

A Reassessment of Writing Direction and Reading Order in Ottoman Tughra Script

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Abstract

Ottoman tughras are stylized script forms used as the official signature of the sultan, enriched with aesthetic elements of calligraphy. This paper revisits common assumptions regarding the reading direction and sequence of tughra inscriptions. It proposes that the widely accepted reading “Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima”¹ may be reconsidered, as the writing direction suggests that an alternative sequence could be more accurate.

Introduction

Tughras are visual and textual emblems representing the ruler’s identity and authority in historical documents. Typically written in Arabic script, these signatures follow a writing direction that proceeds from bottom to top. Decorative extensions such as *zülfe*, *tuğlar*, and *kollar* enhance the visual composition but do not alter the reading or writing direction of the text. Like any written form, a tughra has a defined orientation, which is generally upward from its base.

Keywords

Tughra, Ottoman Tughra, Tughra Writing Direction, Calligraphy, Tughra Reading Order, Paleographic Aspects of Tughra Script, Epigraphic Analysis, Tughra of Sultan Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid

¹ See: > The Wikimedia page “Tughra Mahmud II”

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tughra_Mahmud_II.svg

> Decoding the Tughra, Anatomy of an Imperial Monogram

Using the Signature of Sultan Abdülhamid II as a Guide. By Yasin Giray Demir, Jun 19, 2025 >

<https://notesonpaper.substack.com/p/decoding-the-tughra-anatomy-of-an>

Evaluation of Writing Direction and Reading Sequence

Some sources assert that a tughra from the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II should be read as “Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima.” However, this sequence becomes questionable when the writing direction is taken into account. Since tughra strokes typically progress from bottom to top, the reading “Han Mahmud bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” appears more consistent with the structural flow.

In the visual example below, the writing direction of the color-marked words can be followed through a translation rendered in matching colors.²



Mahmud han bin Abdülhamid muzaffer daima

While oral introductions may use expressions like “Mahmud Han” or “Fatih Sultan Mehmed Han,” tughra inscriptions also include the father’s name. Given the presence of the word *bin* (meaning “son of” in English) and the semantic structure of the phrase, placing the word *Han* at the beginning yields a more coherent reading.

This arrangement results in a semantically sound sentence without requiring a comma or pause. Moreover, it does not disrupt the meaning commonly accepted in academic circles.

As with any writing system, tughras possess a defined writing direction. Skipping the bottommost word and beginning with the second disrupts the reading flow. Writing and reading directions must align.

² You can view the source description of the referenced image here: Wikimedia, page titled “Tughra Mahmud II”; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tughra_Mahmud_II.svg

Adding a comma (imaginarily) to the phrase “Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid” can significantly alter its meaning:

- “Mahmud, Han bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” → “Mahmud, son of Han Abdulhamid...”
- “Mahmud Han, bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” → “Mahmud Han, son of Abdulhamid...”

However, when read according to the writing direction, the sequence “Han Mahmud bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” preserves both semantic integrity and structural consistency. This form also aligns with Turkish syntactic conventions.



Han Mahmud bin Abdülhamid muzaffer daima

Placing the word Han at the beginning maintains the upward writing flow of the tughra.

As a matter of fact, in Central Asian Turkish dialects, as in Ottoman Turkish, the name of the father comes first and the name of the person comes after:

- Like “Ahmet, son of Ali”, “Batur, son of Oğuz”.

In official documents, the format “Ahmet Ardiç Alirıza oğlu” and-or “Ardiç Ahmet Alirıza oğlu” is preferred, whereas in speech, one might say “Alirıza oğlu Ahmet Ardiç.”

Therefore, researchers who translate the phrase as “Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” should explain why they disregard the structural order of the written form in favor of oral conventions. Otherwise, they risk implying that Ottoman tughras lack a writing direction or that it is irrelevant—an inconsistent and problematic conclusion.

Every written language has a writing direction. Expecting coherent meaning from randomly arranged words is equivalent to denying the existence of such direction. Thus,

the reading “Han Mahmud bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” is more appropriate both structurally and semantically.

Furthermore, the title Han (meaning “khan” or “sovereign”) should precede the name in written form. This placement conveys the intended meaning without requiring punctuation. Tughras do not contain pause markers, nor do they need them.

In conclusion, the reading “Han Mahmud bin Abdulhamid Muzaffer Daima” is both structurally consistent and semantically accurate. While spoken expressions such as “Sultan Mahmud Han Hazretleri” may place Han after the name, official tughra inscriptions should not be expected to replicate oral phrasing.

This analysis demonstrates that tughra inscriptions must be examined not only for their content but also for their structural characteristics. Writing direction is a fundamental element that directly influences meaning and sequence.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes that Ottoman tughras should be analyzed not only for their textual content but also for their structural features. Writing direction plays a critical role in determining the meaning and syntactic order of the inscription. The reading “Han Mahmud bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” is consistent with both the writing flow and Turkish semantic structure. Therefore, priority should be given to the internal structure and writing orientation of the inscription rather than to oral conventions.

Moreover, researchers who favor the reading “Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” must clarify why they disregard the written sequence in favor of spoken phrasing, as if no difference exists between the two. Otherwise, they risk suggesting that Ottoman tughras lack a writing direction—an untenable position. This approach not only contradicts the logic of written language but also undermines the structural integrity of the tughra.³

This perspective may contribute to future paleographic and linguistic studies and offer a more coherent framework for interpreting tughra inscriptions.

³ Researchers who insist on the reading “Mahmud Han bin Abdulhamid muzaffer daima” inevitably fall into a contradictory position if they defend this sequence while implying that Ottoman tughras lack a defined writing direction. Accepting that the writing still proceeds from bottom to top after rearranging the first two words suggests that the direction is being disregarded in textual analysis. Yet in all writing systems worldwide—including Arabic and Turkish—writing direction is a fundamental principle. Expecting a coherent sentence to emerge from randomly placed words is equivalent to denying the existence of writing orientation. Therefore, claiming that Ottoman tughras have no writing direction, or that it can be ignored, is incompatible with the universal logic of written language.

Additional References Consulted

- **Sultan Tughra Pronunciations**

For examples and explanations of how sultanic tughras are pronounced, see:

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