

Plaster of Paris/Chalkware Figurines: Period Showcase Objects in Turkish Houses

Alçı/Tebeşir Biblolar: Türk Evlerinde Dönemsel Vitrin Objeleri

Seda DEMİR ^a

Abstract

Until the establishment of the Republic, the upper layers of Turkish society were closely interested in European culture, life, art and literature, especially French. With the disappearance of many traditions such as eating on the floor or the change in social communication patterns, dining tables and chairs, display cases and sideboards, bedside tables for dining rooms, bedrooms and wardrobes began to settle in residences. Between the 1970s and 1990s, plaster figurines with human and animal figures, i.e. figurines, mostly bearing traces of pastoral, religious or simple life, were exhibited in the windows of many houses in Türkiye, and were a symbol dominating domestic decoration for a period with their vibrant colors. The places where immigrants, who produce and sell trinkets, are in majority, are the USA, Germany, and England, and around Europe. These trinkets, which are known to come especially from Italy, England, USA and Germany, have become indispensable and encountered objects in decoration. The study, as a first in terms of previous research, deals

^a Dr., Türkiye Ministry of National Education, Serdivan Anadolu Lisesi, Sakarya, Türkiye, e-mail: serkoc_16@hotmail.com, ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-3044-8530, Adress: Köprübaşı Mah. 4023 Sok. No: 17 Serdivan/SAKARYA.

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with the production stages of these works, their relevant history in terms of intercultural and social factors is included, and original information about their physical structures and prominent artists is inspected. Also in the study, the place and importance of these objects in Turkish houses, their artistic qualities, origins and some features related to Türkiye were discussed, and it was a priority to give information to the literature about the figurines that gained antique value because they were no longer produced.

Keywords: Plaste figurines, Chalkware figurines, German figurines, Italian figurines, showcases in Turkish houses.

Öz

Cumhuriyetin kuruluşuna kadar Türk toplumunun özellikle üst tabakaları, başta Fransız olmak üzere Avrupa kültür, yaşam, sanat ve edebiyatıyla yakından ilgilenmişlerdir. Yerde yemek yeme gibi pek çok geleneğin ortadan kalkması ya da sosyal iletişim kalıplarının değişmesiyle birlikte yemek masaları ve sandalyeler, vitrinler ve büfeler, komodinler için yemek odaları, yatak odaları ve gardıroplar konutlara yerleşmeye başlamıştır. 1970'li ve 1990'lı yıllar arasında Türkiye'de birçok evin vitrinlerinde sergilenen, çoğunlukla pastoral, dini veya sade yaşamın izlerini taşıyan alçıdan insan ve hayvan figürlü heykelcikler yani biblolar, canlı renkleriyle bir dönem ev dekorasyonuna hâkim olan bir simgedir. Bibloların üreticiliğini ve satıcılığını yapan bu göçmenlerin çoğunlukta olduğu yerler, Avrupa'nın bazı yerlerinin yanı sıra çoğunlukla ABD, Almanya ve İngiltere olmuş özellikle İtalya, İngiltere, ABD ve Almanya'dan geldiği bilinen bu biblolar dekorasyonda vazgeçilmez ve sıklıkla karşılaşılan objelerden olmuştur. Çalışmada ilgili önceki araştırmalar açısından bir ilk olarak bu eserlerin üretim aşamaları sunulmuş, kültürlerarası ve toplumsal faktörler açısından ilgili geçmişlerine yer verilmiş, fiziksel yapıları ve belirgin sanatçıları hakkında özgün bilgilere yer verilmiştir. Ayrıca çalışmada bu nesnelerin Türk evlerindeki yeri ve önemi, sanatsal nitelikleri, kökenleri ve Türkiye ile ilgili bazı özellikleri ele alınmıştır ve artık üretilmediğinden antika değeri kazanan biblolar hakkında literatüre bilgi vermek öncelik kazanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Alçı biblolar, Tebeşir biblolar, Alman biblolar, İtalyan biblolar, Türk evlerinde vitrin.

1. Introduction

Showcases, which are derived from the French word "showcase", "verre" (glass), became fashionable in the 1830s and served the function of exhibiting the porcelain and crystal guest sets of the house in the halls (Emiroğlu, 2014: 156).

Westernization movements in the 19th century caused Ottoman society to be influenced by European culture, life, art and literature, especially French culture. Over time, etiquette and lifestyle began to change in Ottoman society, and over the years, this change has spread to the residences of the elite and then to the residences of random people. The custom of eating on the floor table has disappeared, and dining tables and chairs, showcases and buffets, dining rooms for nightstands, bedrooms for beds and wardrobes have begun to be allocated in residences (Demirarslan, 2009).

The showcase has largely disappeared and has been replaced by a simple dressoir that takes up less space, or an LCD TV and unit of almost the same length (Kurt, 2021). Also, although showcases have mostly been obsoleted in modern Turkish houses, showcases which is still common in old individuals' homes happen to include period objects like plaster or chalkware decorative objects. Thus, the need to display of trinkets has decreased since the showcase is no longer preferred in living rooms.

“The formation of domestic spaces like showcases depends on cultural, functional and symbolic values” (Taşkın and Güngör, 2017). The showcase is the furniture which signifies the characteristic differences of every Turkish house by exhibiting what the household find valuable or scenic to be exhibited in a specific corner of the house with constant stability. Also, the patterns available at the objects' preferences in the showcase gives us clues their owners' characteristics and tastes. According to the study carried out by Taşkın & Güngör, (2017) all the participants who are over 40 have showcase in their living room the purpose of which is to exhibit and serve to storage purposes. Their span of existence ranged from 8 to 28 years old. But somehow participants have a common thought about showcases that showcases are among the “unnecessary” furniture. The study also depicted that the most frequent objects happened to be versatile as porcelain, glass and crystal tea and coffee sets, zam-zam sets, sugar bowl, porcelain and silver trinkets and trays, photo frames, crystal vases, wedding candies preserved, candle holder, artificial decorative flowers, laces, doilies, candle holder, etc.

Apart from these objects especially during 80s and 90s, porcelain figures and dolls were quite popular to be exhibited. Also, especially porcelain and chalkware figurines were also popular and prevalent to be kept in showcases in Turkish houses. “The radio, which is a technological means of communication, was given a local character by decorating it with lace and placing tiny trinkets on it, symbolizing the artistic side of the Turks (Çetinkaya, 2012: 54).

Depending all on this information presented so far, it has been specified that there there is a lack of any specific academic study (Turkish or foreign) about these figurines and their certain value in the Turkish society. Thus, this study aims to provide a basic information about the history/origin of plaster and chalkware figurines and their existence in the Turkish houses since 60s and 70s onwards.

The research focuses on their chronological qualities, basic characteristics (physical and original), related periodical information, their maintenance and preservation in terms of their place in Türkiye because the human object interactions depend on socio-cultural context.

2. Method

In this research, for presenting information about the origins, and history of the figurines which are the centers of the study, chronological ordering was used while sociological academic studies were highly depended for the figurine culture in the world and in Türkiye comparatively.

While creating the sample set of this research, a selection was made from the personal collection of the author, who was the collector of the figurines in question. The characteristic physical qualities of those which are especially described as "period objects" by collectors were mentioned, and followingly the most common examples of these figurines, which were, once, show case decorations of Turkish houses for a period, were identified by the author. The set was photographed and used visually in the study by the author herself.

3. A Brief History of Plaster Figurines

To specify the original manufacturers of these pieces of art, it wouldn't be wrong to attribute their debut to Italian artisans in 1820s. These were also the years labor migrants (chimneysweeps, street entertainers/vendors) were frequently travelling to larger cities of Europe, America, etc. Among those there were groups called figurinai, “they were makers and

sellers of small statuettes and figurines. They were itinerant, manufacturing and selling their wares as they travelled from place to place (Colpi, 1991: 39).

Glazed pottery representations of animals and people were common household ornaments during the 18th and early 19th centuries. Some of these pieces were imported from English, French and German potteries, but more were made at home (Lipman, 1972).



Image 1. A Representation of Itinerant Sellers (Smith, 1815).

The production of sacred plaster statues, especially, are so ubiquitous and deeply rooted in the Tuscany that still today there are artisan companies that preserve and use many of their original production molds of 100 years ago, perpetuating a Tuscan tradition (WEB 1). But back in time in the beginning of the 19th century, there was the tradition of making small statuettes and figurines in the area which didn't come enough as a way of earning the life and many of residents in the nearby groups called the figurinai (figurine makers) have started to immigrate.

Colpi (1991: 38) informs that the last group of arrivals into Britain completing the pre-1880 Italian community were several types of itinerant semi-skilled craftsmen including the figurinai. What they called a *campagna*, a tour starting at the end of the winter season for selling could last almost three years. When the weather warmed it was easier to travel to the destination by walking. It was also the ideal time -summer months-, to be able to manufacture and sell in the streets. They had their own hierarchical social structures, a *capo compagnia*,

the oldest and most experienced man directing several campagne himself having the enough financial power to afford the necessary molds, tools and equipment. Under him were several men, called garzoni.

If they were unable to carry the molds from the villages or in case they didn't get the appropriate ones, there were usually skilled ones making them themselves. When they ran out of popular and appealing models, he could carve copies of sculpture that is possible to sell to make a mold out of it.

The market for plaster figures reached its height in the 19th century. Such figures were used to ornament interiors from the grandest country houses to the most ordinary homes. They were also used as sources of inspiration for artists, designers and others, whether in artists' studios or in museums and academies (WEB 2).

Some figurines in this epoc were almost the original copies of Staffordshire figures but they were like miniature copies. Chalkware was for the provincial middle classes a substitute for the Staffordshire owned by the wealthy, and the chalk pieces generally followed popular Staffordshire models. The English designs were, however, infused with a German folk art flavor, and developed in America with bolder patterns and simpler color (Lipman, 1972). But "it is traditionally believed that the figurinai began by selling religious statues, particularly those necessary to make nativity scenes. From all indications, however, nativity scenes were not produced on a large scale until much later. The first and most popular statuette produced and marketed appears to have been that of a sitting cat whose simple lines allowed for easy reproduction, decorated or tinted with lamp smoke. They displayed a certain artistic sense and fineness of craftsmanship typical of the earlier statuettes (Sensi-Isolani 1990).

When it was the early nineteenth century, the variety in the subjects and concepts in these pieces had already enlarged. Among these, there were miniaturized reproductions of the works of Michelangelo, many Greek and Roman sculptures, in addition to the famous busts of ancient philosophers.

Besides the itinerant nature of their work, their act of hiring young children drew the attention of the public in the cities they emigrated which changed the attitudes toward them. It was the intersection by the evolution of public opinion and legislation to both itinerants and child labor at the time. "Their adaptation of a craft that had existed for centuries demonstrates their ingenuity, while the objects d'art and busts of culture heroes they sold help us understand the

relationship between the artistic tastes of middle, upper and working classes, and give us some indication of the historical figures they considered important” (Sensi-Isolani, 1990). By the time child labor was under control and there were many families well-functioning businesses in the cities they immigrated, in 1920s, it was now very rare to see plaster of paris statuettes in the streets of Europe and North America except for the Southern parts where life an industry were being progressed fairly slow. After a while the art of figurinai were not considered among skillful artisans and qualified workforce, not until 19th century. In this century, the Italian government declared that the art belonged to the Lucca province, and it was quite clear that the tradition and the craftsmanship had almost come to an end.

In the second half of the 19th century, chalk ware, or plaster images, became highly popular in Europe and the United States for use in Christian missionary activity, facilitating the exportation of Western Christian assets. The type remained popular until the mid-20th century, being used especially for religious or plain domestic decorations. It boomed during the after-war period (1945-1965).

In the second half of the nineteenth century U. S., plaster "cottage ornaments" out- stripped the pottery products in popularity. The making of chalk ware in this country goes back at least to 1768 when one Henry Christian Geyer advertised in Boston that he practiced the "Art of Fuser Simulacrorum or making of all sorts of curious animals of Plaster of Paris." It is, however, the late Pennsylvania rather than the early New England chalkware that collectors know so well today (Lipman, 1972).

Along with the prevalence of Italian immigrants and the large production of figurines on their side, Germans were also highly involved in the business that can also be specified as a kind of “folk art” at the time, especially in U.S. “Chalkware, made largely by the Germans of Pennsylvania, but also found in sections of New England settled by Germans, was the cheapest available form of household ornament. Almost all of it was made between 1850 and 1885” (Lipman, 1972).

The term “chalkware” describes small (generally 5 to 12 inches tall) decorative figures made of plaster of Paris. Chalkware was a cheaper alternative to the earthenware or porcelain figures, such as English Staffordshire mentioned above, that were popular during the 18th and 19th centuries. Initially, chalkware busts were imported from Europe. However, forms more coveted by Americans, including fruit and animals, were soon produced domestically (O’Banion and Cole, 2011). Many pieces sold,- as in the Italian counterparts-, generally via

the itinerant peddlers, for as little as fifteen cents , and averaged no more than half a dollar for the more elaborate items (Lipman, 1972).

There has been ambiguity about when in the process these objects acquired this name- also being called as chalk or chalkware by the late nineteenth-century which represented more detailed characteristics and specificity than waxes did. They had greater precision in their surface effects and textural qualities, Moreover, their surface quality served better for the paint. The surfaces of unpainted finished plaster could also be coated with a varnish, shiny or matte, to protect the surface or waxed to provide a smooth inviting touch, most often for smaller more intimately scaled pieces. In the 1800s, plaster started to be used as the prime material for ecclesiastical, commercial, educational, and domestic objects in various purposed of the collections in museums, universities, and other schools across Europe and the United States (Promey, 2014). For example, the decades immediately after 1740s American folk-art peculiar to the locality of Pennsylvania are chalkware figures and animals. These, when they are good in design and color, take their place with the best examples of American decorative sculpture in polychrome (Yard, 2003). From the Great Depression through the 1950's, chalkware experienced a resurgence in popularity in America as a common prize at carnivals (O'Banion and Cole, 2011). According to Promey (2014) again, "Plaster also assumed a genealogy that asserted relations with other fine "white" artistic media, alabaster (to one form of which it was chemically related), marble, and porcelain chief among them, but also ivory and bone".

4. Qualities of Production and Some Common Physical Characteristics

The manufacture of plaster molds and casts requires few tools. Some chalkware artists made molds from original clay models; however, most molds were made from existing casts. Indeed, it is not uncommon for pieces to have been made from molds many times removed from the original, which explains the lack of detail in otherwise identical pieces (O'Banion and Cole, 2011). Starting the production, granulated or powdered alabaster chalk is mixed with the necessary amount of water. The mixture is poured into molds. The molds used to be produced out of rubber or glue while their modern-day substitute is often latex or silicone. But glue molds would not come in handy as they could not endure the chemical reaction the material produces while drying.

Although over time new processing techniques have been developed for nativity scenes and sacred plaster statues, we continue to rely on those who have been able to combine the new systems with the secrets of traditional plaster processing.

Plaster molds, made of two parts, were oiled to prevent the plaster mold from adhering to the casting. Rubber bands or rope (never a clamp) were used to hold the pieces of the mold together. This allowed for some separation of the mold in response to the heat and expansion that is created while the plaster casting sets. A limited amount of plaster was poured into the mold, which was rotated until the plaster hardened. After disassembly of the mold, the parting line on the cast was removed with a sharp tool. Early chalkware was painted with oil paint, but watercolors in bright primary colors ultimately gained dominance (O'Banion and Cole, 2011). One of the basic physical characteristics of the figurines in question can also be enlarged with the category of having a pedestal painted in a vivid green color- mostly pictured as the green grass or representing the characters' being in open air- and coming with a versatility in the animal and human figures depicted. The scale of the character representations varies from ice skating couples to amazon women hunting. The depiction of horses, deers, dogs or a simple everyday object like a bucket, ball, umbrella, etc. accompanying ladies is highly prevalent.



Photo 1, 2, 3, 4: Various models of chalkware figurines. (Source: Author)

And male adult figures depicted alone is rare but also seemingly a period came in the late span of production depicting male children and grown-up with various occupations and standing by/holding various object like balls, buckets, umbrellas, hats, etc. Bu this genre is often depicted with an odd body proportion with an object by the side as available in the images below.



Photos 5 and 6: Exaggerated body proportions in the plaster figurines. (Source: Author)

It is highly probable that during a long span in Türkiye, as in the other parts of the World the replicas of replicas were produced as mentioned above because today it is still probable to come across unevenly detailed figurines and most of the second generation replicas are unstamped. Also, the most well-known ones could vary in colors and details. For example, the two depicted in the visuals below belong to the same figurine model but the striking change in the painting details and the apparent physical differences can be detected in the same model. See image 7 and 8 below.



Photos 7 and 8: Twin models in different colors, probably coming from different casts. (Source: Author)

4.1. Two Popular Schools in the Plaster Figurines Prevalent in Türkiye: Santini and Ruggeri

4.1.1. Amilcare Santini (1910-1975)

The artist was born in 1910 near the city of Florence in Tuscany, Italy. He was an apprentice of the well-known Italian Sculptor Colombini who inspired most of his Works through his career. He was famous with the quality of his works whose material he prepared himself out of clay which served as a cast/mold to produce images. He was pronounced to be using only simple tools such as wooden sticks in addition to mostly performing manually (WEB 1 & 2). Studying university, he developed the technique for producing a mixture for which he combined marble with alabaster and resin which he made it sat in the molds he made himself in the room temperature before taken out and painted “in the very old Italian tradition and style” (WEB 1 & 2). The artist passed away in 1975 leaving his legacy of craftsmanship to his children and grandsons (third generation artists). His firm remains still in business and is run by his descendants.” Many models are classical in style and are either religious or mythological in theme” (WEB 1 and 2).

4.1.2. Gino Ruggeri (1957)

Gino Ruggeri, born in Volterra (Pisa) in 1957, as one of the most well-known Italian sculptors in 1900s like in Santini. Working by the famous Bianchi's Factory in Tuscany, and like Santini again, developed his own material in which combined alabaster with resin. The consequence would be the durability and the waterproof quality of the final form. The factory aforementioned was sold to Santinis now that the works of Ruggeri now control the rights to Ruggeri's works, i.e. 1987 forward (WEB 3). Although there have been many other unsigned or unstamped figurines available in variations in Türkiye, almost every three of five plaster of paris figurines are cold-stamped or carved by the side of their pedestals. A. Santini or G. Ruggeri at the back on their plinths (pedestal). There is also another very prevalent stamp deciphering the name Prof. Ruggeri. In many, a name “Prof. Ruggeri” is impressed in the base in addition to a version enlarged with another impression “depositato. In Santini school the term “depositato” is usually represented with inscriptions “DEP” probably implying that the products in question is a registered model.



Photos 8, 9 and 10: Inscriptions at the back pedestals. (Source: Author)

And it is quite frequent that a triangular cold print accompanies G. Ruggeri figurines while it is highly visible that Santini figurines don't have a cold stamp or a symbolic print of a specific company. But it is often the case that many of the figurines have been polished to prevent it from having damages and enable it to present the color which has mostly made them cover the already faded inscriptions on the plinths.

4.2. Italy and the Tradition of Plaster of Paris Figurines and Their Diffusion in Türkiye

Bagni di Lucca, is also the place, in 1500s the Figurinai was born, who ancestors were also the artisans who specialized in the production of stuccoes. It was the material used for embellishing the palaces, mansions, royal structures, etc. Thus, at a certain point in history they came up with the idea of producing/reproducing sacred and plain statues out of plaster. It was a low-cost and accessible material in addition to being processed easily. But a period came in the region that they were heavily in need of money; thus, they began to move and travel to sell, especially in the 19th century which would eventually led their plaster images to become worldwide famous.

The figurinai's emigration in a three-hundred-year span led to the diffusion of the inhabitants of an Italian region, Lucchesia (Tuscany), to four continents. For example, Ranolph Rodgers a famous American sculptor (1825-1875), in 1800s, were influenced from the figurine makers

from Italy who produced and sold plaster of paris statuettes on Cherry Street, New York City, where they had settled bringing together their the centuries-old art of modeling and casting in Plaster from Italian province of Lucca as far back as 300 years (Cavaoli, 1999: 8).

Most groups of emigrants were related, and with few exceptions came from the same village or neighboring villages. Their destinations were major cities in Italy, in particular Venice, Bologna, Rome, Florence and Modena. More than half of those who left, however, traveled abroad. Most went to France whose physical and cultural proximity since Napoleon's sister ruled the principality of Lucca, probably accounted for its attraction. It is only after Napoleon's demise that we find more figurinai traveling in large numbers to other European destinations (Sensi-Isolani, 1990).

In America, chalkware was mainly made by Italian immigrants that sold their products door to door. While traveling chalkware merchants were present in many cities, they sold great quantities of wares to rural Pennsylvanians. (O'Banion and Cole, 2011). It wasn't much different when it comes to other parts of the World receiving immigrants from the northern parts and Germans were also highly involved in the itinerary salesmanship at the time. Thus, most of the plaster image production was also produced by German immigrants in these countries as well.

To designate a certain date or at least a specific year to which Türkiye was introduced to the "figurines" or "plaster images" would not be appropriate as there hasn't been any concrete study held on the topic. Nonetheless, it is quite common and well-known in Türkiye that it was 60s and 70s when they became prevalent in the souvenir shops especially in cities like İstanbul and Ankara. As will be mentioned in the following sections, there have been well known companies named Güzel-İş-Biblo and Eser Biblo whose stamps and phone numbers in addition to the serial numbers of the images in question survived are still clearly legible today. Before that "during the Ottoman period, there were no ceramic figurines due to the prohibition of paintings and figures. With the proclamation of the Republic, trinket production began in Türkiye, which modernized with the influence of Europe" (Ulukütük, 2010).

During 1950-1960 period when the rational international movement was dominant, After World War II, things were rapidly developing in terms of technology, materials, construction methods and aesthetic values and were confronted with western architecture. "After 1955, as an extension of the developments in the West, the issue of architectural decoration came to the agenda again with the adoption of the idea of integrating architecture with painting and

sculpture. By taking advantage of the possibilities of contemporary industry and technology, new materials have begun to be used in a different context in architectural decoration. The large plain wall surfaces of high reinforced concrete buildings were tried to be enriched with color and form elements. Although it is a factor that increases the cost of construction, the use of mosaics, stained glass, ceramics, frescoes, metal castings and sculptures has become widespread, especially in hotels, large office and bank buildings." (Ceyhan 2002). Another point in terms of evaluating these figurines is that there emerge two company names which have resulted these figurines' reputation in Türkiye as "Ankara figurines". It is possible to claim that there have been two major names whose work was very widespread and frequently sold in the Turkish stores between late 1960s and early 1980s. On their debut and diffusion phase within Türkiye, it is highly probable to mention that their importation was directly realized in largest cities in Türkiye like İstanbul and Ankara, the capital. The reason could be counted as the extraordinarily common frequency of coming across to a stamp under the name of two companies/stores named "Güzel İş Biblo" and "Eser Biblo" which are two apparently already closed down companies in Ankara long ago. They had the figurines stamped at the bottom of the figurines with their archival numbers stated with a stamp. The exact stamping of the companies are as in the image below:



Photos 11, 12, 13 and 14: Stamping at the bottom of te pedestals. (Source: Author)

5. Conclusion

Having surged from an arm of religious art, plaster figurines diffused over the World from Italy with economical motives of the people called *figuranai* when they also began to move and travel to sell their statues and in the 19th century, leading this movement to make their art known all over the World which is probably somehow related to why they got into Türkiye. During a long span of time following the emergence of showcase culture in the early years of the country, these pieces of arts were highly popular in especially middle-class Turkish houses especially between 1960s and 1980s.

Although these figurines are now referred to as period figurines or nostalgic plaster figurines in today's Türkiye; besides, their financial value is not as high as porcelain period figurines. It is possible to obtain especially the most well-known models of these figurines, which attract the attention of collectors and nostalgia lovers, mostly from antique dealers or public auctions.

These realistic and artful castings with a wide variety of genre subjects, may not be classified as an individual and concrete branch of current folk art over the modern world. But as household ornaments which have been quite popular for a number of years in Türkiye as in many other parts of the world from 70s on, played a vivid part in the life of the people and as such are worthy of our interest as a blast from in many traditionally styled Turkish showcases today.

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Yazarın Katkı Oranı

Makalenin tek yazarlıdır.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı: Çalışma için destek alınmamıştır.

Etik Onay: Bu makale insan veya hayvanlar ile ilgili etik onay gerektiren herhangi bir araştırma içermemektedir.