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## Writing and alphabet samples in the Ottoman Archive documents

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## Образцы письменности и алфавитов в документах Османского архива

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### Abstract

The Ottoman State was one of the central actors of European and world politics for about six centuries. The state, which ruled over a wide geography, had successfully managed to keep different religious, ethnic and cultural elements together for centuries. In the set order called “nation system”, people lived in peace and tranquility. On the other hand, the Ottoman State gave a wide area of freedom to its citizens in the field of language and alphabet, as in many other areas, and never interfered with the languages and alphabets of the nations living under its rule. For this reason, people freely used their own language in their daily lives, works, religious and social lives for centuries. This study deals with the documents exhibited on the occasion of the “Language and Alphabet Samples in the Ottoman Archive Documents” exhibition organized by the Directorate of State Archives of the Republic of Turkey within the scope of the Conference “Native Language – Source of Historical Memory and Cultural Heritage” organized by the State Committee on Archives of the Republic of Tatarstan. In the study, which deals with the rich archive examples of the Ottoman Empire in terms of language and alphabet, 20 documents are briefly evaluated in a wide range starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Аннотация

Османское государство было одним из центральных акторов европейской и мировой политики на протяжении шести веков. Государству, правящему на огромной территории, удавалось поддерживать единство религиозных, этнических и культурных составляющих в течение многих столетий. При устроенном порядке, называемом «национальной системой», люди жили в мире и согласии. С другой стороны, Османское государство предоставляло подданным свободу в отношении языка и алфавита, а также во многих других областях, и не вмешивалось в вопросы языков и алфавитов народов, находящихся под его господством. Поэтому люди свободно использовали родной язык в повседневной жизни, в работе, религиозной и общественной жизни. Данная

статья посвящена документам, представленным в экспозиции «Примеры языков и алфавитов из документов Османского архива», устроенной Управлением государственных архивов Турецкой Республики в рамках конференции «Родной язык – источник исторической памяти и культурного наследия», организованной Государственным комитетом Республики Татарстан по архивному делу. В данном исследовании представлены богатые в отношении языка и алфавита архивные образцы, относящиеся к периоду Османской империи, приводится краткая характеристика 20 документов, начиная с XV и заканчивая XX в.

### **Keywords**

Ottoman State, archive records, exhibition, native language, cultural heritage.

### **Ключевые слова**

Османское государство, архивные записи, выставка, родной язык, культурное наследие.

Ottoman State, which ruled over the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa for more than six centuries, passed into history as one of the three greatest empires in the world history. The state rapidly expanded its borders shortly after its establishment, and as a result of this situation, different nations came under Ottoman rule. The expansion of the borders of the Ottoman State also led to being neighbors to different states. On the other hand, the fact that the Ottoman State was one of the few states politically of its period necessitated diplomatic contacts with states from many different geographies of the world for centuries.

By the virtue of the “millet system” developed by the state administration in the Ottoman lands, which had a large population in a wide geography, it was able to keep people from different religions, nations and sects together in peace and tranquility, and this was seen as a great administrative success. Because the Ottomans never intervened in the differences of the nations that came under their rule and showed maximum effort for the happiness of their subjects.

However, language is one of the most important elements of being a nation. Language, like an organism, is alive and in danger of extinction. The language that is never spoken is forgotten, disappears, that is, it dies. The set of symbols that enable the spoken language to be written and read is called the alphabet. Each nation has preferred and used the alphabet that is suitable for itself in the historical practice of its own history and belief system. To give an example from Turkish history, Turks have used Göktürk, Uyghur, Arabic, Cyrillic and Latin alphabets throughout history. It is also noteworthy that several of these alphabets were used by different Turkish societies in the same period.

It is noteworthy that during the Ottoman period, people were provided with a wide range of freedom regarding the use of language and alphabet, as in other areas. In principle, the Ottoman administration never interfered with the languages and alphabets of the nations living under its rule, and approached these nations with a perspective that encouraged their activities in the field of language. As a result of this, it has made a significant contribution to the survival of these languages in literary, scientific, religious and social life. Although the official language of correspondence was Turkish, people continued to speak their own language in daily life, they were able to produce literary and cultural works in their own language, and they were able to use their own language in their relations with the state. The fact that more than one language was spoken in the same street in Ottoman cities has become one of the routines of daily life. This routine continued from the foundation of the state until its collapse.

It is possible to say that this practice, which was formed in daily life in the Ottoman State, was also maintained in the relations between the state and the nations subject to it. When the documents kept in the Directorate of State Archives are examined, it is clearly seen that there are different types of documents produced by nations in their own languages. Among them, the texts written by Ottoman citizens of different ethnic and religious affiliations in their own language and presented directly to the sultan are truly remarkable. It would be appropriate to state that the Ottoman State embraced the differences in this sense and did not have any complexes, especially in terms of language.

This attitude of the Ottoman administration in terms of the language of its citizens is very valuable in terms of world cultural heritage. The documents used in the exhibition "Language and Alphabet Samples in the Ottoman Archive Documents" prepared by the Directorate of State Archives of the Republic of Turkey within the scope of the conference "Native Language – Source of Historical Memory and Cultural Heritage" organized by the State Committee on Archives of the Republic of Tatarstan prove that a wide range of expression areas were offered to Ottoman citizens in terms of language and alphabet diversity. These documents, at the same time, are a testament to the determination of the Ottoman understanding of administration in keeping the differences alive and developing them, and of its success in this matter.

In the exhibition, 20 documents, which can be divided into three different groups, are exhibited in a wide range from the XV century to the XX century. The first group of these documents are the documents written by the Ottoman administrative mechanism and written in a language other than Turkish. In the second group of documents, there are examples of documents written by the people living in the Ottoman lands in their own language and addressed to the state administration. Finally, examples of documents in different languages written to the Ottoman State from other countries were exhibited. The documents exhibited in this regard can be briefly listed as follows: The Greek letter of 1824 stating that the Wallachian voivode wanted to give a fur gift to the Ottoman sultan, the Bulgarian Mahzar (kind of petition) written by the Bulgarian community in 1849, the Bosnian letter of 1853 in which the clergy working in three monasteries in Bosnia sent their thanks for the religious freedom provided to them by the Ottoman administration, the Muslim district for its fair administration, the petition written in Greek in 1861 by the Greek people who demanded that the district governor stay in his position, the congratulatory letter in Armenian prepared by the Armenian nation in 1873 on the occasion of the anniversary of Sultan Abdulaziz's accession to the throne, the 1887 letter of thanks presented in Arabic by the Meccans who were satisfied with the management of Saffet Pasha, who was appointed to the Governorship of Hejaz, copy of the newspaper Drita, which was written in 1891 by a person named Musa Temim published in Albanian, the own language of the Albanians in the Ottoman lands. This group of documents clearly shows us that the Ottoman administration and administrators did not feel any discomfort from people's living in their mother tongue and using their own language in their relations with the state.

In addition to all these, although the Ottomans were a small principality at the beginning of the 14th century, the borders of the state expanded greatly in a short time and as a result, from the second half of the 15th century, the Ottoman State, as one of the dominant powers of the period, came to an important position in world politics. As a result of this, diplomatic contacts were established with the states both regionally and in different continents of the world. In the diplomatic contacts established, the states produced texts sometimes in their own languages and alphabets, and sometimes in

languages such as Arabic and French, which were the internationally accepted languages of the period. In this way, states were able to maintain their contacts among themselves. However, the need for a staff arose as a result of the Ottoman State's contact with states with very different languages and cultures, as well as the need to translate and respond in the same language when necessary. In this respect, translators affiliated to the Divan-ı Hümayun (Imperial Council), which was at the center of the Ottoman administration, were employed since the establishment of the state. In the following periods, especially since the second half of the 18th century, the concept of diplomacy gained a new dimension in world politics, as a result of this, the Ottoman State established permanent embassies in many states, and these developments were followed by consulates opened in the relevant countries.

These breakthroughs in the diplomatic field led to the arrival of documents in many different languages to the Ottoman State, and on the other hand, the production of documents in different languages by the Ottoman bureaucracy. The increase in this diplomatic traffic with foreign countries compared to previous periods made the need to train foreign language-speaking personnel in the Ottoman State more evident, and as a result, the establishment of a Translation Room became essential. In this way, texts in different languages that came from or addressed to foreign countries began to be archived more systematically. In this way, the document collections in different languages from the Ottoman period to the present day have become even richer.

In this exhibition titled "Examples of Language and Alphabet in Ottoman Archive Documents", there are also documents from the states that came to the Ottoman State and ruled in a wide geography from Central America to Japan. In addition to these, the documents produced by the Ottoman bureaucracy in the languages and alphabets of the respective states addressed to the autonomous states and foreign states are also exhibited. The Latin edict of 1482 (in the Venice Archive) written by Bayezid II addressing the Republic of Ragusa for the delivery of his brother Cem Sultan to him has a special importance in terms of the diversity of documents. Again, during the reign of Yavuz Sultan Selim, the Slavic letter addressed to the Moldavian Voivode in 1512, declaring the privileges of the Moldavian people in the fields of fishing and farming, shows that the diversity of language and alphabet in the Ottoman archive goes back to very ancient times. The Japanese letter dated 1888 stating that the Japanese Emperor Meiji Mutsuhito gifted the Order of Chrysanthemum to the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, and the Russian letter sent from the Russian Empire in 1889 stating that the marriage ceremonies of Grand Duke Nikolayevich and Princess Miliça were performed is also in our exhibition to show the languages and alphabets. Among the other exhibited examples of archive documents in other languages and alphabets sent from foreign countries to the Ottoman State are the Arabic letter of friendship sent by the Emir of Morocco to the Ottoman sultan Sultan Ahmed III in 1728, the Persian friendship letter sent by the Persian Shah Feth Ali to Istanbul in 1807. Other such documents are the letter of credence in French presented to the Ottoman Sultan by Alexandr Mavrokordato, who was appointed as the ambassador to Istanbul by Greece in 1842, the letter in Abyssinian announcing the engagement sent from the King of Abyssinia in 1898, and the letter in Siamese dated 1899 sent by the King of Thailand to the Ottoman Sultan. The last two examples of archival documents written in other languages, addressed to the Ottoman administration from foreign countries, are Estrada Palma's 1902 Spanish letter announcing the establishment of the independent Cuban State, and Ireland's letter of thanks sent to the Ottoman Sultan

Abdülmeceid in 1848 for the aid sent from the Ottoman administration during famine, which is known as the “Great Famine” in British history.

As a result, language atlas takes place in the literature as maps showing the distribution of languages spoken in the world. It is possible to say that most of the languages included in the language atlas of the period when the Ottoman State existed were seen in the Ottoman records and naturally took place in our archives. In this respect, the Ottoman archives make serious contributions to the world cultural heritage and scientific studies in related languages. In this context, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who contributed to the organization of the exhibition titled “Examples of Language and Alphabet in the Ottoman Archives” and contributed to the promotion of these resources, especially Gulnara Gabdrakhmanova, the Chairman of the State Committee on Archives of the Republic of Tatarstan.

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