 19th century.

Admission to Balıkesir High School was by examination, as recorded in *Karesi* newspaper². The first student of Balıkesir High School was Müstecabizade İsmet, who earned the school's first student number. İsmet graduated at the top of his class and studied in Istanbul, where, particularly in the 1890s, he became the chief editor of two prominent magazines, *Mektep* and *Musavver Terakki*. Later, he also published *Hizmet*, a newspaper in İzmir. Müstecabizade İsmet's early literary and cultural education was rooted in his time at Karesi İdadi.

Today, the first building of Karesi İdadi is being considered for conversion into a museum, although it has stood vacant for several years. Meanwhile, the institution

² Karesi, 33, 22. Teşrinievvel 1302 / 3 November 1886.

continues to operate as Balıkesir High School (Balıkesir Lisesi). The modern-day school stands in an upgraded facility, far exceeding the original building, yet it remains a testament to the long and storied history of Balıkesir's educational development. Balıkesir High School, once known as Karesi İdadi, is not only one of the most respected institutions in Balıkesir but also holds a distinguished place in the history of education across Turkey.

In summary, Ayvalık High School, which opened at the same time as Balıkesir High School, holds a significant place in history as a key institution for the education of the Greek population living in and around Balıkesir. Not limited to local Greek students, Ayvalık High School also welcomed students from across Greece, further solidifying its regional importance. Both Ayvalık and Balıkesir High Schools played pivotal roles in the city's modernization process, contributing to the educational and cultural development of the region during the late 19th century.

2. Libraries and Bookstores

One of the key indicators of a city's intellectual development is the presence of books and libraries. A city with more books and libraries generally has a higher intellectual level among its residents. Balıkesir, historically, has been a region of high intellectual engagement, with notable ancient libraries like the Library of Pergamon, located approximately 100 km from the city. In addition, significant cultural centers such as Assos, Kysikos, and Antandros were located in and around Balıkesir. Therefore, a rich literary and library tradition would emerge in Balıkesir in the 19th century. However, the city lagged in this aspect.

In the second half of the 19th century, three libraries were known to be available for the Muslim Turkish population of Balıkesir. These included the Elhac Mehmet Efendi Library in the Selatin District, the Elhac Çingeli Mehmet Ağa Library next to Yıldırım Mosque, and the Ali Şuurî Library in the Hisariçi District. Unfortunately, the Ali Şuurî Library was destroyed in the 1898 Balıkesir earthquake, and its books were transferred to the Hamidiye Library, which Mutasarrıf Ömer Ali Bey built. Together, these libraries contained around 3,000 books. Compared to Izmir, where several libraries operated during the same period, including Hisar, Şadırvan, and Mufti libraries, Balıkesir's library infrastructure was relatively underdeveloped.

Information on bookstores in Balıkesir during this time is scarce. However, in June 1886, Arakel Efendi, an Armenian bookseller from Istanbul, opened a branch of his bookstore in Balıkesir. This bookstore, managed by local notable Saatçi Ethem Efendi, provided newly published books for Balıkesir's readers. There is no record of other bookstores operating in the city then. As for Ayvalık High School's library, it was reportedly well-stocked, though no specific details on the quantity, language, or quality of the books are provided.

3. Tekkes and Zaviyes

During the Ottoman Empire, tekkes and zaviyes were institutions where Muslims received religious and mystical education. Balıkesir, like other cities in the Empire, had several tekkes and zaviyes that played an essential role in the region's intellectual life. Sufi orders such as Mevlevi, Cerrahiye, Rufailik, Uşşâkîlik, Naqshbandi, and Bektashilik were active in Balıkesir. Notably, Hacı İbrahim Ethem Efendi, a leading scholar from Balıkesir who passed away in 1868, was a member of the Naqshbandi order.

Additionally, one of the madrasahs in the city was a Mevlevihane Madrasa, where figures like Ahmet Efendi and İbrahim Efendi served as teachers. This indicates that Mevlevism was a prevalent belief system in the area. Müstecabizade İsmet, a prominent literary figure from Balıkesir in the second half of the 19th century, was also influenced by the Cerrahiye order. Today, sects such as Cerrahîlik, Naqshbandi, and Kadirilik have a notable presence in Balıkesir.

4. Printing Houses

Three printing houses operated within Balıkesir province in the second half of the 19th century, two in the city center and one in Ayvalık. The first printing house in Balıkesir was established in Ayvalık in 1819. Kostani Tonbara, an Ayvalık native who studied printing in Paris, opened the first press in the region to produce Greek-language books. His press, known as the Tonbara Printing House, printed various scientific and cultural works, including books on painting, music, and sculpture.

The second printing house in Balıkesir was the Karesi Provincial Printing House, located on the current Hilton Garden Inn hotel site. This printing house operated manually with eight staff, and the Karesi newspaper and the Karesi Provincial Yearbook were printed. The printing house was dismantled and moved to Bursa in 1888 after Balıkesir's administrative status was changed from a province to a sanjak.

The third printing house, Cemil Efendi Printing House, was established in 1892. This printing house used a lever-operated machine and lithographic stones. After 1910, it was responsible for printing newspapers like *Balıkesir*, *Lightning*, and *Frame*.

These printing houses were crucial in spreading literature and news in the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

5. Newspapers

In the nineteenth century, periodicals became one of the most important means of communication and social interaction. Within the Ottoman Empire, the publication of Turkish-language newspapers and magazines expanded beyond the major cultural centers during the second half of the century. This development was closely tied to the administrative reorganization that followed the *Regulation of Provinces* issued in 1864. Under this reform, the empire was divided into 24 provinces of varying status, and printing houses were established in provincial centers as part of the modernization efforts. These printing houses soon began publishing local newspapers, providing state authorities a new instrument to influence and direct public opinion.

One such publication was *Karesi*, the first provincial newspaper in Balıkesir. Its first issue appeared on 5 March 1302 (17 March 1886), marking the beginning of a new phase in the region's cultural and journalistic life. Published weekly, *Karesi* produced 105 issues before ceasing publication on 30 March 1304 (11 April 1888). It is the first Turkish-language periodical in Balıkesir and is widely recognized as the starting point of journalism and press history.

The editor-in-chief, Mehmet Sadettin Bey, who also directed the Karesi Printing House, played a central role in the newspaper's establishment. Upon its release, the Istanbul press and other media outlets praised *Karesi*, a fact acknowledged by the editorial board through a printed note of thanks (Mehmet Saadettin (1303/1887)).

During its two years of publication, *Karesi* published not only literary and semi-literary works, such as poems, stories, letters, and prose poems, but also nearly 500 articles covering a wide range of fields: philosophy, education, geography, history, public administration, law, agriculture, medicine, and public health. Furthermore, the newspaper extensively reported the social, political, cultural, and economic developments in Balıkesir and surrounding settlements. These materials offer valuable primary sources for historians researching the late Ottoman period in the region.

As noted by Selmin İskender, who conducted a detailed study of the newspaper, *Karesi* had a significant influence beyond its immediate locality. Copies were distributed to other major cities such as Istanbul, Bursa, and Izmir, and contributions from these provinces were also published in the paper. The literary content of *Karesi* is particularly useful in understanding the aesthetic sensibilities and cultural tastes of Balıkesir's residents during the reign of Abdülhamid II (İskender, 2005, p. 88).

The editorial team included figures such as Ali Haydar, Ahmet Nurettin, Arvanet Agaton, İbrahim Efendi, Mehmet Feyzi Efendi, Mehmet Nuri Efendi, Muharrem Hasbi, Recep Efendi, and Sadrettin Efendi. The paper also published early works by writers and poets like Abdülaziz Mecdi Tolun and Müstecabizade İsmet, who later gained national fame. All of this underscores the foundational role *Karesi* played in the cultural development of Balıkesir.

It is also important to note the role of the Greek community in Balıkesir, particularly in Ayvalık, where publishing activities were even more advanced than in the Turkish population. In the nineteenth century, the Greek-language daily *Krikis* and the biweekly magazine *Haliko Astir* were published in Ayvalık (Bayraktar, 1998, p. 30). Although archival collections of these Greek publications are not found in Turkish repositories, further research in Athenian libraries and archives may reveal additional information on the print culture of the Greek community in Ayvalık.

6. Theaters

Theater as a genre began to spread among Muslim Turks in the second half of the nineteenth century. Especially after the proclamation of the Tanzimat Edict in 1839, theater companies from France and Italy arrived in Istanbul and held performances for months. Subsequently, plays began to be written by Turkish authors, most of which were original works or adaptations of Molière and performed initially by Armenian and Greek theater troupes. The theater was increasingly regarded as entertainment and an educational tool, attracting significant attention. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the theater played a notable role in developing Ottoman society's intellectual and artistic life.

During this period, as in other centers of the empire, Turkish theater also emerged in Balıkesir. However, the exact frequency and scope of theatrical activity, the establishment of dedicated theaters, and the timeline of the first performances in the city remain unclear. Nevertheless, an advertisement published in *Karesi* newspaper suggests that a theater troupe known as the Agah Efendi Theater visited Balıkesir in 1886³. The announcement stated that performances would begin at the end of Ramadan that year. A week later, the newspaper's 15th issue (21 June 1302/3 July 1886) confirmed that the Agah Efendi troupe had arrived and would stage a play. From these announcements,

³ *Karesi*, 14. 4 June 1302 / 16 June 1886.

it is understood that the troupe performed in Balıkesir for approximately one month, from the beginning to the end of Ramadan.

Unfortunately, little surviving information exists about the performance venues, the specific plays, or the audience composition. Another report published in *Karesi* (no. 23, 6 August 1302/23 June 1886) mentions a theater and circus group performing in the city, though the name of the group and the plays they performed are unknown. Still, the repeated visits to the Agah Efendi Theater and the longevity of their stay suggest the formation of a distinct theatrical culture among Muslim Turks in Balıkesir.

Undoubtedly, the theatrical activities in Balıkesir during the late nineteenth century were not limited to those mentioned in *Karesi*. It is believed that Greek theater continued regularly, particularly in Ayvalık, where the Greek population was dense, and in nearby settlements such as Bandırma and Erdek. Unfortunately, detailed information about the development of Greek theater in these areas remains scarce. A systematic review of Greek-language newspapers published in Ayvalık during this period could shed more light on the extent of theatrical life and the broader cultural dynamism in the Balıkesir region.

Conclusion

Since antiquity, Balıkesir Province has developed as an essential center of culture, art, and science. Prominent ancient cities such as Pergamon, Assos, Troy, Antandros, Dasklepon, Kyzikos, and Adramytteion lie either within or near its modern borders, indicating a longstanding regional legacy of reason, science, and art.

The influence of the European Enlightenment reached Balıkesir about a century after it had begun on the continent. The first signs of modernization appeared among the Greek population of Ayvalık, who maintained strong educational and commercial ties with Athens. They were the first in the province to establish printing presses, publish newspapers, and open high schools using modern curricula. Muslim Turks began to follow suit approximately fifty years later, establishing modern schools, printing houses, and newspapers. The Armenian community, in turn, primarily developed in tandem with their Muslim Turkish neighbors, experiencing the Enlightenment process together.

European influence reached Balıkesir from two poles: Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, and Athens, the capital of Greece. While Balıkesir's Muslim Turks and Armenians were culturally oriented toward Istanbul, the Greeks of Ayvalık looked toward Athens. This dual orientation is reflected in local developments; for example, an Armenian, Arakel Efendi, founded the first Turkish bookstore in Balıkesir.

Education in nineteenth-century Balıkesir displayed a dual character. For Muslim and Christian populations, modern-style schools began to open for the first time. Traditional institutions, madrasas, church schools, and monasteries remained prevalent alongside them. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Balıkesir became a contested space between scholastic thought (grounded in religious doctrine) and Enlightenment ideals (centered on reason, science, and art). The Greek population advanced rapidly toward modernity among the region's communities, while the Armenian and Turkish communities progressed more gradually. The acceleration of the Enlightenment among the Turks would only occur during the Republican period under Atatürk.

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Received / Материал поступил в редакцию 03.11.2024

Accepted / Принят к публикации 03.02.2025