Alevi Digital Archives and Epistemic Autonomy: The Institutional, Academic, and Digital Transformation of Alevi Knowledge

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Summary

This article argues that the body of knowledge on Alevism, which became increasingly visible through the “Alevi publication boom” of the 1990s, has today reached a new threshold through digital archives, online encyclopedias, oral history recordings, and open-access platforms. Its central point is that Alevi digital archives are not merely technical repositories for preserving cultural heritage. They also constitute a new field of struggle over who represents Alevism, through which concepts, within which institutional frameworks, and with what kind of political or epistemic authority. In this context, the Alevi Encyclopedia stands out as a distinctive digital knowledge institution: independent of the state, sectarian politics, or closed ideological agendas; grounded instead in academic standards, multilingual open access, collective scholarly labour, and the Alevi community’s right to speak for its own memory.

Tags: Alevi Akademisi, Alevi Hafızası, Alevi teolojisi, Alevilik, Ansiklopedi, Araştırma Merkezi, Dijital Epistemoloji, Dijitalleştirme, Enstitü, Sözlük, Üniversite

“The Alevi Publication Boom” and New Forms of Circulating Knowledge on Alevism

In the early 1990s, the profound transformation of global political balances, the rise of identity-based politics in Turkey, and, more importantly, the massacres and forced displacement policies that took place in Alevi living spaces—such as Sivas (1993), Dersim (1994), and the Gazi and Ümraniye neighbourhoods of Istanbul (1995)—targeted Alevis sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, and brought Alevi politicisation to a new stage. During this period, Alevis began to organise rapidly both in Turkey and in the Western European diaspora, becoming more visible in the

public sphere under their own name, through their own institutions, and with their own demands. Alongside concerns over security, the defence, preservation, and transmission of Alevi culture and identity to new generations were among the main motivations. This was followed by an intense struggle for official recognition, which achieved important gains in several Western European countries. This international visibility was not limited to the political sphere. It also strongly stimulated academic, intellectual, and artistic production on Alevi history, culture, sociology, politics, belief worlds, and ritual practices (Zırh 2026, 1–18).

During this period, often described as a “publication boom” on Alevism and extending especially from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, journals, books, edited volumes, articles, newspaper series, and later texts circulating online began to multiply at an increasing pace. These were produced by researchers, religious leaders, intellectuals, institutional representatives, and local memory bearers. At the same time, theses, reports, and research projects on Alevism in Turkey and in the international academic world also gained growing visibility. In the end, a multilingual, multi-layered, and internationally recognised body of literature on Alevism emerged.

This vast literature undoubtedly also reflects the historical, socio-cultural, geographical, linguistic, symbolic, and religious-traditional differences that Alevi communities have carried from the past, as well as the strong contemporary political expressions of these differences. Alevis reinterpret and transmit their historical and cultural differences through modern forms of politics, migration experiences, diaspora conditions, and struggles for recognition. The actors involved in knowledge production are, of course, not outside this socio-political atmosphere. It is therefore necessary to note that knowledge on Alevism has never taken shape as a linear or homogeneous narrative. On the contrary, the intense debates around popular questions—what Alevism is, how it should be defined, how its historical roots should be interpreted, how its relationship with Islam and other Abrahamic religions and/or traditions should be understood, and how geographical, ethnic, and linguistic differences should be situated within this picture—constitute one of the central phenomena shaping contemporary Alevism.

As the first quarter of the twenty-first century comes to an end, one of the most visible outcomes of changing and transforming human conditions is the entry of internet technologies into social life. These technologies have now become an irreversible part of everyday life, public communication, and the ways in which new generations acquire knowledge. Naturally, all forms of knowledge circulate within their own social, political, cultural, and institutional contexts; they are reproduced through different

knowledge regimes, forms of authority, and logics of classification. From this perspective, the vast literature on Alevism mentioned above has not merely found a new space of circulation in the digital world. Today, questions about how knowledge on Alevism will be collected, by whom it will be classified, through which conceptual frameworks it will be interpreted, and by what tools it will be transmitted to future generations have also begun to generate new methods, new institutions, and new fields of debate.

The focus of this article is the process through which the cultural heritage that Alevis carried until the end of the twentieth century largely through oral culture, collective memory, ritual practices, *Ocak–talip* relations, local narratives, and various sacred written and material documents is now being transferred to the web, classified, and re-evaluated with the help of contemporary digital technologies. *Buyruks*, genealogies, manuscripts, *cönks*, ritual texts, *nefes*, *deyiş*, institutional archives, reports prepared on Alevis, field notes, audio-visual recordings, and oral history narratives are among the main materials of this new field of digital archiving. Yet the transfer of these materials into digital environments cannot be seen merely as a technical act of preservation. This process also raises questions about who will represent knowledge on Alevism, through which concepts it will be organised, and how the Alevi community's right to speak over its own memory will be protected.

Alevi society, Alevi politicisation, and the Alevi movement have always had a noteworthy—and still insufficiently studied—interaction and proximity with academia (Gültekin 2025, 24–33). Today, therefore, the internationally recognised field of Alevi Studies carries several structural, intellectual, and institutional specificities that distinguish it from other area studies fields, including neighbouring fields such as Kurdish Studies. One important reflection of this specificity is that Alevi institutions began, already from the late 1990s onward, to build their own "academies," educational platforms, research centres, and memory initiatives. Today, various projects, digital platforms, archival initiatives, and encyclopedic works developing within this field of interaction are shaping a new space of knowledge production and transmission that may be called "Alevi digital archives." This article may be read as a preliminary attempt to assess, frame, and discuss this new field, which will directly affect future generations and is closely connected to Alevi institutionality.

The Institutionalisation of Alevi Studies: Universities, Institutes, and Alevi Academies *(See Table 1)*

One of the early examples of institutional work on Alevism and Bektashism within a

university in Turkey was the Centre for Turkish Culture and Hacı Bektaş Veli Research, established at Gazi University on 28 October 1987 under Higher Education Law No. 2547. The Centre aimed “to document the place of Hacı Bektaş Veli in the history of Turkish culture, to address gaps in knowledge in this field, to develop cooperation with similar institutions, and to conduct research on cultural figures such as Pir Sultan Abdal, Hasan Dede, and Gül Baba.” Today, the fact that its library holds approximately 3,500 printed works, around 100 *cönks*, journals and manuscript documents, as well as digital copies of nearly 600 rare works obtained from libraries around the world, shows that the Centre created an early written-source and archival base in the field of Alevism-Bektashism. At the same time, founded within the YÖK-centred higher education order that emerged after the 1980 military coup, this Centre also reflects the Turkish state’s tendency to approach religious-social formations that it does not officially recognise, such as Alevism, not as independent faith communities, but rather within the categories of “Turkish culture,” “folklore,” “Sufism,” and “cultural heritage.” For this reason, the Centre is important, on the one hand, as an early public institution that contributed to the accumulation of documents, publications, and academic work in the field of Alevism-Bektashism. On the other hand, it is also significant because it shows the Sunni-normative and culturalist boundaries within which the state-academia relationship in Turkey has produced knowledge on Alevism.

Within Alevi institutions, initiatives aimed at academic knowledge production, faith education, archiving, and the formation of institutional memory appear to have emerged as early as the late 1990s, during an early phase in which the Alevi movement was developing and becoming institutionalised. The role of the European diaspora in this process is particularly noteworthy. The Avrupa Alevi Akademisi (The European Alevi Academy), founded in Germany in 1997 and today continuing its work under the name Alevi Academy, set itself goals such as preparing informational materials needed by Alevi institutions, carrying out German- and Turkish-language educational work on Alevism, compiling written sources for faith services, developing training programmes for *pirs*, *anas*, *zakirs*, and young people, collecting data on Alevis, and creating an Alevi archive and memory (Engin 2017). In this respect, this initiative should be understood not merely as an educational institution in the narrow sense, but as an early effort to collect, transmit, and institutionalise knowledge on Alevism under diaspora conditions.

Another independent institute initiative centred on Alevi institutions in the European diaspora is the Alevi-Bektashi Cultural Institute, also founded in Germany in 1997. The Institute aims to research the historical, intellectual, and faith-based structure of Alevism and Bektashism within a scientific framework; to identify oral and written sources; to encourage academic work across different disciplines; and to transmit

Alevi-Bektashi faith practices, ritual worlds, and philosophical discourse to broader audiences. In this respect, the Institute should not be seen only as a cultural or faith centre. It should also be regarded as one of the early diaspora-based knowledge and memory initiatives that treated the archiving of written and oral sources—such as genealogies, imperial decrees, authorisation documents, foundation deeds, *velâyetnames*, *cönks*, *divans*, *nefes*, *duvaz imam*, *deme*, and *deyiş*—as a strategic priority.

In Turkey, one of the earliest known examples is the Alevi Institute, founded in Ankara in 2008 through the initiative of the Headquarters of the Hacı Bektaş Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation and the Alevi Cultural Associations. It should also be emphasised that most of the academics who supported this initiative had previously been involved in *Kırkbudak – Journal of Anatolian Folk Beliefs Research*, the first peer-reviewed journal in the field of Alevi Studies, published between 2004 and 2007. The Institute was established on the basis of the observation that "although many books and journals on Alevism had been published since the 1990s, the scientific accumulation of knowledge in the field remained insufficient." It aimed "to conduct scientific studies on Alevism, to compile existing efforts, and to contribute to the preservation and development of Alevism." The presence of academics, religious leaders, researchers, artists, and institutional representatives in its scientific and advisory boards made this initiative an early and notable bridge between Alevi institutions and academic knowledge production.

In the 2010s, a second similar initiative emerged in the European Alevi diaspora. The Delil Education Academy, which brought together intellectuals within Alevi institutions and sought to build a multi-dimensional educational space for Alevi society, may be considered one of the important contemporary examples of this institutional-academic search. Introduced through a symposium held at the University of Duisburg-Essen in December 2017, the Delil Education Academy defined its aim as producing scientific knowledge in the fields of academic institutionalisation and education; consolidating and strengthening existing knowledge; and sharing it with relevant institutions. In this sense, the Delil Education Academy can be seen as one of the concrete steps taken in relation to the long-standing goal of the European Alevi movement to establish "its own scientific institution." The initiative positioned itself as an educational movement seeking to strengthen the institutional capacity of Alevi civil society, its possibilities for critical thinking, and its relationship with academic knowledge production.

Similarly, one of the initiatives that developed within Alevi institutions in Turkey in the 2020s is the GADEV Alevi Academy, established under the Garip Dede Dergâhı

Foundation. Announced to the public in 2022, the academy aimed to approach Alevism at the intersection of the social sciences and traditional fields of knowledge centred on faith, *erkân*, and *Ocaks* through programmes titled “Alevism in Turkey from a Social Science Perspective” and “*Yol-Erkân*, Faith, and *Ocaks* in Alevism.” The fact that the programme content covers disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, law, gender studies, ecology, media, politics, economics, and theology has made the GADEV Alevi Academy one of the interdisciplinary education and knowledge-production initiatives developing within Alevi institutions.

One of the most recent examples of similar efforts in the diaspora is the Dortmund-based Rıza Şehri Academy. Opened in January 2024, the academy aims to research the history, philosophy, theology, mythology, rituals, and socio-cultural values of the Alevi faith; to preserve the knowledge and documents that emerge from this work; to transmit them to future generations; and to introduce them into international literature. What makes the Rıza Şehri Academy especially important for the discussion in this article is that it is not only an education and research platform, but also the host of the Alevi Encyclopedia project, which began in April 2024.

The Alevitische Akademie (Alevi Academy) in Austria may also be mentioned within this line of diasporic institutionalisation. Operating under the umbrella of the Alevitische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich (ALEVI), the academy organises seminars, panels, conferences, and educational activities aimed at the study, transmission, and public dissemination of Alevism. Although its official website does not state a clear founding date, the fact that the name “Alevitische Akademie” was registered by ALEVI in 2019 indicates that this institutional designation acquired formal status in the recent period.

At this point, it is useful to look briefly at the Alevi-focused academic structures that have developed, especially since the 2000s, within European universities, pedagogical universities, institutes, and teacher-training programmes. These initiatives in Europe have largely taken shape around theology, religious pedagogy, teacher education, diaspora, identity, and memory studies. At the University of Hamburg, the process began with the establishment of Alevi Theology within teacher education in the context of “Religious Education for All” (2014), and later became institutionalised under the name Institute for Alevi Theology (2024). Positioned as one of the first academic institutes in the world dedicated to Alevi theology, this structure aims to research and teach *Alevitentum* in its historical and contemporary self-understandings, and in its regional, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity. At the University of Vienna, Alevi Theological Studies was established within the Institute for Islamic-Theological Studies

in the Faculty of Catholic Theology (2018), and was defined as one of the first internationally oriented university-level theological fields to make Alevism an object of research and teaching on the basis of its own religious self-understandings. With the opening of the independent individual bachelor's programme titled Alevi Theological Studies (2022/23), the Vienna case has become even more important for the institutionalisation of Alevi theology in Europe. Another important line in Austria is the training of Alevi religious education teachers that developed around the Institute for Alevi Religion at the Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule Wien/Niederösterreich (2018). Here, students can choose a focus on Alevi Religion or Alevi Doctrine within primary school teacher education; through a structure of 60 ECTS spread across bachelor's and master's levels, they can acquire qualification as primary school teachers as well as Alevi religious education teachers. This example should be understood not as a theology department in the narrow sense, but as an institutional model in the field of Alevi religious pedagogy and teacher training. Similarly, in Germany, the Pädagogische Hochschule Weingarten represents an early and noteworthy example in the field of Alevi religious pedagogy. It became possible for teachers there to receive additional training in Alevi religious education / religious pedagogy (2011), and the process gained a more institutional character with the creation of the first academic position in the field of *Alevitentum* at a German higher education institution (2013). Project-based initiatives such as the Alevi Religion and Identity Project around the University of Westminster in London should also be added to this picture. Thus, Alevi Studies in Europe has developed not only as a field of academic research, but also as an institutional field connected to religious education, public recognition, diaspora identity, and community-based knowledge production.

In Turkey, university-based centres and institutes on Alevism-Bektashism point to an earlier public-academic line, yet many of these structures have followed a limited or interrupted trajectory in terms of continuity, productivity, and institutional visibility. The Hacı Bektaş Veli Research Centre, originating in Gazi University and later transferred to Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, constitutes an early example of this line. Other structures—such as the Institute for Alevi Studies at İnönü University, the Hacı Bektaş Veli Research and Application Institute at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, the Centre for Alevi Studies Research and Application at Munzur University, the Alevism-Bektashism Application and Research Centre at Toros University, the Hacı Bektaş Veli Research and Application Centre at Hitit University, the Alevi-Bektashi Culture Application and Research Centre at Süleyman Demirel University, and the Alevism and Ahl al-Bayt Culture Application and Research Centre at Dicle University—show that knowledge on Alevism-Bektashism has found institutional counterparts within the university field. However, unlike many European

examples, in most of these centres Alevism has been approached not through an independent theological self-understanding or through a minority-religious-community-based framework of knowledge production, but rather under headings such as “Turkish culture,” “the legacy of Hacı Bektaş Veli,” “Sufism,” “folklore,” “social integration,” and “cultural research.” As a result, the geographical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and historical differences displayed by Alevi communities even within Turkey are either not visible in most cases or have been seriously manipulated. For this reason, academic institutionalisation in Turkey has, on the one hand, produced archival, graduate education, publication, and event-based platforms in the field of Alevism-Bektashism. On the other hand, it has also served as an important indicator of the conceptual and institutional boundaries within which the state-academia relationship defines knowledge on Alevism.

One of the striking points here is that both the academy initiatives developed within Alevi institutions and the official university-centred academic structures have operated within certain limits. Early examples such as the Alevi Institute and the Delil Education Academy created significant excitement and expectations at the time of their foundation. Yet over time, they appear to have struggled to establish a regular, continuous, and publicly traceable line of institutional production. Newer initiatives that emerged in the 2020s, such as the GADEV Alevi Academy and the Rıza Şehri Academy, continue their work, but they are still in the process of building a lasting foundation in terms of inter-institutional cooperation, joint research programmes, regular publication activities, and the transfer of the knowledge produced to the wider Alevi community and the public through written or digital media. At the same time, academic work outside Alevi institutions—especially in the Turkish context—appears to be strongly shaped by dominant academic paradigms, the current political climate, and the state’s official approach to Alevism. As a result, within this overall picture, the production, collection, and transmission of knowledge on Alevism has reached a new threshold. For centuries, Alevi memory was carried largely through oral culture, collective memory, ritual practices, religious-social institutions, *Dergâh* and/or *Ocak–talip* networks. With the dynamics of modernisation, migration, and politicisation, it first gained visibility through printed publications. From the 2010s onward, it has begun to move into a new field of production and circulation through internet technologies, digital archives, online encyclopedias, video recordings, oral history projects, online museums, digital exhibitions, and open-access knowledge platforms.

Alevi Studies Network and the Alevi Encyclopedia: From Academic Network to

Digital Memory

One of the current initiatives that stands out within this new academic and digital knowledge ecosystem is the Alevi Studies Network. Active on a regular basis since 2022 and today bringing together nearly 400 international researchers, the Alevi Studies Network shows that Alevi Studies is no longer merely a scattered collection of individual research efforts. Rather, it has become an internationally embodied, traceable, and increasingly continuous academic field. Through its weekly newsletters, announcements of academic events, publication news, calls, and presentations of institutions and projects, the Network strengthens the circulation of knowledge among researchers working on Alevism. It also creates a regular space of contact between Turkey, Europe, and broader international academic circles. In this respect, the Alevi Studies Network can be regarded as an important digital-academic platform that makes current academic production on Alevism visible, strengthens communication within the field, and supports the institutional identity of Alevi Studies (Gültekin 2026, 21–23).

The broader public and encyclopedic dimension of this line is represented by the Alevi Encyclopedia. Launched on 2 July 2025 and registered with the ISIL code DE-4607, the Alevi Encyclopedia is not merely a digital publishing platform. It positions itself as an independent, open-access, and multilingual knowledge institution through which Alevi knowledge can be re-collected and circulated across academic, institutional, and community-based levels. Reaching 2,500–3,000 unique visitors per day less than a year after its launch, and generating a total engagement approaching millions, the project has rapidly become a central point of reference in web-based searches on Alevism. Through entries, thematic dossiers, video recordings, oral history interviews, academy lectures, symposium outputs, and multilingual publications, the Encyclopedia brings academic knowledge production together with community memory. Its direct inclusion of the voices of *pirs*, *anas*, *babas*, *dedes*, *seyits*, *zakirs*, and local memory bearers is especially foundational for the preservation and transmission of Alevi oral cultural heritage in the digital age. In this respect, the Alevi Encyclopedia is not only an archive that collects existing knowledge on Alevism. It is also a dynamic space of collective memory and public knowledge that strengthens the Alevi community’s right to speak about its own memory, faith, concepts, and experiences. Moreover, the fact that it has inspired similar encyclopedic and archive-oriented initiatives in Turkey and Europe shortly after its establishment, developed dialogues with recognised academic institutions such as the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and created a common ground among Alevi institutions, academics, researchers, religious leaders, and community actors further clarifies the project’s distinctive position in the production and

circulation of Alevi knowledge in the digital age.

The International Conference of Alevism Studies, held biennially at the University of Westminster in London, is one of the notable examples of the institutionalisation of the field of Alevi Studies in Europe. First held in 2023 and then again in 2025, the conference brings together researchers working on Alevism at an international level, also in connection with studies on Alevi identity, religious education, and diaspora carried out around Westminster. These meetings, which also include researchers from Turkey, show that Alevi Studies is no longer simply a set of scattered studies conducted at local or national levels. Rather, it has become a Europe-centred, interdisciplinary, and increasingly continuous field of academic interaction.

From Oral Culture to Digital Archives: New Fields of Circulation for Alevi Memory

This transformation cannot be understood merely as a technical shift from printed texts to digital files. While the process described since the 1990s as the “Alevi publication boom” marked the rapid and intensive transition of Alevi communities from a memory world largely based on oral culture toward written culture, the 2020s have created a new threshold for the production, collection, classification, and transmission of knowledge on Alevism through internet technologies, digital archiving possibilities, and online knowledge platforms. For centuries, Alevism was transmitted largely through oral culture, ritual practices, collective memory, *Dergâh* and/or *Ocak* and *talip* networks, local narratives, sacred places, *deyiş*, *nefes*, hagiographic narratives, and a limited number of manuscript documents. For this reason, transferring Alevi oral cultural heritage to digital platforms means reorganising a plural, contested, and multi-layered field of knowledge across different languages, geographies, historical experiences, ritual traditions, political positions, and community memories stretching from the Balkans to Anatolia, from the Caucasus to the Levant, from the Iranian plateau to Inner Asia and the Western European diaspora. When manuscripts, genealogies, *cönks*, letters, ritual texts, visual materials, sound recordings, and oral history narratives—often preserved until today by families, *Ocak* circles, religious leaders, or local communities—are digitised, they are not merely preserved. They are also opened to a new field of public circulation. This brings with it methodological, ethical, epistemological, and institutional questions: who archives these materials, according to which criteria they are classified, through which conceptual framework they are interpreted, and to whom they are made accessible.

At this point, especially in the context of Alevis in Turkey, the digitisation of

manuscripts, official documents, institutional archives, audio-visual recordings, and oral history materials is an important process, but also one that must be carried out carefully. Alevis have been targets not only of physical violence but also of epistemic violence. They have often been defined from the outside through narrow categories produced by states, official ideologies, missionary activities, nationalist historiographies, sectarian religious understandings, and certain academic knowledge regimes. Alevism has at times been explained through limiting frameworks such as “heresy,” “folkloric remnant,” “heterodox Islam,” “an extension of Turkish culture,” or “a disappearing authentic tradition.” This makes digital archiving work more than a matter of preservation and access. For this reason, transferring Alevi cultural heritage into digital environments carries methodological and ethical responsibilities: archival materials should not be detached from their contexts; community sensitivities should be respected in relation to documents considered sacred or private; local languages and emic concepts should be preserved; oral history narratives should be treated not merely as data, but as forms of memory, testimony, and experience; and knowledge on Alevism should be produced together with religious leaders, local researchers, institutional representatives, artists, memory bearers, and community actors, as well as academic specialists. Therefore, examining current digital archiving initiatives, online knowledge platforms, and efforts to record Alevi oral cultural heritage allows us to see more clearly how knowledge on Alevism is being collected in the digital age, through which tools it is being transmitted, what possibilities and limitations it contains, and what place the Alevi Encyclopedia occupies within this expanding digital knowledge ecosystem.

One notable example in this context is the archival work of the Alevi-Bektashi Cultural Institute, founded in Cologne in 1997 under the honorary presidency of Prof. Dr. Irène Mélikoff and continuing its activities since 2007 at its centre in Hausen (Wied). The Institute, which aims to conduct scholarly, cultural, and faith-related work on Alevism and Bektashism, stands out as one of the early Europe-based institutional initiatives through its symposiums, panels, publications, and the *Journal of Alevi-Bektashi Studies* (Ceylan and Ersal 2019, 173–208). What makes it especially important for this article is its multi-layered archival structure, consisting of printed works, manuscripts, sound, image, and video recordings, and institutional archival materials. The Institute’s archive includes manuscripts and documents compiled from personal archives, a copy of the written and visual material archive of the Gazi University Hacı Bektaş Veli Research Centre, and digital materials collected through field research. The recently prepared archive catalogue is not a static inventory that merely lists this accumulation. It has been designed as a dynamic and participatory reference tool that aims to make printed works, manuscripts, audio-visual recordings, and institutional archival

materials more accessible to researchers and community members. The fact that the catalogue was prepared through cooperation between the Alevi-Bektashi Cultural Institute, the “Alevi Archive” project of the Saxon Academy of Sciences (2026), the Specialised Information Service for Middle Eastern, North African, and Islamic Studies at the University and State Library of Saxony-Anhalt in Halle, and various institutional and personal partners shows that this archive is not merely a local collection. It is a memory ground connected to international academic and community-based knowledge networks. The presentation of catalogue data in text, Citavi, CSV, XML, and BibTeX formats also indicates that the archive offers a low-threshold yet grounded mode of access for both academic research and cultural-social work. In this respect, the Archive of the Alevi-Bektashi Cultural Institute may be considered one of the early and noteworthy examples of opening texts and audio-visual materials preserved in personal archives as “sacred trusts” to a wider field of research, cultural memory, and social participation through digital copies, information forms, and cataloguing.

Another example that can be mentioned in relation to the Hacı Bektaş Veli Research Centre, established at Gazi University and today continuing its activities within Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, is the restoration and conservation process of 29 documents donated to the Centre. These documents, which included imperial decrees, petitions, and authorisation documents exceeding 2.5 metres in length, underwent conservation at Ankara University Başkent Vocational School in 2001 due to physical damage such as fire, humidity, fragility, missing parts, and ink deterioration. This example shows that written documents belonging to Alevi-Bektashi communities have passed into different public institutions and university archives. It also underlines the importance, for digital archiving debates, of asking in which institutions these documents are preserved, and within which frameworks of access and interpretation (Baydar 2001, 21–26).

The Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive (ABDA), whose name has been heard more frequently in recent years, stands out as an open-access digital humanities project that aims to preserve Alevi-Bektashi written, oral, and material cultural heritage and make it accessible to researchers and the wider public. Developed at William & Mary under the direction of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, the project focuses especially on the on-site digitisation of Alevi-Bektashi documents and manuscripts preserved in family archives in Anatolia. In its pilot phase, fieldwork was carried out in eleven provinces using portable scanning equipment; a total of 685.4 GB of material was digitised, including handwritten authorisation documents, family genealogies, visitation records, religious texts, and poems of the *nefes/deyiş* type dating from the fourteenth century to the early twentieth century. The project has also developed

initial inventory and mapping work on Alevi-Bektashi villages and sacred places, bilingual English-Turkish metadata forms, and online survey tools. In later phases, the project plans to catalogue the existing materials, conduct new scans in Anatolia and the Balkans, initiate volunteer data collection processes for villages and sacred places, and add oral history, photographs, and audio-visual recordings to the archive. In this respect, ABDA may be regarded as an independent academic initiative focused on transferring Alevi-Bektashi heritage into digital form, especially through family archives, local documents, and written materials preserved in the field.

One of the most current Europe-based examples within the expanding field of digital archiving and documentation is the project titled *Alevitisches Archiv: Ethnohistorie alevitischer Gemeinschaften in Anatolien, 16.–20. Jh.* (*Alevi Archive: Ethnohistory of Alevi Communities in Anatolia, 16th–20th Centuries*), launched under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Markus Dreßler (Leipzig) at the Saxon Academy of Sciences. This project, which began last month and stands out with its long-term and comprehensive support structure, aims to reassess the historical settlement dynamics, community-formation processes, and relations of Alevi communities with different religious and social milieus from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. The project seeks to test, through broader empirical materials, the widespread narrative that Alevi communities historically developed as isolated, closed, and detached from the outside world. Within this framework, Ottoman archives, manuscripts found in Alevi collections, oral traditions, and elements of material culture are considered together. The historical mapping of Alevi geographies, settlement networks, faith circles, and community memory is also envisaged. Conducted through a digital humanities approach, the project may be considered a current, ambitious, and long-term academic initiative aimed at documenting the Alevi oral cultural world and written cultural heritage by systematically collecting, linking, analysing, and, as far as possible, making data publicly accessible. At the same time, how the project will relate to Alevi communities' own memories, emic concepts, and local knowledge regimes, and which ethical and methodological principles it will adopt in processes of archiving, mapping, and classification, remain among the issues that must be carefully followed in such large-scale digital archiving projects.

After these examples, the *Encyclopedia of Alevism and Bektashism* (ABA) project-initiative can be mentioned as a current example showing that digitisation is not limited to community-based or independent academic initiatives, and that state institutions in Turkey have also begun to intervene directly in the digital and printed circulation of knowledge on Alevism. In early 2026, it was reported that this project would be carried out by the Alevi-Bektashi Culture and Cemevi Presidency, affiliated

with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey, together with the Board of Trustees of Hoca Ahmet Yesevi International Turkish-Kazakh University. The project aims to present knowledge in the field of Alevism and Bektashism to society as a whole, both virtually and in printed form. In an official letter that appears to have been sent by the Ministry to all universities through YÖK, it was requested that “the scientific studies produced so far be rewritten in an encyclopedia format understandable to all segments of society, that all data obtained on Alevism and Bektashism be presented in this format, and that universities be informed for the writing of entries.” The fact that this announcement was transmitted to all universities through YÖK suggests that the project is not merely a cultural publishing activity. It can also be read as an attempt by the state to establish a new institutional framework over the production and circulation of knowledge on Alevism by activating the higher education field.

At this point, the issue is not simply the preparation of a new encyclopedia. In Turkey, Alevism has long been a field of struggle over knowledge, located at the centre of state policies, the official understanding of religion reshaped through the AKP, academic classifications, and debates over public recognition. As the visibility of digital platforms, open-access archives, and community-based memory work increases, it appears that the state is also trying to intervene in this field through its own institutional capacity. This situation moves the digitisation of Alevi oral cultural heritage and written documents beyond a technical matter of preservation. Questions of who will collect knowledge on Alevism, through which concepts it will be classified, into which historical narrative it will be placed, and through which public language it will be circulated are directly connected to the problem of epistemic authority and representation. Therefore, Alevi digital archives are not neutral repositories of knowledge where the past will simply be preserved. They are becoming a new field of struggle in which the Alevi community will either protect or lose its right to speak over its own memory, faith, culture, and historical experience.

Conclusion: Alevi Digital Archives, Internal Voice, and Epistemic Autonomy

Within this broad historical, institutional, and digitalisation landscape, initiatives such as the Alevi Studies Network and the Alevi Encyclopedia can be understood as current outcomes of a qualitative transformation in the field of Alevi Studies. On the one hand, these initiatives reflect how the transformations of human sociability, knowledge circulation, and academic communication in the digital age are reshaping the field of Alevism. On the other hand, they are not merely external objects of this transformation. They are also platforms of voice, memory, and knowledge production

developed from within by Alevi society and by researchers working on Alevism. For this reason, the Alevi Encyclopedia occupies a distinctive position not only in terms of collecting and publishing knowledge on Alevism, but also in relation to the question of who publicises this knowledge, according to which principles, through which conceptual frameworks, and with what kinds of social responsibility.

The Alevi Encyclopedia is an independent platform that is not affiliated with any state institution, political party, sectarian structure, or closed ideological agenda. It is built on the principles of academic standards, collective labour, open access, and multilingual knowledge circulation. With this character, it creates an alternative epistemic ground against exclusionary, folklorising, assimilationist, or state-centred knowledge regimes that have historically produced knowledge on Alevism. It offers a space in which the Alevi community's own memory, concepts, world of belief, and historical experience can become visible. One of the most distinctive features of the Encyclopedia is that it does not leave academic knowledge as a closed literature circulating only among specialists. By giving direct voice to *pirs*, *anas*, *babas*, *dedes*, *seyits*, *zakirs*, and local memory bearers, it treats oral history, ritual narratives, life stories, and local experiences as constitutive sources of the Alevi knowledge regime.

For precisely this reason, the Alevi Encyclopedia should stand at the centre of the debates on digitalisation, archiving, representation, knowledge sovereignty, and epistemic autonomy discussed throughout this article. Its registration with the ISIL code DE-4607 within international knowledge infrastructures does not diminish its independent character. On the contrary, it enables knowledge on Alevism to circulate through a reliable, traceable, and lasting digital institution. Considering that younger generations increasingly acquire knowledge on Alevism through digital media, it is extremely important that Alevi institutions do not merely observe this project from the outside, but support it at material, institutional, and intellectual levels. Instead of consuming their energy through endless internal debates, mutual rivalries, and narrow organisational agendas, Alevi institutions need to focus on such lasting projects that concern the shared memory, knowledge, and future of Alevi society. Such support does not simply mean supporting a website or a publishing activity. It means protecting the possibility for Alevism to transmit its own voice, its own memory, and its own conceptual world into the future in the digital age.

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