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Royal Calligraphers of the Ottoman Dynasty: Insights from the Topkapı Palace Archives¹

Abstract

This article examines the calligraphic production of Ottoman sultans from the early eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, drawing on a corpus of largely unstudied archival inventories. It argues that royal calligraphy was not only a personal and devotional pursuit but also a form of dynastic self-fashioning, institutional memory, and architectural inscription. Beginning with Sultan Ahmed III and culminating in the reign of Sultan Mehmed VI, the essay traces the evolution of sultanic calligraphy through its material forms, instructional contexts, and spatial deployment in sacred sites. It situates these practices within broader transformations in palace life and Ottoman visual culture.

Keywords: Ottoman calligraphy, sultanic authorship, Topkapı Palace, archival inventories, royal inscriptions, devotional art

1. Introduction

The education of royal children, particularly princes, at the Ottoman court was enriched with lessons in calligraphy (*hüsniyat*), foreign languages, and literature, which formed integral components of their specialised training. As a result, the practices of reading texts in multiple languages and mastering the art of calligraphy became deeply embedded in the lives of dynasty members from an early age. Immersed in a culture of books, these individuals developed a profound appreciation for literary and artistic excellence. They sought to acquire the rarest and most exquisitely crafted volumes; commissioning works from the most prominent artists of their era. These books, adorned with elegant calligraphy, gilded and illuminated with vibrant colours, occasionally illustrated, and bound in ornate covers, were not only treasured possessions but also served as the foundation for private libraries established by the Ottoman ruling elite.²

Although Ottoman calligraphy has long been the subject of rich scholarship, studies have tended to privilege celebrated master calligraphers, stylistic genealogies, and the production of Qur'an manuscripts and albums, often treating sultanic calligraphy as an ancillary phenomenon. More recent work has begun to reconsider the sovereign's

1 The earliest documents in the Topkapı Palace Archives regarding calligraphy by sultans dates to the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839). Consequently, this article focuses on calligrapher sultans from Mahmud II onwards.

2 See Tanındı 2019, 21–95.

hand as a site of artistic authorship and symbolic power, particularly in architectural and ceremonial settings.³ This article advances that conversation by introducing and analysing a group of archival inventories – compiled between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – that document calligraphic works produced by members of the Ottoman dynasty. These registers, many of which remain unpublished and largely unexamined, bring into focus how sultanic calligraphy was recorded, preserved, and displayed within the imperial palace. By drawing sustained attention to these sources for the first time, the article reveals how royal calligraphy functioned not only as a personal and devotional practice, but also as a medium of dynastic commemoration, institutional memory, and spatial inscription.

This bibliophilic tradition is exemplified by several notable figures and collections: Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481) amassed a collection of books in both Eastern and Western languages; Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) maintained a close relationship with his calligraphy instructor Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 1520) and curated a collection of rare manuscripts; Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695–1703) and his brother Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730) developed strong ties with their tutor Hâfiz Osman (d. 1698), with Sultan Ahmed III constructing an independent library within the Topkapı Palace. Sultan Mahmud I (r. 1730–1754) oversaw the establishment of libraries adjacent to the Hagia Sophia Mosque and in front of the qibla wall of the Fatih Mosque. The Nuruosmaniye Library, also initiated by Sultan Mahmud I, was completed during the reign of Sultan Osman III (r. 1754–1757), while Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) created a library within the Yıldız Palace. Additionally, *valide sultans* such as Hatice Turhan Sultan (d. 1683), Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan (d. 1853), and Pertevniyal Valide Sultan (d. 1884) established endowed libraries that housed rare and valuable books. Collectively, these examples reflect the Ottoman dynasty's enduring fascination with books and their commitment to cultivating literary and artistic legacies that spanned centuries. By the eighteenth century, this bibliophilic culture had begun to leave a visible imprint on the architecture of the court itself, as sultans and *valide sultans* commissioned freestanding library buildings that embodied both aesthetic ideals and evolving practices of knowledge collection. The relationship between such architectural patronage and the court's literary culture has been the subject of recent scholarship, including studies that explore how these libraries functioned as both intellectual and symbolic spaces.⁴

The integration of calligraphy into palace life was not limited to appreciation or patronage. Members of the royal family who pursued calligraphy – particularly princes – were trained in its technical and aesthetic dimensions, often under the supervision of court-appointed masters. As with other professional calligraphers, their works followed a system of formal apprenticeship, culminating in the awarding of an *icâzet* (calligraphic diploma), which authorised the student to sign their work. These signed compositions – typically *levhas* (calligraphic panels), *kitâs* (calligraphic compositions), or entire manu-

3 See Keskiner 2012.

4 See, for example, Sezer 2016.

scripts – often included a *ketebə*, the calligrapher's colophon or inscription, identifying the author and, occasionally, his master or the date and purpose of the work.

For sultanic calligraphers, these *ketebəs* frequently echoed the structure of their *tuğra* (imperial monogram), with the sultan's name followed by his father's name. While some royal inscriptions took the form of simplified *tuğra*-like compositions, others used more conventional script layouts, often in *celi thuluth* or *ta'līq*. These forms of writing circulated not only within the albums and libraries of the palace but also in architectural inscriptions, mosque panels, and ceremonial settings. Understanding these practices and formats is essential for interpreting the inventories that follow, which catalogue a wide range of such objects and inscriptions.

Among the members of the Ottoman dynasty, those with both talent and inclination sought to produce their own calligraphic works, transcribing their own books, creating *kit'as* and *levhas*. A Qur'an manuscript copied by Prince Korkud (d. 1513), the son of Sultan Bayezid II, a calligrapher and bibliophile, is dated to around 1500.⁵ Similarly, a Qur'an manuscript transcribed by Prince Mehmed (d. 1756), one of the sons of Sultan Ahmed III, is dated 1167 AH (1754).⁶ Although Sultan Ahmed III and Sultan Mahmud II are also reported to have copied Qur'an manuscripts, these works have not survived to the present day.⁷ From the reign of Sultan Ahmed III, calligrapher sultans – like other calligraphers of the time – began to frequently produce *levhas*. During the reign of Sultan Mahmud II, the practice of adorning walls with *levhas* in gilded frames became widespread.

In a portrait album from the period of Mahmud II that survives to this day, Ottoman sultans are depicted in interiors embellished with *levhas* inscribed in *zer-endüd* on black backgrounds, displayed in gilded frames, either hung on the walls in gilded frames or propped against them (Figure 1).⁸ From the reign of Sultan Ahmed III onward, and particularly until the close of Sultan Abdülmecid's reign (r. 1839–1861), calligrapher sultans often created these *levhas*, drawing inspiration from those they observed in their surroundings. Numerous *levhas* bearing the signatures of sultans were produced during this period.

Registers documenting works created by sultans from the time of Mahmud II onward shed light on this prolific production. Furthermore, these records represent the initial efforts to establish a distinct sub-collection of sultanic calligraphy within the treasury of the Topkapı Palace.

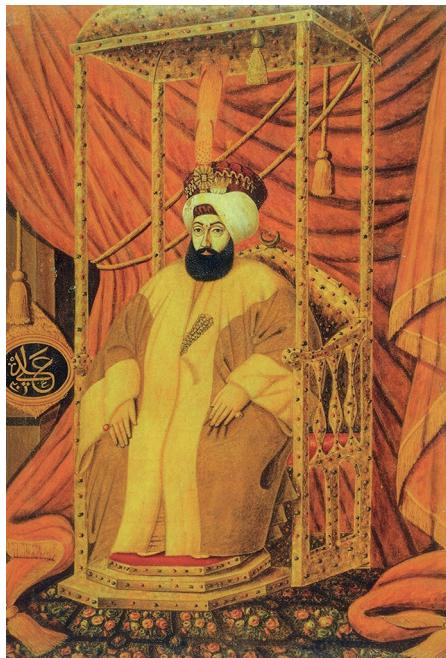
5 Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 100-0279. See Tanındı and Aldemir 2023, 194–5.

6 Süleymaniye Library-Yeni Cami, inv. no. 1. See Derman 2010, 258–9.

7 Müstakimzâde discusses to whom Sultan Ahmed III presented the Qur'ans he transcribed; however, these copies have not survived. See Müstakimzâde 2014, 75. See also Derman 2010, 259.

8 For the Kırç Album, see Renda 1992.

Figure 1. Portraits of Ottoman sultans from an album prepared during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839). Courtesy Kıracı Family



2. Sultanic Calligraphy in the Ottoman Archives

From the nineteenth century onward, archival records not only documented the identification of calligraphic panels within the palace, but also maintained dedicated registers of calligraphic works personally executed by the sultans.⁹ A document dated 17 *Rebiülevvel* 1255 AH (31 May 1839) suggests that the impetus for systematically recording these works stemmed from Sultan Mahmud II's request to view a *levha* inscribed by his grandfather, Sultan Ahmed III (Figure 2).¹⁰ The document recounting this event states:

Our sovereign, the beneficent and unrivalled ruler of the world, His Majesty the Sultan, requested the distinguished and esteemed *levhas* inscribed by his grandfather, the noble and illustrious Sultan Ahmed Han – may he rest in eternal mercy and forgiveness. Upon investigation, the sought-after *kit'a* was found in the Circumcision Cham-

9 These documents from the State Ottoman Archives have been identified here for the first time. I would like to thank Fuat Recep for his assistance in translating these documents and interpreting certain phrases.

10 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.e. 898-95.

Figure 2. Document dated 31 May 1839, presented to Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839). Directorate of State Archives

ber (*Sünnet Odası*) located near the Chamber of the Holy Mantle (*Hırka-i Saadet Odası*). The *levha* was verified and presented to His Majesty. Moreover, as the panel bore an inscription referred to as ‘conversation’ (*hasbihâl*), this terminology was preserved in the official report, mirroring the wording on the original manuscript.¹¹

According to this account, the search led to the discovery of Sultan Ahmed III’s *levha* in the Circumcision Chamber of the Topkapı Palace. A precise copy of the *levha* was made and presented to Sultan Mahmud II. On the same day, presumably in response to or as a continuation of this command, a list was compiled documenting *levhas* created by various calligrapher sultans and other distinguished calligraphers (Figure 3).¹²

The document in question is undated and does not specify the locations where the *levhas* were kept. However, it has been classified along with the record dated 17 *Rebiülevvel* 1255 AH (31 May 1839). Some of the *levhas* listed in this document can still be found in the Topkapı Palace today. The sheer number of calligraphic works enumerated suggests that the list was compiled as part of an effort to document the sultanic calligraphy held within the palace. While the document does not explicitly state which sultan commissioned it, the frequent use of the phrase *şevketli efendimiz* (our glorious sovereign) in reference to Sultan Mahmud II and his works strongly indicates that the list was prepared on his command.

According to the list titled ‘The Blessed Imperial Calligraphic Works of Our Glorious, Noble, and Magnanimous Sovereign, the Benefactor of the World and Our Patron,’¹³ the recorded items include:

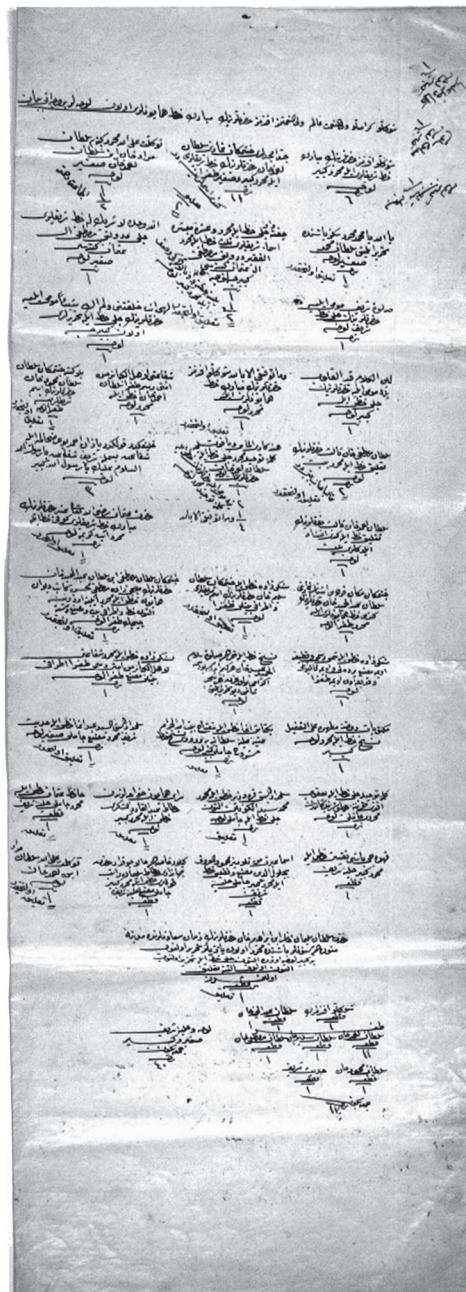
Six large *levhas* inscribed in the blessed calligraphy of our glorious sovereign,
 Eleven large and small *tuğra* (imperial monogram) *levhas* inscribed in the blessed calligraphy of his exalted forebear, the late Sultan Ahmed Han, may his soul rest in paradise (recorded under his own name),
 One small *levha* inscribed with *Tevekkeltü 'alā Allāh* (I place my trust in God) by Sultan Murad Han, son of Sultan Ahmed Han,
 One small *levha* inscribed with *Al-jamā'atu rahmatun* (The congregation is mercy),
 One small *levha* inscribed with *Yā Allāh, Yā Muḥammad* (O God, O Muhammad), written by Sultan Mehmed at the age of eight (to be mounted),
 One large *levha* inscribed with a double *waw* motif in *celi* script, along with the names of the *Aşere-i Mübəssere* (the ten companions of the Prophet Muhammad promised paradise) in *thuluth* script, attributed to Derviṣ Mustafa 'Alî Osman,

11 'Veliyyi i nīmet i bî minnetimiz Padişah i Alempenâh efendimiz hazretlerinin Büyük peder i mēâlî gevherleri cennet-mekan hallede aşyârı̄n Sultan Ahmed Han aleyhi'r-rahmeti ve'l gufrân hazretlerinin işâr i seniyye i dîlârâlarından matlûb i âlleri buyurulan kîfa i mergûbe i mūallâları̄ bi't tabarrî Hırka-i Saadet Odası civarında vaki Sünnet Odası olan mahalde bulunup levhada mastûr olduğu bi tibkîbî terkim ve sîy i âlilerine takdim olunmuştur ve hattâ bâlâ yi levhada dabi hasbihâl tabir olundugundan bi aynîbî varaka i çâkerîde dabi öylece tabir olundu efendim.'

12 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 6224.

13 'Şevketli kerâmetli veliyyi i nīmet i âlem veliyyi i nīmetimiz efendimiz hazretlerinin mübârek hatt i hümâyunları̄ olan levhalar ber vech i âlî beyân'

Figure 3. Inventory dated 31 May 1839, presented to Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839). Directorate of State Archives



One large *penbe şanta vav levha* inscribed in the same manner,
 One small *levha* inscribed in *celî* script with *Innallâha waḥdahu lâ sharika lah* (Indeed, God is One, and there is no partner to him), attributed to Dervîş Mustafa 'Alî Osman,
 One large *levha* inscribed in *celî* script with the *Salarwât-i Şerif* (Blessings upon the Prophet),
 One large *levha* inscribed in *celî* script with *Ilâhi anta khalaqtani wa lam akun shay'an* (O Lord, You created me when I was nothing),
 One large *levha* inscribed in *celî* script with *Layyin al-kalâm qayyid al-qulûb* (Gentle speech binds hearts),
 One *levha* inscribed in *celî* script with *Wa mā taわfiqi illâ bi-llâh* (My success is only through God), written in the blessed hand of our glorious sovereign,
 One *levha* inscribed with *Shafâ'atî li-ahl al-kabâ'ir min ummati* (My intercession is for the great sinners of my community) in *resm tuğra* script by Sultan Ahmed Han,
 One *tuğra levha* bearing the noble name of the late Sultan Mahmud Han,
 Two *levhas* inscribed in *ta'liq* script with couplets by Sultan Mustafa Han III (likely attributed to Sa'ib) (to be mounted),
 One *levha* inscribed in *celî* script with *Kalimat al-Tawâhid* (The declaration of divine unity), embellished with Indian craftsmanship and diamonds, attributed to Sultan Ahmed Han,¹⁴
 Two additional *levhas* inscribed in the noble hand of Sultan Ahmed Han with *Kalimat al-Tawâhid*,
 Four *levhas* inscribed with *Wa mā taわfiqi illâ bi-llâh*,
 Three large *levhas* featuring the inscriptions *Shafâ'at* (Intercession), *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim* (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful), and *Shafâ'at yâ Rasûl Allâh, As-salâmu 'alayka yâ Rasûl Allâh* (O Messenger of God, intercede for us; Peace be upon you, O Messenger of God),
 One *levha* inscribed with a couplet in *ta'liq* script by Sultan Ahmed Han III, composed by the sultan himself,
 One *levha* inscribed with a Qur'anic verse in *kufî* script in the blessed hand of Caliph 'Uthmân ibn 'Affân, may God be pleased with him (to be mounted),
 One *tuğra levha* in the noble hand of his Majesty Sultan Abdülhamid Han, may he dwell in paradise,
 One *levha* bearing a *tuğra* inscribed in the noble hand of His Majesty Sultan Abdülhamid Han, may he dwell in paradise,
 One *levha* inscribed with the name of His Majesty Sultan Selim, may he dwell in paradise, surrounded by verses, written in the hand of Sinekîzâde (to be mounted),
 One *tuğra levha* inscribed in gold script on a mirror, bearing the name of His Majesty Sultan Mustafa, son of Sultan Abdülhamid, surrounded by verses and an intricate floral design, written in the hand of Mâbeyncîzâde Mustafa Muhsin, Court Scribe of the Imperial Council (to be mounted),

14 This *levha* is a *Kelime-i Tevhid* [Testimony of Faith], adorned with diamonds and rubies, which Sultan Ahmed III commissioned to be hung on the wall of the Privy Chamber in the Chamber of the Holy Mantle, as will be discussed below.

One *levha* featuring a sun motif, an elaborately carved velvet curtain, and an embossed *tuğra*, created with stencilled and cut-out velvet, written in the hand of Sinekîzâde,

One *levha* inscribed in *naskh* script with a prayer of blessings: 'El-Hamîd Abd Han – Whoever recites this image every morning shall find steadfastness and be immersed in intercession,'

One *tuğra levha* elaborately designed and surrounded by verses, bearing the inscription: 'My intercession is for those among my community who commit grave sins,' written in the hand of Sinekîzâde,

One *levha* inscribed with 'I place my trust in God,' written for Sultan Murad, son of Sultan Ahmed (to be mounted),

During the blessed era of His Majesty Sultan Süleyman, son of Sultan Ibrahim, inscriptions recorded on the columns of Medina were transcribed onto a large *levha* in gold *celî* script and mounted beneath the golden eaves.

One couplet by our glorious sovereign,

One couplet by Sultan Abdülhamid Han,

Eleven couplets by Sultan Ahmed Han,

One couplet by Sultan Selim Han,

One couplet by Sultan Mustafa Han,

One couplet by Sultan Mahmud Han,

One couplet containing a hadith,

Total: 17 pieces.

Levhâs and *Hilye-i Şerîfs*, both large and small.

Total 40 pieces.

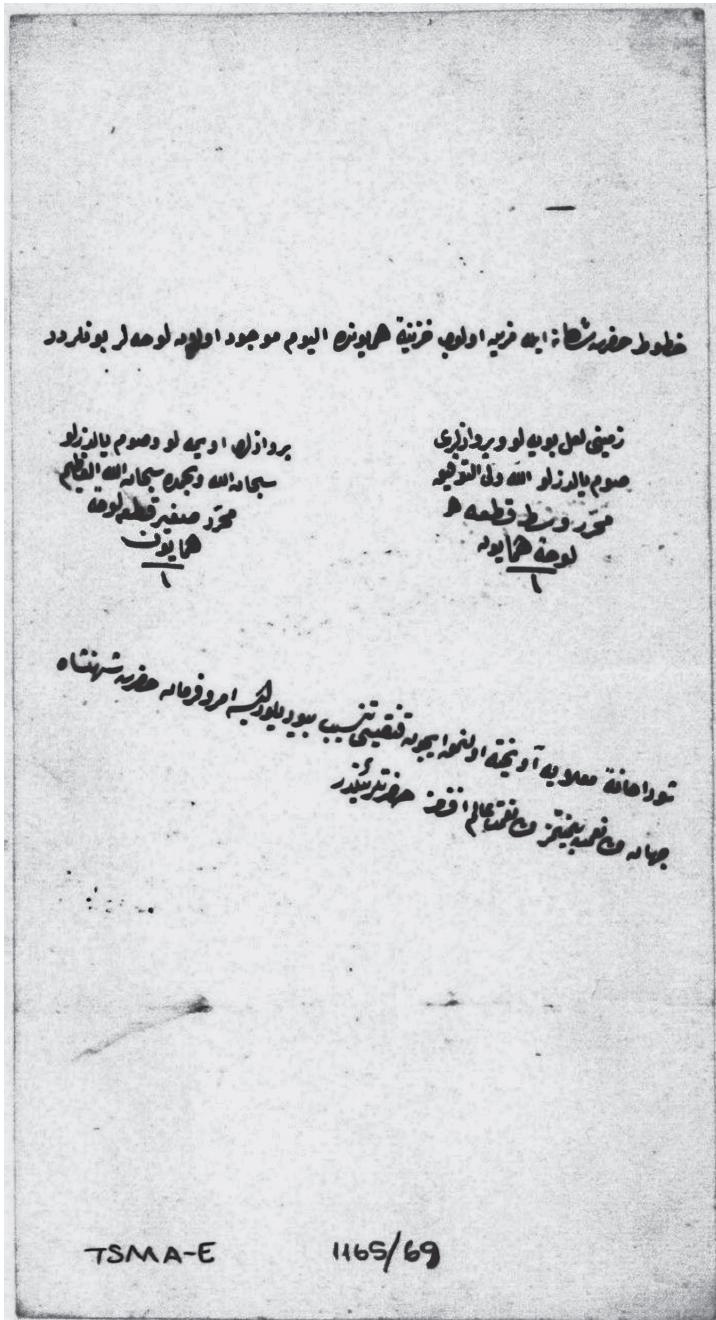
It is highly probable that, when the *levha* by Sultan Ahmed III that he wished to see was only found as the result of extensive searching, Sultan Mahmud II ordered the comprehensive inventory of the *levhas* housed within the Topkapı Palace. This directive was issued just a month before his death on 28 June 1839, and the aforementioned *levha* may well have been the last to which he devoted particular attention. Two months later, within the same Circumcision Chamber, the ceremonial beard-growing ritual, known as the *tesrib-i lihye*, was performed as part of his son Sultan Abdülmecid's enthronement. Shortly thereafter, a new list of the *levhas* created by the sultans, housed in the Imperial Treasury, was presented to Sultan Abdülmecid.¹⁵

The short inventory titled 'Calligraphic panels adorned with His Majesty's handwriting currently held in the Imperial Treasury,'¹⁶ dated 29 *Zilhicce* 1256 AH (21 February 1841), details two sultanic calligraphic works housed in the Treasury. These are described as follows: 'A central imperial panel, inscribed with '*Allahü Veliyyü't-Tefvîk*,' set against a red enamelled ground with borders gilded in solid gold,' and 'A smaller panel, inscribed with '*Sübhânallah ve bi-hamdih Sübhânallâhi'l-Azîm*,' featuring ornamental borders and gilding in solid gold' (Figure 4). The concluding statement of the document, 'To be

15 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.e 1195-69.

16 'Hututî hazreti şâhâne ile müzeyyen olup Hazine-i Hümâyunda elyevm mevcud olan levhalar bunlardır'

Figure 4. Inventory dated 21 February 1841, presented to Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861). Directorate of State Archives



placed in the exalted council chamber, whichever is deemed suitable by His Majesty, the Shah of the World, our gracious benefactor, the most compassionate master of the World,' implies that the official drafting the document was presenting the Sultan a choice regarding which of the two *levhas* should be displayed in the council chamber. This further illuminates the sultan's purpose in commissioning the inventory.

A subsequent inventory, prepared at the behest of Sultan Abdülmecid, is dated 16 *Rebiü'lâhir* 1277 AH (1 November 1860).¹⁷ This is a more detailed record, cataloguing the *levhas* within the palace. Notably, the list includes the entry '*Esmâ-i Şerîfler* in His Excellency's handwriting,' signifying a work executed by Sultan Abdülmecid himself.

Another register, dated 17 *Tesrinisani* 1292 AR (12 *Zilkade* 1293 AH / 29 November 1876) appears to have been prepared at the command of Sultan Abdülhamid II (Figure 5).¹⁸ This extensive list includes, among other entries, panegyrics to the sultans as well as *tugras*. The *levhas* created by the sultans are catalogued as follows:

One *levha* in *ta'lîq* script, emanating from the pearls of Sultan Mahmud Han's noble handwriting, one *levha* inscribed with the *hadîth* '*Shafâ'atî*' in the handwriting of Sultan Mahmud Han, one *levha* inscribed with '*Hazret-i Halîd*' in the handwriting of Sultan Abdülmecid, one *levha* inscribed with *Wa mā tawfiqî*.¹⁹

While the document does not specify the exact palace to which these *levhas* belong, it is reasonable to infer that they are among the calligraphic works housed in the Topkapı Palace, given that the document itself is part of the Palace's archives.

An additional, undated inventory, also found among the archival materials, offers another detailed record (Figure 6).²⁰ Notably, it references a calligraphic work from the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876), dated to 1283 AH (1866–1867). This suggests that the inventory was likely compiled after Sultan Abdülaziz's reign, most probably under Sultan Abdülhamid II. Unlike the earlier lists, this document specifies the dates of composition for each of the works.

One small *levha* inscribed with *Yâ Allah Yâ Muhammed*, written by Sultan Mehmed Han at the age of eight,

One *levha* inscribed with a couplet recited by Sultan Ahmed Han III upon receiving his robe of honour,

One *levha* in *ta'lîq* script inscribed with *Tevekkeltü alallah* by Sultan Murad b. Ahmed Han (year 1040),

One *levha* inscribed with a couplet written by Sultan Mustafa Sâlis Han (year 1188),

One *levha* inscribed with a couplet composed by Sultan Mustafa Sâlis Han (year 1180),

17 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 10429-1 and 10429-2.

18 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.e. 613-73.

19 The *levha* written by Sultan Abdülmecid, known as *Hazret-i Halîd*, was written for Abu Ayyub al-Ansari (d. 669), commonly known as Eyüp Sultan. The sultan's calligraphy in the Eyüp Sultan tomb will be discussed further below.

20 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 10705.

Figure 5. Inventory dated 29 November 1876, presented to Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909). Directorate of State Archives

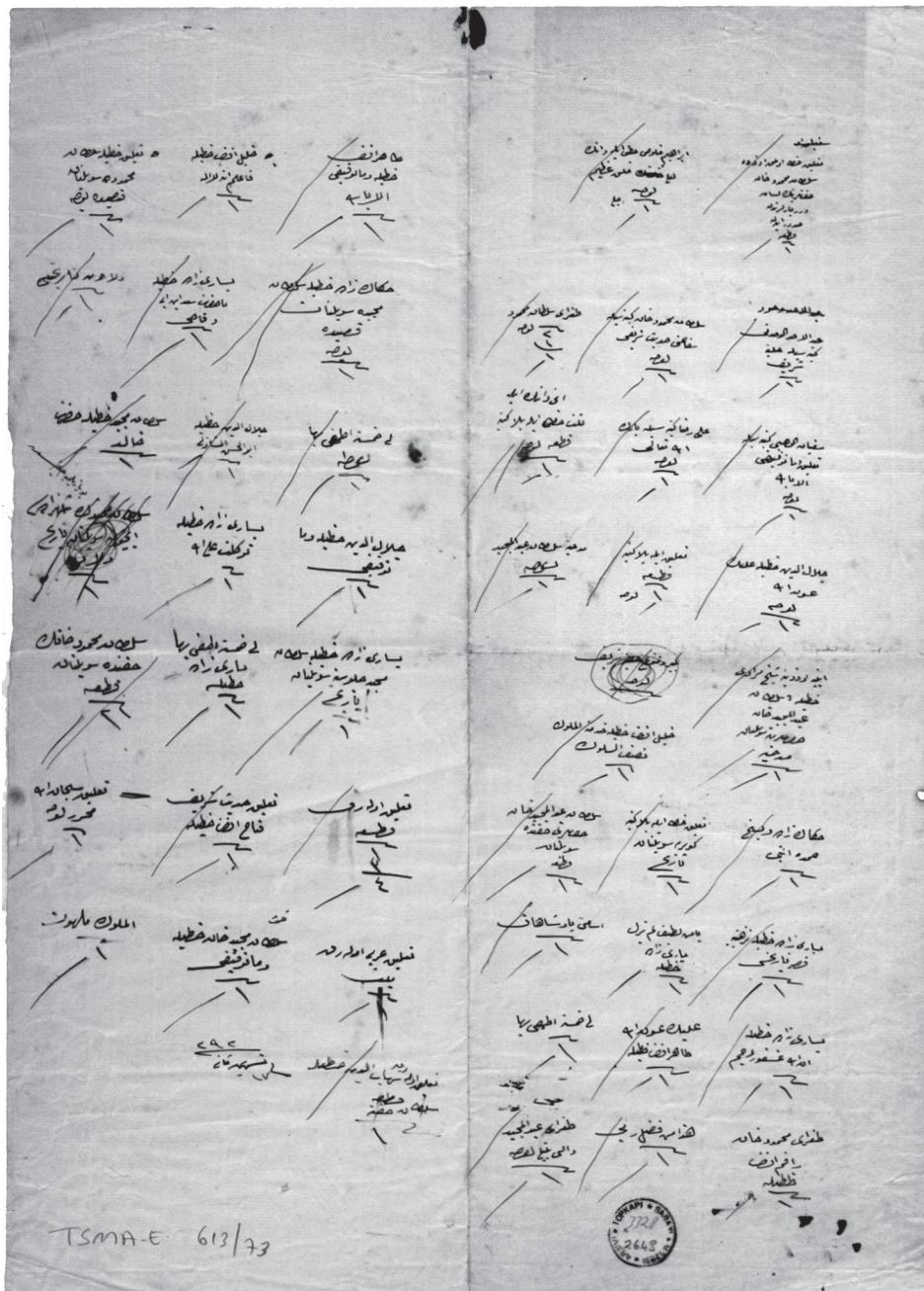
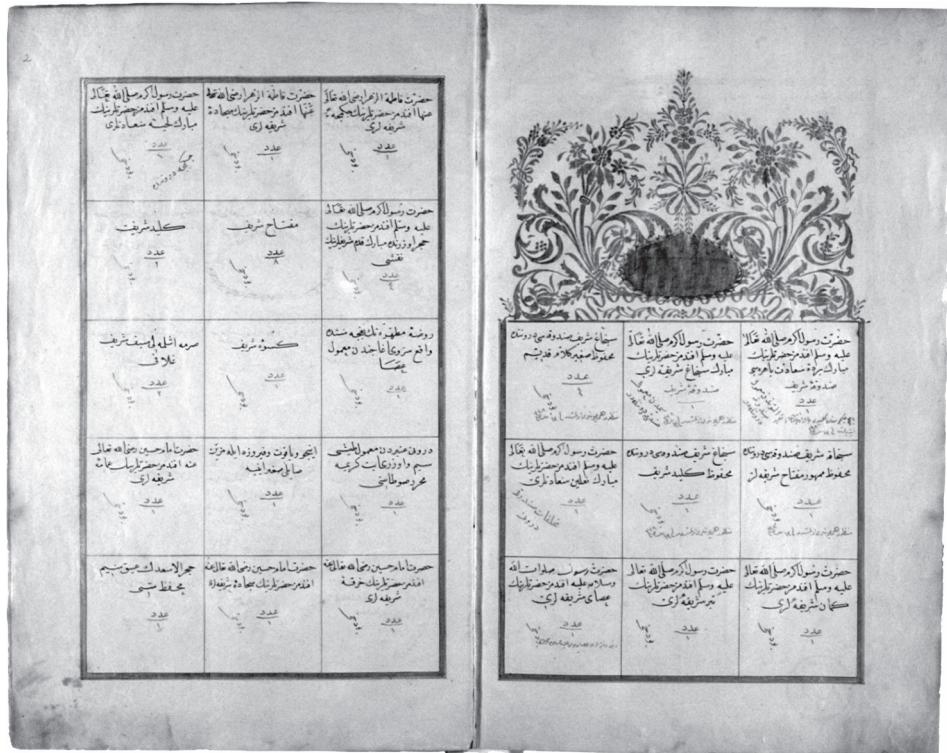


Figure 6. An undated inventory, probably presented to Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909). Directorate of State Archives



One *levha* inscribed with *Seyyidü'l kavmi hâdimübüm*, written by Sultan Abdülmecid Han,

One *levha* inscribed with *Bismillah teyemmünen bi zikrihi'l celîl*, written by Sultan Abdülaziz Han (year 1283),

One large double *waw levha* written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II (year 1105),

One *levha* with a *tuğra* written by Sultan Ahmed Han,

One large double *waw levha* written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II,

One large *levha* inscribed with *Besmele-i Şerîf*, written by Sultan Mahmud Hân II,

One large *levha* inscribed with *Salât-i Şerîf*, written by Sultan Mahmud Hân II (year 1226),

One *levha* inscribed with *Allah vahdehû lâ serike lehû*, written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II (year 1105),

One *tuğra* written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han (year 1121),

One *levha* inscribed with the *kelime-i tevhîd*, written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han,

One small *levha* inscribed with *El Cemâ'atü rabmetün*, written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han,

One large *levha* inscribed with *Şefâ'at Yâ Rasûllâh*, written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han,

One *levha* in *naskh* script inscribed with Six Verses from the Holy Qur'an, written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han

One *levha* inscribed with *Ve mâ Tevfîki illâ billâh*, written by Sultan Mahmud Hân II (year 1222),

One large *levha* inscribed with *Leyyinü'l-Kelâm Kayyidü'l-Kulûb*, written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II (year 1103),

One *levha* inscribed with *Elhamdüllâh alâ ni'amîhî*, written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II and illuminated by Sultan Ahmed III,

One *tuğra*-shaped *levha* inscribed with the hadith *Sefâ'atî li ebli'l kebâir min ümmetî*, written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han (year 1123),

One *levha* inscribed with *Ve mâ tevfîki illâ billâh*, written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han,

One geometric *levha* made using a compass, written by Sultan Mehmed IV ibn İbrahim Han

One *tuğra* *levha* written by Sultan Mehmed IV ibn İbrahim Han (year 1160),

One short *tuğra* *levha* written by Sultan Mustafa II ibn Mehmed Han (year 1109)

One *tuğra* *levha* inscribed with the noble name of Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han

One *levha* inscribed with *Muhammed Nebiyyü'r-râhme*, written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II (year 1106)

One *tuğra* *levha* written by Sultan Ahmed III ibn Mehmed Han (year 1115)

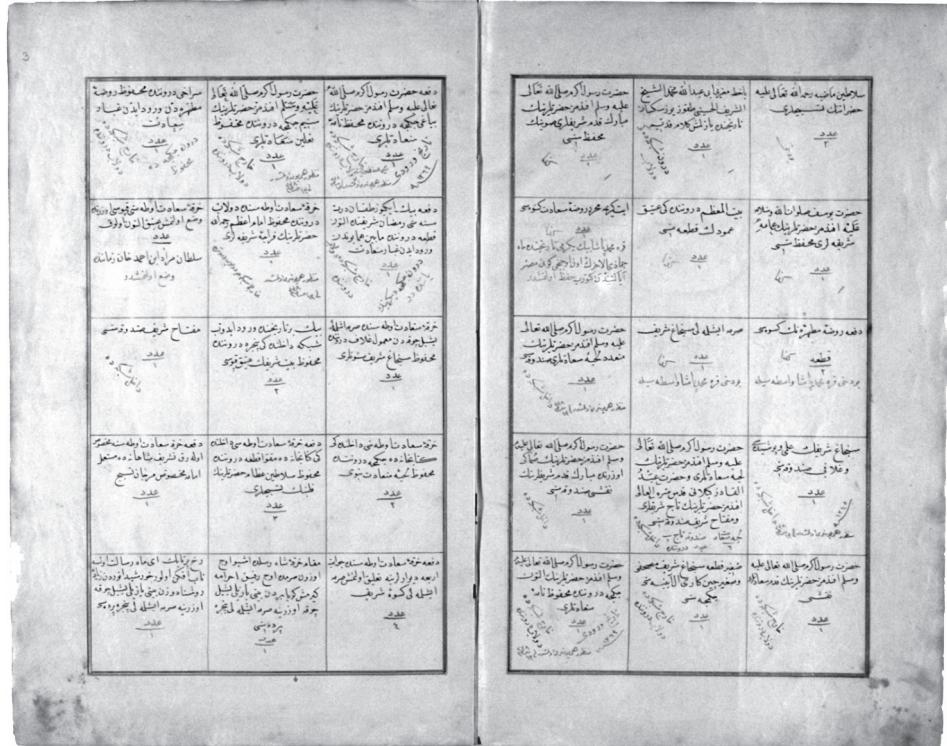
One *levha* inscribed with *İldâhî Ente Halaktenî*, written by Sultan Mustafa Hân II

The document indicates that it was reviewed by Sultan Mehmed VI Vahîdeddin (r. 1918–1922) with the recorded date 13 *Nisan* 1338 AR (15 *Şâban* 1340 AH / 13 April 1922) (Figure 7). While the preparation of the list was not commissioned by him, it is noteworthy that, in the final year of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Vahîdeddin personally examined a register of sultanic calligraphy housed in the palace.

The inventories compiled by the Imperial Treasury do more than record calligraphic holdings; they reflect an enduring tradition of royal authorship. From childhood, many princes received formal training in calligraphy, producing works that would eventually enter the palace collections. These documents, in turn, offer rare insight into the institutional and educational structures that sustained calligraphic practice within the court. While much of the surviving documentation centres on the nineteenth century, the roots of this tradition can be traced to the early eighteenth century, when Sultan Ahmed III studied under Hâfiz Osman and cultivated a distinct sultanic style.

The following section turns to this courtly context, moving beyond a strictly chronological account to trace three overlapping phases in the evolution of royal calligraphy.

Figure 7. A later note recording that the inventory was examined by Sultan Mehmed VI Vahided-din (r. 1918–1922) on 13 April 1922. Directorate of State Archives



First, under Ahmed III, calligraphy emerged as a central practice of princely formation, closely tied to architectural patronage and devotional labour. In the nineteenth century, figures like Mahmud II and Abdülmecid refined and institutionalised the art, transforming it into a disciplined courtly genre shaped by standardised training and intensified visual circulation. By the late Ottoman period, the practice had taken on more commemorative and symbolic dimensions, shaped by changing palace rhythms and the pressures of imperial decline.

3. The Calligraphy Masters at Court

The prominence of royal calligraphy in the registers suggests that numerous sultans actively engaged in the production of *levhas*, both during their princedoms and after ascending the throne. Princes in line for succession underwent specialised training within the palace to cultivate the attributes of rulership.²¹ Their instruction was over-

21 İpsırılı 1995, 185–7.

seen by members of the *Enderun Mektebi* (Palace School), the elite imperial school tasked with educating future statesmen, soldiers, and sovereigns. Alongside military and administrative preparation, the curriculum emphasised activities that embodied princely virtue: horseback riding, archery, foreign languages, and the mastery of calligraphy. Some princes, having demonstrated notable skill, sustained their calligraphic practice into their reigns. Sultan Ahmed III was one such figure.

As a prince, Ahmed III, alongside his brother Mustafa II, studied under the esteemed calligrapher Hâfiz Osman, who had been appointed as the court's calligraphy instructor.²² Sultan Ahmed III's reputation as a calligrapher during his reign is further substantiated by a detailed section dedicated to him in Müstakimzâde Süleyman Sâdeddin's (d. 1788) seminal work, *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn* (a comprehensive treatise on calligraphy and calligraphers), which he began writing in 1173 AH (1759–1760).²³ This account is part of a broader picture that has increasingly come into focus in recent scholarship, which highlights the sultan's engagement with calligraphy not only as a personal artistic pursuit but also as a means of shaping the aesthetic and devotional environments of the court and its architectural spaces.²⁴ The section, which recounts the sultan's tutelage under Hâfiz Osman, is recorded as follows: 'The calligraphy of Sultan Ahmed III, formed through his study of *thuluth* and *naskh* scripts under various esteemed instructors, notably includes his instruction by Hâfiz Osman Efendi, whose teachings he graciously accepted.'²⁵ According to Müstakimzâde, several other renowned masters, whose names are also listed, participated in Sultan Ahmed III's calligraphy circle, and the dates related to the sultan's works were subsequently recorded.²⁶

These dates, inscribed by the divan poet and author Seyyid Vehbî Efendi (d. 1736), also the author of the *Surnâme of Ahmed III*,²⁷ and the divan poet Nedîm Ahmed Efendi (d. 1730), are found in a *murakka-i hümâyûn* (imperial album). This *murakka*, held in high esteem, is most likely the renowned album containing Sultan Ahmed III's *tuğras*.²⁸ Two of these monograms, engraved in stone, were later transferred to the walls flanking the entrance of the Chamber of the Holy Mantle, which Sultan Ahmed III had restored. This act exemplifies a significant moment in the process of transferring *çeli* script from the pages of books and albums to architectural surfaces.

As princes, Ahmed III's grandsons and Abdülhamid I's sons, Sultan Mustafa IV (r. 1807–1808) and Sultan Mahmud II, studied calligraphy under Kebecizâde Mehmed Vasfi (d. 1831), one of the palace's most esteemed calligraphy masters. Several practice sheets (*meşk kit'aları*) penned by Mahmud II for his instructor have survived to the pres-

22 For more on Hâfiz Osman and Sultan Mustafa II, see Müstakimzâde 2014, 276, 481; also see Serin 2010, 158.

23 Müstakimzâde 2014, 73–6.

24 See Keskiner 2012.

25 Müstakimzâde 2014, 74.

26 *ibid.*

27 Vehbî's illustrated edition of the *Surnâme*; Topkapı Palace Library, III. Ahmed, inv. no. 3593.

28 The facsimile of the *murakka* has been published. See Derman 2009.

ent day.²⁹ Although undated, these sheets, along with the written exchanges between the prince and his tutor, provide valuable insight into the structure of their lessons. While the nature of their correspondence suggests that some instruction may have taken place remotely – almost in the manner of written exchange – it is likely that they also met in person, given Kebecizâde's role as a court calligraphy instructor at the time.³⁰

In 1807, Mahmud II received his *icâzet* from Kebecizâde.³¹ The diploma's certification statement explicitly acknowledges the legacy of Şeyh Hamdullah, a seminal figure in Ottoman calligraphy. The text, penned by Kebecizâde Mehmed Vasfi, reads as follows:

Henceforth, this refined script and eloquent composition, executed in accordance with the principles and conventions established by the esteemed Şeyh Ibnü's-Şeyh Hamdullah Efendi, have been deemed worthy of approval. In recognition of this accomplishment, permission is granted for the transcription of *bîlyes* and inscriptions to His Imperial Highness, the sovereign of exalted dignity, majesty, and power, Prince Mahmûd Adlî, son of Sultan Abdülhamid Han and grandson of Sultan Ahmed Han. Hüve'l üstâd Mehemed Vasfi, 1222/1807

At the time, Prince Mahmud was seventeen years old; one year later, he would ascend the throne.

After ascending to the throne, Sultan Mahmud II pursued the study of *thuluth* calligraphy under the tutelage of Mustafa Râkim (d. 1826) and produced *celî thuluth levhas* in Râkim's distinctive style (Figure 8).³² A surviving draft reveals that Râkim himself arranged the phrases the sultan would inscribe.³³ In this draft, Râkim not only compiled selected passages from Mahmud II's earlier writings but also reorganised them into a new composition, adding explanatory notes before presenting it to the sultan. This document provides invaluable insight into the collaborative working process between the two. It is likely that the phrases, once refined in this manner, were subsequently transcribed onto *levhas*, with the sultan's *ketebé* (signature) inscribed upon them. Indeed, an inscription at the Grand Mosque of Bursa closely follows the composition of this draft.³⁴

Sultan Abdülmecid, the son of Mahmud II, embraced the calligraphic style of another prominent master of the period, Mahmud Celâleddin (d. 1829). He received his *icâzet* from one of Mahmud Celâleddin's leading students, Mehmed Tâhir (d. 1845), as well as Kazasker Mustafa İzzet (d. 1876). Mehmed Tâhir's most profound influence on the sultan's writing appears to have been his guidance in emulating Mahmud Celâleddin's

29 Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. H. 2238. See Derman 2019, 328–33.

30 M. Uğur Derman also notes the unusual nature of the communication between the prince and his tutor, who, despite the court's cultivated appreciation for the arts, only corresponded through practice sheets rather than meeting in person; see Derman 2019, 329.

31 Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. GY. 1353. See Derman 2019, 332, 334.

32 For Mustafa Râkim see Berk 2003.

33 Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. GY. 322/19. M. Uğur Derman has provided a detailed publication of this draft, see Derman 2019, 337–9.

34 *ibid.*, 339.

Figure 8. Calligraphic panel by Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) in Mustafa Râkim's (d. 1826) style. Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 130-0109



compositions.³⁵ Kazasker Mustafa İzzet, a prominent calligrapher during the reigns of both Mahmud II and Abdülmecid, had studied under the esteemed masters Çömez Mustafa Vâsif (d. 1853) and Yesârızâde Mustafa İzzet. Invited to the *Enderun Mektebi* by Mahmud II, Mustafa İzzet (d. 1849) went on to serve as a calligraphy instructor to princes and sultans alike.³⁶

Kazasker Mustafa İzzet also transcribed copies of the Qur'an and prayer books for members of the imperial family, including Pertevniyal Vâlide Sultan, the mother of Sultan Abdüllâzîz; and Bezmiâlem Vâlide Sultan, the mother of Sultan Abdülmecid. His multifaceted role in the cultural life of the palace and his contributions to the artistic and intellectual milieu of the period cement his status as a defining figure.³⁷ The close working relationship between Mahmud II and Mustafa Râkim finds a parallel in the bond between Sultan Abdülmecid and Kazasker Mustafa İzzet. Abdülmecid, following the calligraphic style of his master, inscribed Qur'anic verses as well as *kelâm-i kibâr*

35 Sultan Abdülmecid's work featuring the verse from the Surah Al-Baqarah (II:137) which translates to 'Allah is sufficient for them. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing,' appears to have copied Mahmud Celâleddin's style precisely, as seen in one example at the Eyüp Sultan Tomb and another at the Topkapı Palace. Abdülmecid's *levha*: Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. GY. 386. See Derman and Çetin 1992, 120, 212. For Mahmud Celâleddin's work, see Yazır 1981, 133.

36 For the calligrapher's biography, see İnal 1955, 154–62.

37 Aldemir Kîlercik 2018, 35–46.

Figure 9. *Kit'a* in sülüs and nesih scripts by Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861). Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 110-0084



(wise sayings) on themes of just rulership and victorious leadership. He also commissioned the illumination of his calligraphic compositions and presented them as gifts to his viziers.³⁸ The fact that several of these compositions share identical content suggests that the sultan systematically produced multiple copies for distribution (Figure 9–10).³⁹

- 38 One of the very similar calligraphic compositions designed and illuminated by Sultan Abdülmecid: Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 110-0084. See Tanındı and Aldemir 2023, 353. For the Khalili Collection, inv. no. CAL.26 see Özsayiner 1999, 63; Safwat 1996, 156, 159; Turkish Foundation Calligraphy Museum, inv. no. E-541. For the *kit'a* in the former Emin Barın Collection, see Derman 2006, 2:85. TIEM 3255; unpublished. Galata Mevlîvîhanesi, inv. no. 488; unpublished.
- 39 The *kit'a* in the Khalili Collection, inv. no. CAL.26 and the Turkish Foundation Calligraphy Museum, inv. no. E-541 are identical in both content and illumination. See Özsayiner 1999, 63 and Safwat 1996, 156, 159.

Figure 10. *Kit'a* in *sülüs* and *neshi* scripts by Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861). Turkish Foundation Calligraphy Museum, inv. no. E. 541



Unlike *celî levhas*, which could be reproduced through stencil techniques by illuminators, each of Sultan Abdülmecid's *thuluth* and *naskh* compositions represents an independent, personally inscribed work. Similarly, his handwritten *Amme cüzzü* (the final section of the Qur'an), executed with a reed pen, was illuminated in a manner that reflects both the artistic sensibilities of the period and the sultan's personal taste, adorned with gracefully curving *saz* leaves and large floral bouquets.⁴⁰

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, this model of sustained, hands-on practice began to shift. While some later sultans continued to receive training in calligraphy, their engagement was often more intermittent, shaped by ceremony and dynastic image rather than regular production. The identity of the master calligrapher who instructed Sultan Abdülaziz at the palace remains uncertain, though it is possible that he benefited from his elder brother Sultan Abdülmecid's calligraphy sessions with

40 Topkapı Palace Library, env. no. H.S. 3. See Tanındı 2019, 76.

Figure 11. *Levha* by Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876). *The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art*, Accession no. CAL 0403, © The Khalili Family Trust



Kazasker Mustafa İzzet. Compared to other sultans, Abdülaziz appears to have had little interest in calligraphy, with only a few surviving examples of his writing (Figure 11). Moreover, these surviving pieces were likely not his original compositions, but rather copies of *levhas* inscribed by other calligraphers.

Sultan Abdülmecid's son, Sultan Abdülhamid II, who was skilled in woodworking, is also believed to have studied under Kazasker Mustafa İzzet during his time as a prince. However, despite his well-documented passion for books and manuscripts, as evident in the library at the Yıldız Palace, Abdülhamid II did not pursue calligraphy further (Figure 12). Similarly, Sultan Abdülmecid's youngest son and Abdülhamid II's brother, Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin, likely received calligraphy lessons at his father's behest while he was still a prince. It remains uncertain whether his tutor at the palace was the aging Kazasker Mustafa İzzet, who was in his seventies at the time. Even if this was not the case, it is evident that Vahideddin's instructor had him copy compositions from Kazasker's works. Indeed, one of the few surviving *levhas* bearing Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin's *ketebə* is a direct reproduction of a *celî thuluth* composition by Kazasker Mustafa İzzet (Figure 13).⁴¹ In this piece, Vahideddin inscribed the phrase *Aleyke Avnallâh* ('May God's aid be upon you'). Both Kazasker's original and Vahideddin's reproduction are dated 1288 AH (1871–1872). At the time, Vahideddin was around ten or eleven years old, while Kazasker Mustafa İzzet was around seventy or seventy-one. The *ketebə* on the

41 Turkish Foundation Calligraphy Museum, inv. no. E-583. I would like to thank Halet Uluant for drawing my attention to this *levha*.

Figure 12. *Levha* by Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909). National Palaces Collection, inv. no. TS GY. 325/70



levha reads: *ketebəhū necâbetlü Vahîdeddin Efendi hazretleri* ('Written by the noble Vahîded-din Efendi'). At this point, he was still a prince.

Prince Abdülmecid, the son of Sultan Abdülaziz, is primarily celebrated for his paintings. However, his refined calligraphy is also noteworthy. Although there is no formal record of a master calligrapher instructing him, it is believed that, during his confinement in the palace, he may have developed his calligraphic skill by copying existing *levhas*, possibly under the guidance of an unrecognised tutor. His compositions include works in both *ta'liq* and *thuluth* scripts, and he often depicted *levhas* within his paintings (Figure 14).⁴² These depictions reveal that while Prince Abdülmecid did not master the craft, he was capable of writing in different calligraphic styles. A notable

42 A *levha* written in *ta'liq* script is preserved in the Dolmabahçe Palace, inv. no. 11/1717.

Figure 13. Levha by Sultan Vahideddin (r. 1918–1922). Turkish Foundation Calligraphy Museum, inv. no. E. 583



Figure 14. Levha by Prince Abdülmecid Efendi (d. 1944), dated 1923–1924. National Palaces Collection, inv. no. MS 11/1707



example can be found in a large oil painting titled *Mosque Entrance (Cami Kapısı)* dated 1339 AH / 1337 AR / 1920, in which he painted the door of an unidentified mosque, incorporating a *levha* adjacent to it.⁴³ The Arabic inscription on the *levha*, meaning 'O Allah, the opener of all doors, open to us the doors of goodness,' was likely inscribed by himself in *celî thuluth* script.

In another of his oil paintings titled *Beauty Serving Coffee (Sarayda Kabveci Güzeli)* from 1311 AH (1893–1894), Prince Abdülmecid inscribed a *Bismillah* in bold Kufic script on the door behind the central female figure.⁴⁴ Two stacked borders along the wall further feature calligraphy: the upper border bears the Arabic inscription *Allâhû lâ ilâhe illâ huâ l-hâyyû l-kayyûm* ('There is no god but Allah; He is the Ever-Living, the Sustainer of all existence') in Kufic script, while the lower border displays the phrase *Lâ gâlibâ illâ Allâh*, meaning 'There is no victor but Allah,' in a rounded script resembling *celî thuluth*. The prince's Kufic script, known as *el-hattî l-mâgrîbî*, is a rounded form widely used in North Africa, Al-Andalus, and the Maghreb. In his famous painting *Goethe in the Harem (Study) (Haremde Goethe (Mitalaa))*, a *levha* bearing a large *ta'liq* inscription hangs on the wall behind the reclining female figure (Figure 15).⁴⁵ This *levha* features the phrase *Mûr der hane i hod hokm e Süleyman dared*, which translates to 'The ant has dominion over its own house, according to Solomon's decree.'⁴⁶ Unlike the inscriptions in his other paintings, Prince Abdülmecid includes his own *ketebé* on this *levha*. Taken together, these examples reflect a dynastic tradition that evolved from deeply personal devotional practice to a more commemorative and symbolic form of artistic authorship.

Namık İsmail (d. 1935) made a similar painting, titled *Woman Reclining on the Sofa (Sedirde Uzanan Kadın)*, in 1917 (Figure 16).⁴⁷ In this piece, a woman is depicted reclining on a low couch, her legs extended, wearing a wide-neck black dress that leaves her shoulders bare. Behind her is a library filled with books, with a mother-of-pearl inlaid table in front. A small tray with cups of coffee and water rests on the table. Parallel to the woman's legs and the sofa, a horizontal *levha* draws the viewer's attention. The wood-framed *levha* bears the inscription *bismillahirrahmanirrahim*, in *ta'liq* script. As his father, İsmail Zühdü, was a calligrapher, Namık İsmail was well-versed in the art of calligraphy. Namık İsmail and Prince Abdülmecid shared a friendship, and in photographs taken during the prince's visit to İsmail's Şişli Atelier in 1917, the two are seen together. It is likely that

43 Sakıp Sabancı Museum Painting Collection, inv. no. 200-0099.

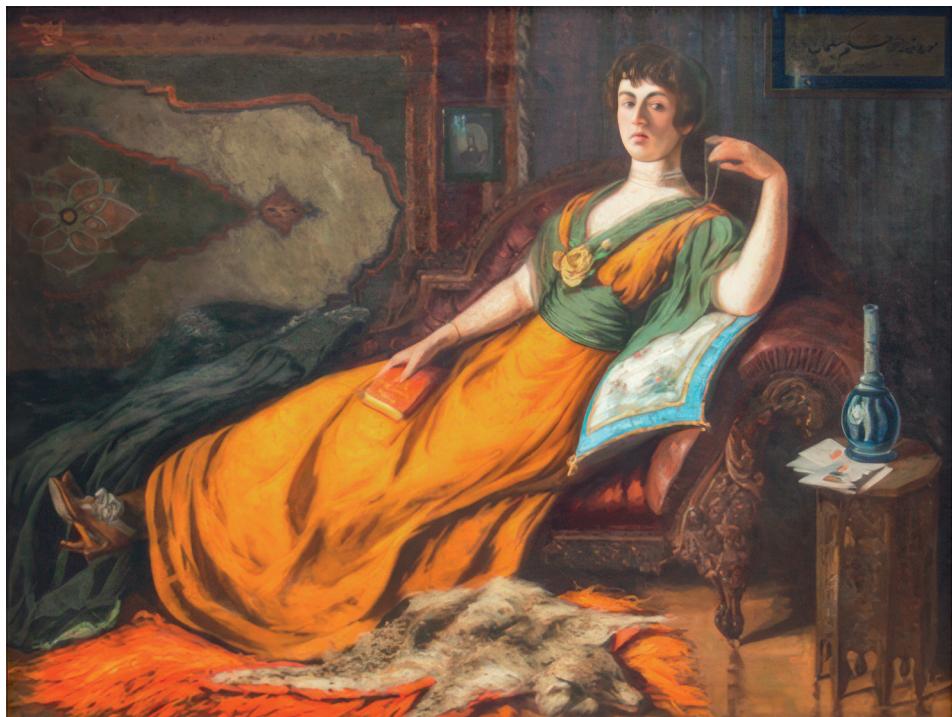
44 Türkpetrol Foundation Collection.

45 Ankara Museum of Painting and Sculpture collection, inv. no. R-0195.

46 This inscription may be related to certain verses from Surah An-Naml (XXVII:17–8) of the Qur'an. According to the verses, when Solomon's army, composed of humans, jinn, and birds, arrived in the Valley of the Ants, an ant warned the others to go into their homes to avoid being trampled by Solomon and his army without their noticing. It is also reported that Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520–1566) had a conversation on a similar matter with Şeyhülislâm Ebüssuûd Efendi (d. 1574). It is not known to which of these references Prince Abdülmecid was alluding.

47 MFAU Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture Collection.

Figure 15. Prince Abdülmecid Efendi (d. 1944), *Goethe in the Harem (Study)*, 1918, oil on canvas, Ankara Museum of Painting and Sculpture, inv. no. R-0195



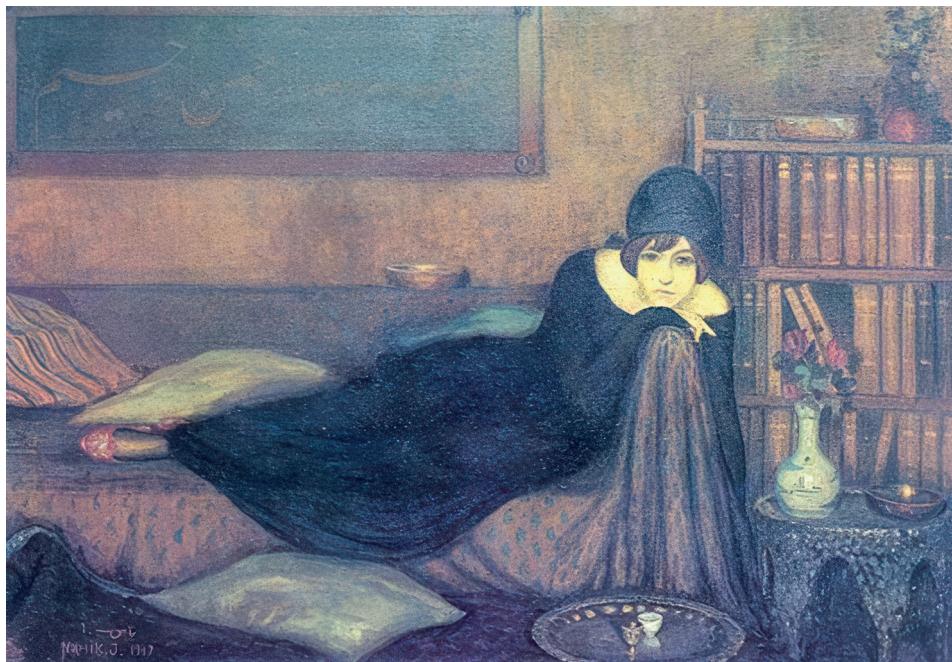
before painting *Goethe in the Harem (Study)*, Prince Abdülmecid had seen Namık İsmail's painting and been inspired by the *ta'liq* inscription hanging on the wall of the room.

Several master calligraphers who taught at court have proudly documented their esteemed roles in the inscriptions of their works. Often, their titles within the palace were added later as supplementary lines to the margins of their *ketebə*. One such calligrapher was Mustafa Anber Ağa (d. 1684), who served as a *meşk* instructor during the reign of Sultan Mehmed IV (r. 1648–1687). The son of Mehmed Ağa, one of the palace attendants, Anber Ağa's connection to the palace is highlighted by Müstakîmzâde in *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn*, where it is noted that he was among those who 'Sarây-i Hümâyûn'da *perverîş yâfe i kemâl*' ('attained mastery at the imperial court').⁴⁸ An addition was made in the inscription of a Qur'an manuscript dated 1085 AH (1674–1675) stating: 'Saray-i Hümâyûn hocası olup Anber namiyla maruftur,' indicating his role as a teacher at the palace.⁴⁹

48 Müstakîmzâde 2014, 480.

49 Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 100-0267. See Tanındı and Aldemir 2023, 122.

Figure 16. Namık İsmail (d. 1935), Woman Reclining on the Sofa, 1917, oil on canvas, MSFAU Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture



Kebecizâde Mehmed Vasîî, an instructor during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II, left a noteworthy inscription in a Qur'an manuscript completed in 1204 AH (1790). On the last page of the manuscript, he wrote: 'This *mushaf* [Qur'an] was written by the weakest servant of Allah, known as Kepecizade, who served as the *meşk* instructor at the Saray-ı Âmire and prayed for the continued prosperity of the imperial state. The completion of the manuscript took place in the month of Rajab in the year 1204.'⁵⁰ Mehmed Şefik (d. 1880), a prominent calligrapher during Sultan Abdülmecid's reign, similarly mentions his teaching role at the palace. In a 1263 AH (1846–1847) copy of the *Amme cütü*, he notes that he served as the calligraphy instructor at the Imperial School of Music (*Muzika-yi Hümâyün*).⁵¹

50 Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 100-0259. See Tanındı and Aldemir Kılercik 2013, 53–4.

51 Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 102-0304. See Tanındı and Aldemir 2023, 154–5.

4. Sultans' Inscriptions

Apprentices who completed their training were traditionally granted an *icâzet*, allowing them to sign their work independently.⁵² Upon signing their pieces, calligraphers would often use the Arabic phrase 'ketebehû,' meaning '... wrote this.' These *ketebe* inscriptions usually appeared at the end of manuscripts or on single-page calligraphic compositions such as *kut'as* or *levhas*. They typically included the calligrapher's name, title, date of completion, and occasionally additional details such as the work's location, the names of their teachers, or the person for whom the work was created.

Calligrapher sultans also occasionally included *ketebe* inscriptions on the last pages of their manuscripts, as well as independent pieces. However, these inscriptions have seldom survived to the present day. At times, they would also include the date in Arabic numerals. In many surviving examples, sultanic *ketebes* not only identify the calligrapher but also reflect formal parallels with the *tuğra*. These compositions often feature the sultan's name paired with that of his father and adopt layouts that echo the structural logic of the imperial seal. The stylistic interplay between these formats – especially in the works of Sultan Ahmed III and Sultan Mahmud II – suggests an effort to merge personal authorship with dynastic symbolism. The central part of the *ketebe*, similar to the *kürsü* or *sere* of the *tuğra*, would feature a composition that mirrored the structure of the seal. In both the *ketebe* and the *tuğra*, the sultan's name, paired with his father's, was written in a similar format, further underscoring the connection between the two.

Sultan Ahmed III is particularly notable not only for his calligraphy but also for his role as a *tuğrakes* (calligrapher who drew the imperial monogram). He occasionally signed his calligraphic works with his *tuğra* and at other times with an *istifli ketebe* (composed colophon). It appears that the tradition of simplifying the *tuğra* into a stylised *ketebe* for use on calligraphic works began with Sultan Ahmed III. Since the sultan was capable of drawing his own *tuğra*, it is likely that the design of his *ketebe* was his own creation. Sultan Ahmed III's *ketebe* reads 'Ahmed, son of Mehmed,' in Arabic as '*Ahmed bin Mehmed*'⁵³ Sultan Mahmud II also adopted this practice in his calligraphy. His inscription, 'Mahmud, son of Abdülhamid Han wrote this,' in Arabic as '*ketebehû Mahmud bin Abdülhamid Hân*', is known to have been designed in collaboration with his master calligrapher, Mustafa Rakim. The *ketebe* at the end of the *kit'a* works, which have rarely survived, is the same inscription written in plain text: '*ketebehû Mahmud ibn-i Abdülhamid Hân*'⁵³

Sultan Abdülmecid's *istifli ketebe* reads 'Mahmud Khan's son Abdülmecid,' written in Ottoman Turkish as '*Mahmud Hân'ın oğlu Abdülmecid*'⁵⁴ Unlike his father, Sultan Mahmud II, Abdülmecid inscribed his *istifli ketebe* under the *naskh* lines of his *kit'a* works as well. In addition to his calligraphy and *kit'a* pieces, an inscription added to the end of his *Amme cüzü* reads: '*ketebehû Abdülmecid Hân ibn-i Sultan'ül fâni Mahmud Hân*', meaning 'Abdülmecid, son of Sultan the mortal, Mahmud Han.' A small num-

52 Derman 1997, 493–9.

53 A *kut'a* by Sultan Mahmud II dated 1249 AH (1834) is today housed in a private collection. See Derman 2019, 336.

ber of surviving calligraphic works from other sultans also feature similar *istifli ketebe* inscriptions. Sultan Abdülaziz's *ketebe* reads 'Mahmud Han's son Abdülaziz,' while Sultan Abdülhamid II's *ketebe* reads 'Abdülmecid Han's son Hamid,' both of which are also written in *istif* style.

Since Prince Abdülmecid never ascended the throne, he did not possess an official *tuğra*. However, until the late sixteenth century, princes who served as provincial governors would also have *tuğras* bearing their names.⁵⁴ These princely *tuğras* shared a similar structure and design with those of the sultans. After the abolition of the custom of princes going on military expeditions and with the beginning of their confinement to the palace, *tuğras* were only designed for princes once they became sultans. In contrast, Prince Abdülmecid, with his strong artistic inclinations, began designing his own *tuğra* and coat of arms even while still a prince.⁵⁵ The *tuğra* in these works follows the classical *tuğra* form. However, his calligraphic inscriptions and signatures on his *levhas* and paintings, while reminiscent of the *tuğra* form, are an original design. In his signature and inscription, he used the phrase '*Abdülmecid bin Abdülaziz Hân*', meaning 'Abdülmecid, son of Abdülaziz Han,' and included one of the *tuğra*'s distinctive dagger arms crossing over his name. Additionally, the prince employed this same signature in his letters and in the *hatt-i meşâbir* (memoir books) known as *defter-i meşâbir*, in which he signed his writings.⁵⁶

5. Calligraphy by Sultans in Sacred Spaces

For calligrapher sultans, writing inscriptions on the walls of mosques and other sacred spaces – particularly those they constructed or renovated – was regarded as a spiritual duty. Among these sacred sites, the Chamber of the Holy Mantle in the Topkapı Palace holds particular significance. For Ottoman sultans, serving in this chamber, considered the spiritual resting place of the Prophet Muhammad, was a great honour. The tradition of calligrapher sultans placing their *levha* in these rooms, particularly in the Privy Chamber, where sacred relics were housed, became an integral part of their esteemed role.

The practice of displaying sultans' calligraphy on the walls of mosques and sacred spaces began with Sultan Ahmed III. One of the most significant inscriptions from this tradition is a *kelime-i tevhid* (Testimony of Faith) *levha* from 1138 AH (1726) placed on the entrance to the Chamber of the Holy Mantle during its renovation (Figure 17).⁵⁷ This inscription, framed in the shape of a *tuğra*, bears the phrase *Şah Ahmed bin Mehmed Hân el muzaffer*. On either side of the entrance, two *tuğra*-style inscriptions are engraved into marble. One reads *Cihan mâlikî Hâkân i Emced*, while the other states *Şerîat Sâlikî*

54 Umur 2011, 54–6.

55 A *tuğra* by Prince Abdülmecid from 1920, MSRK, inv. no. 64/1153-3. Also see Yağbasan 2004, 83.

56 For the prince's memoirs: Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, inv. no. T. 2219 and the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, inv. no. 153.

57 Ağca 2013, 225–9.

Figure 17. *Kelime-i Tevhid* by Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730) in celi sülüs script, in the Apartment of the Holy Mantle at the Topkapı Palace



Sultan Ahmed, both written in the same *istif* format. Together, these inscriptions translate as ‘The highly honoured sovereign, the ruler of the world, Sultan Ahmed, who walks on the path of Islam.’⁵⁸ In addition to these inscriptions, the sultan also penned another *kelime-i tevhid* adorned with diamonds and rubies, to be placed in the Privy Chamber of the Chamber of the Holy Mantle.⁵⁹

Ahmed III also sent his *levhas* to be placed in sultanic mosques (*selâtin camileri*). Müstakîmzâde Süleyman Sâdeddin, in *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn*, mentions that Sultan Ahmed III’s mother, Gülnûş Râbia Sultan (d. 1715), commissioned a *levha* featuring the *hadîth* ‘Paradise is under the feet of mothers’ (*el Cennetu tahte akdâmi’l ümmehât*) for the mosque she built in Üsküdar.⁶⁰ Sultan Ahmed III also wrote the inscriptions for the monumental fountain he constructed between the Hagia Sophia and the *Bâb-i Hümâyûn* (Sublime Porte) in 1728–1729. This fountain, frequently portrayed by painters, was always featured with these inscriptions. One such depiction was painted by Şevket Dağ in 1910.⁶¹

When Sultan Mahmud II restored the Chamber of the Holy Mantle, he ensured that *levhas* of his own calligraphy were placed on the walls (Figure 18).⁶² Sultan Mahmud II’s calligraphy can be found in several mosques, including the Hagia Sophia, the

58 The same *tuğra* styles are found in Sultan Mahmud II’s *tuğra* album from 1140 AH (1727–1728). Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. A. 3653. See Derman 2009, 22–3.

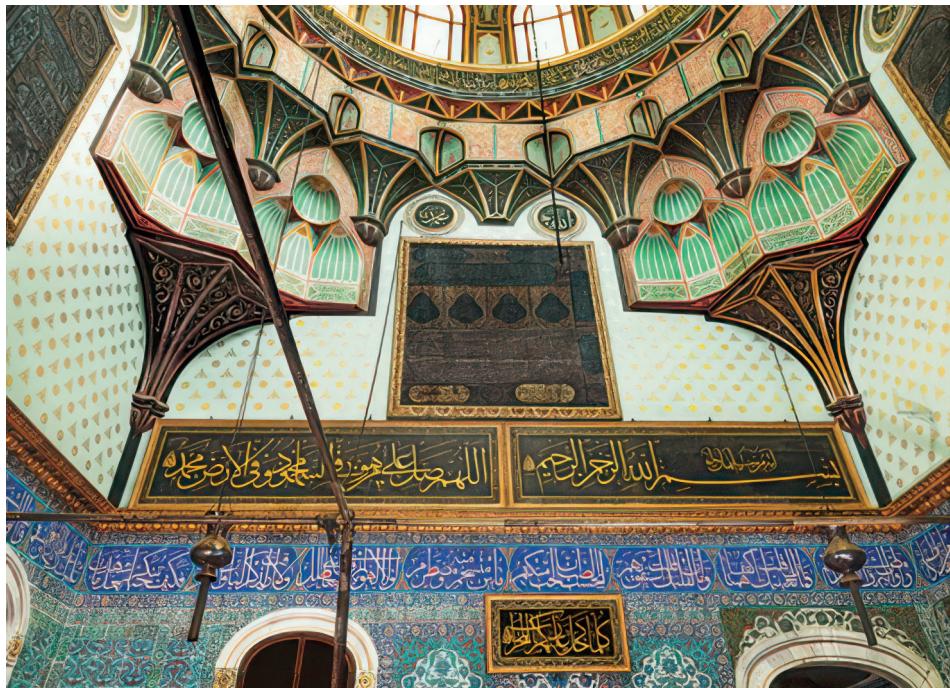
59 Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. 21/220. Ağca 2013, 160–1.

60 The mosque in question is the Yeni Vâlide Sultan Mosque. The *levha* is still in place. See Müstakîmzâde 2014, 75.

61 Sakıp Sabancı Museum, inv. no. 200-0285.

62 Ağca 2013, 252–3, 245–5, 261, 266–7, 271, 273.

Figure 18. *Levha* by Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839), on the walls of the Privy Chamber at the Topkapı Palace. Photograph: Bahadır Taşkın



Fatih Mosque, the Beyazıt Mosque, the Süleymaniye Mosque, the Yeni Valide Mosque in Üsküdar, the Valide Mosque in Aksaray, and the Emirgan Mosque, as well as the Grand Mosque of Bursa and the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne.⁶³ Like his grandfather, Sultan Mahmud II primarily had his calligraphic works placed in sultanic mosques. In 1809, he undertook significant repairs to the Hagia Sophia Mosque, and the Hamid-i Evvel Mosque in Emirgan was rebuilt under his auspices in 1838. The *levhas* bearing his calligraphy were likely sent following these construction projects. Another noteworthy practice, akin to the widespread distribution of *levhas* across mosques in Istanbul, Bursa, and Edirne, was Sultan Mahmud II's commissioning of portraits after the clothing reform. These portraits were ceremoniously sent to state offices and embassies abroad.⁶⁴

Sultan Abdülmecid's inscriptions can be found in the Hırka-i Şerif Mosque in Fatih, the Ortaköy Mosque, the Bezmiâlem Vâlide Sultan Mosque in Dolmabahçe, and the

63 Derman 2019, 339.

64 For the practice of distributing portraits of the sultan to Ottoman statesmen, foreign rulers, and embassies, which began with Sultan Selim III and continued with Mahmud II, see Renda 2000, 442, 449.

Kılıç Ali Paşa Mosque.⁶⁵ The Hırka-i Şerif Mosque, constructed by Sultan Abdülmecid in 1851, was designed to house and facilitate the visitation of the Prophet Muhammad's mantle, which is believed to have been entrusted to Veysel Karani.⁶⁶ The inscriptions within the mosque were penned by Sultan Abdülmecid himself, alongside his instructor, Kazasker Mustafa İzzet. Similarly, the *çehâryâr-i güzîn* inscriptions adorning the walls of the Ortaköy Mosque, which the sultan had commissioned in 1854, as well as the inscription of the *kelime-i tevhid* on the pulpit, are also his work.⁶⁷ The construction of the Dolmabahçe Mosque was initiated by Sultan Abdülmecid's mother, Bezmiâlem Vâlide Sultan, and he completed it after her death in 1853.⁶⁸ The walls of this mosque, bearing his mother's name, also feature inscriptions in Sultan Abdülmecid's hand.

In a practice reminiscent of his father, Sultan Mahmud II, Sultan Abdülmecid also sent his inscriptions to mosques outside of the capital. An archival document dated 18 *Zilhicce* 1266 AH (25 October 1850) records that, upon the sultan's command, a special envoy was dispatched to deliver eight of his inscriptions to the Emîr Sultan Mosque in Bursa. After prayers were offered for the Sultan, the inscriptions were hung on the mosque's walls. The letter accompanying these inscriptions, sent by İbrahim Sarîm Paşa (d. 1854), Governor of Hudâvendigâr and the Director of the Bursa Waqf,⁶⁹ described the work as 'adorned with the blessed handwriting of His Majesty the Emperor, marked by miraculous artistry.' The Emîr Sultan Complex, dedicated to the venerated figure of Emîr Sultan (d. 1429), was regularly renovated by Ottoman sultans.⁷⁰ Its endowments were augmented through additional grants, with particular gifts sent to the mausoleum. The complex, which had often been damaged by earthquakes, underwent significant restoration during the reigns of Mahmud II, Abdülmecid, Abdülaziz, and Abdülhamid II. Sultan Abdülmecid, having overseen repairs to the Emîr Sultan tomb in 1845, likely decided these *levhas* after this restoration.⁷¹

Sultan Abdülaziz's inscriptions can also be found at the Vâlide Mosque in Aksaray, built in honour of his mother, Pertevniyal Vâlide Sultan, and completed in 1871. An archival document dated 12 *Zilkade* 1288 AH (23 January 1872), shortly after the mosque's completion, provides an inventory of items to be placed within.⁷² Among these are listed 'two inscriptions in imperial handwriting,' which must belong to Sultan Abdülaziz. Furthermore, a note later added to the list of sacred objects preserved inside the silver grille of the Privy Chamber at the Topkapı Palace, dated 23 *Şevval* 1269 AH (30 July 1853), reads: 'A *levha* by His Majesty Sultan Abdülaziz, inscribed

65 Subaşı 1999, 58.

66 Tanman 1998, 378–82.

67 Gündüz 2007, 408–9.

68 Kalfazade 1994, 502–3.

69 State Ottoman Archives HH.İ. 1-50. İbrahim Sarîm Paşa was also a grand vizier known for his calligraphy. He served as the governor of Bursa from 1849 to 1851. See Toksoy 2008, 642.

70 Tanman 1995, 148–51.

71 *ibid.*, 150.

72 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 8205-4.

*“Bismillahi teyemmünen bi zikrihi'l celîl”*⁷³ It appears that, following in the footsteps of his father Mahmud II, and grandfather, Ahmed III, Sultan Abdülaziz also placed one of his own inscriptions while performing services in the Privy Chamber. Abdülaziz also commissioned the grille, which holds the mantle of the Prophet, along with two nested wooden chests gilded in gold, and a pouch for the mantle, embroidered with gold thread on green velvet. The casing for the mantle is dated 1282 AH (1866).⁷⁴ One of Sultan Abdülaziz's rare inscriptions can be found at the mausoleum of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari (d. 669), known as Eyüp Sultan, who participated in the first Muslim siege of Istanbul and died there.⁷⁵ The sword girding ceremonies performed at the time of Ottoman sultans' ascensions to the throne were conducted in front of Eyüp Sultan's mausoleum. For this reason, the Eyüp Sultan complex, particularly the mausoleum, has been one of the most sacred sites, meticulously maintained by successive sultans. Among the many Ottoman sultans who sent inscriptions to the mausoleum were, naturally, Ahmed III, Mahmud II, and Abdülmecid.

Though Sultan Abdülhamid II did not send an inscription to be displayed in a mosque, he is known to have commissioned Ebüzziyâ Tevfik (d. 1913) to decorate the Yıldız Mosque – the foundations of which were laid in 1881 and completed in 1885 – with Kufic calligraphy.⁷⁶ As a testament to the sultan's admiration for Kufic script, Ebüzziyâ Tevfik adorned the prayer hall of the mosque with a panel bearing the entire *Surah al-Mulk*, inscribed in large Kufic letters. The inscription's border features round cartouches bearing the names of the *aşere-i mübeşere* (the Prophet Muhammad's ten companions promised paradise), arranged in Kufic script. Between these round cartouches, he placed rectangular, segmented cartouches decorated in an arabesque style. On the mosque's dome, Ebüzziyâ Tevfik inscribed the first three verses of *Surah al-Najm*, the Arabic word for 'star,' also in Kufic script. Around the edge of the dome, alternating rectangular panels bear the inscription *al-hamdu lillahi ve ala ni'mat al-Islam* in Kufic script. Above the mihrab, the inscription *Bismillah* was also rendered in Kufic. While Sultan Abdülhamid II himself did not possess the skills of a calligrapher, he ensured that the Yıldız Mosque, which became a symbol of his reign, was adorned with this beloved script.⁷⁷

The only inscription by Abdülmecid Efendi to be found in a mosque is located in the Fâtih Mosque, which holds a privileged position as the first sultanic mosque built after the conquest of Istanbul. According to Semavi Eyice, after the conquest, Sultan Mehmed II specifically chose the site of the Church of the Twelve Apostles, one of the most significant Byzantine sites, for the complex he intended to build in his name.⁷⁸ Immediately after the conquest, the church was first assigned to the Orthodox Patri-

73 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 900.

74 Ağca 2013, 148, 150, 244, 308, 310.

75 Algül 1994, 123–5.

76 Ebüzziyâ 1907, 99–108.

77 For the revival of Kufic script during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II and its political motivations, see Schick 2013, 119–38.

78 Eyice 1995, 244–9.

Figure 19. ‘...Help from God and present victory (conquest of Mecca). Give good tidings (O Muhammad) to believers’ (Saf surah: 13). Levha by Prince Abdülmecid Efendi (d. 1944), dated 1922–1923. Fatih Mosque. Photograph: Hadiye Cangökçe, 25 February 2022



archate. However, shortly thereafter, another location was provided to the Patriarchate, and the construction of the Fatih complex began, becoming one of the most significant religious and cultural centres in Istanbul. The inscription written by Abdülmecid Efendi, the last caliph of the Islamic world, is placed next to the mihrab of this mosque, which is of great significance for the Muslim world. The inscription, dated 1923–1924, is framed with a gilded Ottoman coat of arms (Figure 19). In this inscription, the caliph wrote the verse from *Surah As-Saff*: ‘A help from Allah and a near victory (the conquest of Mecca). (O Muhammad!) Give glad tidings to the believers!’ (61:13). The content of the inscription suggests that it was prepared specifically for the Fâtih Mosque.

6. Female Calligraphers of the Dynasty

In addition to the Ottoman sultans and princes, archival documents also record that women in the palace, including *valide sultans* and daughters, occasionally wrote calligraphic inscriptions, although in very small numbers. One of these women is an uniden-

tified valide sultan. In the *Ceyb-i Hümâyún* and *Harcı Hâssa* ledger dated 29 *Rebiülevvel* 1205 AH (6 December 1790), is a note stating: 'The inscription belonging to the late Valide Sultan, located in the Dâvud Paşa Palace, has been ordered to be renewed by the Sultan, and expenses incurred for its writing and gilding are recorded.'⁷⁹ It is likely that during the restoration of the Dâvud Paşa Palace, which had become quite dilapidated by the eighteenth century, the calligraphic inscription written by the Valide Sultan was taken down from the wall as the interior items were being removed, its value was recognised, and it was subsequently entered in the record and gilded.⁸⁰ The ledger also mentions that 'the expenses were approved by His Majesty.' This work is understood to belong to Sultan Selim III. Since Selim III's mother, Mihrişah Sultan (d. 1805), was still alive at the time, the Valide Sultan in question must have been the mother of another sultan. The sultan preceding Selim III was Sultan Abdülhamid I, whose mother, Râbia Şermi Sultan (d. 1732), passed away before her son ascended the throne, so she did not hold the title of Valide Sultan.⁸¹ However, it is also possible that this title was used later in respect for her son after he became sultan.

Another female member of the court likely associated with calligraphy, according to archival documents, is Hibetullah Sultan (d. 1841), the daughter of Sultan Abdülhamid I and the sister of Sultan Mahmud II. After her death on 18 September, the *Ceyb-i Hümâyún* and *Harcı Hâssa* ledger dated 29 *Şâban* 1257 AH (16 October 1841) records: 'The calligraphy of the late Hibetullah Sultan, the most esteemed one, has been received from the noble court of His Imperial Majesty and recorded in the *Hazine-i Enderun-i Hümâyün*, and it has been noted in the royal ledger. Six pieces of calligraphy in *thuluth* and *naskh*, decorated with gold, are mentioned.'⁸²

Thus, it is understood that there were gilded calligraphic pieces among the valuable items passed on from Hibetullah Sultan and sent to the palace. While these pieces are referred to as 'the calligraphy of Hibetullah Sultan,' it is also noted that they do not have signatures. The calligraphy could have been executed by Hibetullah Sultan herself, or she may have simply been the owner of the pieces. According to the same ledger, it is also indicated that Hibetullah Sultan possessed a copy of the Qur'an sent by the sultan. It is thought that the sultan in question could have been either her brother, Mahmud II, or her nephew, Abdülmecid, who was on the throne at the time.

Hibetullah Sultan was married at a young age to Alâeddin Paşa, the Governor of Erzurum, and became a widow while she was still young.⁸³ She resided in the Kadırga

79 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d 2436-0021. *Ceyb-i hümâyün* refers to the funds allocated for the personal use of the sultan and the expenditures made from these funds; Sahillioglu, 1993, 465–7. *Harcı hâssa*, on the other hand, corresponds to expenditures made on behalf of the sultan or members of the dynasty; see Bilgin 2020, 534–5.

80 For the state of the Dâvud Paşa Palace at this time, see Eyice 1994, 45–8.

81 Sakaoglu 2015.

82 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 2488.

83 There are two documents in which Alâeddin Paşa expressed his astonishment at this marriage decision; see State Ottoman Archives HAT. 119-4840 and HAT. 127-5248.

Palace.⁸⁴ This palace is also depicted in a print in the book *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore*, published in 1819 by Antoine-Ignace Melling (d. 1831).⁸⁵ Archival documents show that despite having income from properties, land, and farms allocated to her, Hibetullah Sultan led a lavish life and was known for her generosity. It is understood that her expenses for tailoring, fabrics, jewellery, haberdashery, gifts, construction and repairs, furniture, decoration, and kitchen costs were quite high.⁸⁶

A well-known female calligrapher of this period is Esmâ İbret (d. 1780), who was born nine years before Hibetullah Sultan.⁸⁷ The daughter of Serhâsekiyân-ı Hâssa Ahmed Ağa, she was likely married to her calligraphy instructor Mahmud Celâleddin around 1795 or shortly thereafter, at the request of Sultan Selim III.⁸⁸ Recognised at court as a female calligrapher, Esmâ İbret may have been introduced to the young female members of the palace who showed an interest in the art of calligraphy. Among those who may have been acquainted with her is Hibetullah Sultan. Mahmud Celâleddin, Esmâ İbret's husband, was also a calligrapher closely associated with the palace.⁸⁹ Notably, he inscribed the *celî thulûth* calligraphy adorning the tomb of Mihrîşah Vâlide Sultan, mother of Sultan Selim III, in 1207 AH (1793). It is plausible that this master calligrapher was among the instructors who taught calligraphy to Hibetullah Sultan. Around the same time, her brother, Prince Mahmud, who would later ascend to the throne as Sultan Mahmud II, was also receiving instruction in calligraphy.

In addition to members of the Ottoman dynasty, palace calligraphy masters also trained other students, including a woman named Cilvenaz. While her precise identity remains uncertain and only one work by her has been documented, her name suggests that she may have been a concubine in the palace.⁹⁰ In the colophon of her 1841–1842 *bîlye*, she inscribed the words: 'O Muhammad, intercede for the Ummah, Cilvenaz, year 1257.' Archival records dated 1 *Rebîulâbir* 1267 AH (3 February 1851) and 5 *Şâban* 1274 AH (21 March 1858) indicate that Cilvenaz served as a *kâlfâ* (attendant) to Hoşyar Kadın (d. 1859), Sultan Mahmud II's second wife.⁹¹ Hoşyar Kadın, along with another of her attendants, Şemsiye, was known to have a deep appreciation for books.⁹²

84 Artan 1993, 201–11.

85 Topkapı Palace Library, inv. no. A. 3704. See Çağman et al. 2004, 270.

86 For examples of documents referring to Hibetullah Sultan's wealth and financial difficulties despite her assets, see: State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.d. 829 and HAT. 1653-21. Among the generous gifts given by Hibetullah Sultan were jewel-encrusted boxes presented to the Spanish and Dutch ambassadors; State Ottoman Archives HAT. 410-21310.

87 Derman 1995, 418–9.

88 A *bîlye* written by Esmâ İbret in 1209 AH (1795) was presented to Sultan Selim III and his mother, Mihrîşah Vâlide Sultan. Following this, the sultan and his mother arranged the marriage of the female calligrapher with her teacher; Derman 1995, 418.

89 Derman 2003, 359.

90 İnal 1955, 771.

91 State Ottoman Archives TS.MA.e. 499-22 and TS.MA.e. 683-19.

92 Hoşyar Kadın's book is catalogued as TSK EH.1070, and Şemsiye's book as EHA IX/3; see Derman et al. 2021, 270–1.

The Ottoman palace thus fostered an environment in which sultans, *valide sultans*, and women with a passion for calligraphy had the opportunity to work with master calligraphers, study rare manuscripts preserved within the palace, and inhabit spaces adorned with exquisite calligraphic inscriptions. This vibrant artistic milieu, however, began to wane during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II, when the royal family transitioned from residing in Topkapı Palace to newly constructed waterfront palaces along the Bosphorus. Unlike their predecessors, who were immersed in the artistic traditions of the palace, later members of the dynasty – particularly after the reigns of Abdülmecid and Abdülaziz – grew up without the same exposure to the arts of the book. The shifting political and social dynamics of the era further distanced younger members of the dynasty from the calligraphic tradition. This decline, as reflected in contemporary newspapers and periodicals, began to take root among the broader Ottoman public by the mid-nineteenth century and had largely reached the royal family by the century's end, severing their once-close engagement with the calligraphic arts and their practitioners.⁹³

These registers, long overlooked in the study of Ottoman calligraphy, offer more than a simple catalogue of artistic production. They illuminate a cultural and educational system in which calligraphy was deeply embedded in the formation of princely identity and the performance of imperial authority. By foregrounding the names, works, and tutelage of sultans themselves, the inventories reveal a nuanced picture of calligraphy not just as a devotional or aesthetic pursuit, but as an embodied practice of rule. The close reading of these documents also invites a reassessment of the institutional dynamics that supported artistic transmission at the highest levels of Ottoman society – from master-pupil relationships to the commemorative use of calligraphy in architecture, albums, and painting. Tracing these lines of instruction and inscription not only expands our understanding of royal calligraphic production, but also reframes the archive as a site of both artistic agency and historical memory.

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