Scripts, Scribes, and Sanjaks: An Analysis of Ottoman Turkish Styles in Documents Pertaining to the Afrin Region (Kurd-Dagh)

Introduction

The "styles" of Ottoman Turkish found in documents pertaining to the Afrin region of Syria are not monolithic. They represent a complex matrix determined by a document's function, its point of origin, and the specific administrative and linguistic context of the Vilayet of Aleppo. While high imperial scripts like *Divani* were used for edicts of power emanating from Istanbul, the most voluminous and frequently used styles were the functional scripts of provincial bureaucracy and finance—namely *Riq'a*, *Siyakat*, and, crucially, a localized Arabic *Naskh* for judicial matters. This reflects the practical realities of governing a semi-autonomous Kurdish region within a predominantly Arab-speaking province.

This report synthesizes paleographic analysis with administrative history. It first establishes the administrative placement of Afrin, known in Ottoman records as Kurd-Dagh ("Mountain of the Kurds"), within the Ottoman Empire to identify the relevant documentary corpus. It then analyzes the distinct calligraphic scripts and linguistic registers of the Ottoman bureaucracy before applying this framework to the specific types of documents that would have been produced concerning the region.

The report is structured in four parts. Section I details the administrative context of Afrin. Section II examines the linguistic landscape of Ottoman Syria. Section III provides a paleographic survey of key bureaucratic scripts. Finally, Section IV synthesizes these elements to identify the specific styles most used in Afrin-related documents, providing a nuanced answer to which forms of writing were most prevalent in the governance of this historic area.

Section I: The Administrative Context of Afrin (Kurd-Dagh) in the Ottoman Empire

To identify the styles of writing used in documents about Afrin, one must first understand where to look for these documents. The location and nature of archival records are dictated

by the region's specific place within the Ottoman administrative hierarchy. Afrin's identity as both a subordinate part of a major province and a semi-autonomous district shaped the types of records created about it.

1.1 The Vilayet of Aleppo: The Provincial Superstructure

Throughout the Ottoman period (1516-1918), the Afrin region was unequivocally part of the larger administrative unit centered on the city of Aleppo.¹ This province was known first as the Eyalet of Aleppo and later, following the comprehensive administrative reforms of 1864, as the Vilayet of Aleppo.³ The province was a major imperial hub, second only to the capital Constantinople in commercial and strategic prominence at various times, largely due to its pivotal location on the trade routes connecting Anatolia, Persia, and the Mediterranean.³ The Vilayet of Aleppo was a vast and diverse territory. Its administrative boundaries were stretched northward to incorporate the largely Turkish-speaking cities of Maraş and Antep (Aintab) and the Kurdish-speaking areas around Urfa, creating a province with a mixed population of Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish speakers, alongside significant Armenian and other communities. The province was subdivided into several districts known as sanjaks (or livas), including the sanjaks of Aleppo, Aintab, Maraş, and Urfa, which formed the administrative superstructure under which Afrin was governed.³

1.2 Kurd-Dagh: The "Sancak of the Kurds" (Ekrad Sancağı)

17th century, were even appointed governors of the entire Eyalet of Aleppo.⁶

Within the broader Vilayet of Aleppo, the Afrin plateau held a distinct identity. Ottoman documents officially referred to this mountainous region as the "Sancak of the Kurds" (*Ekrad Sancağı*) or Kurd-Dagh. This was not merely a geographic descriptor but a recognized administrative entity reflecting the area's demography and political structure. This status points to a system of semi-autonomous governance, a pragmatic approach the Ottoman state frequently employed in frontier zones or regions dominated by powerful tribal confederations. In exchange for loyalty, tax revenues, and the provision of auxiliary troops for imperial campaigns, the central government granted local chieftains considerable autonomy. These hereditary fiefs, sometimes known as *yurtluk-ocaklık*, allowed local rule to pass from father to son, in stark contrast to the standard practice of rotating centrally appointed governors. They powerful Janbulad family, Kurdish chieftains based in Kurd-Dagh, exemplify this system. They served as hereditary governors (*sancak-bey*) of the neighboring Sancak of Kilis and, at the height of their power in the early

1.3 Implications for Archival Research

The dual administrative identity of the Afrin region—as a component of the Vilayet of Aleppo and as a semi-autonomous Kurdish sanjak—dictates the nature and location of its historical documentation. Documents concerning Afrin will not be found under a standalone "Afrin" heading in Ottoman archives. Instead, research must be directed toward the records of the Vilayet of Aleppo.³ Specifically, relevant materials are most likely to be found within the records of the

Sancak of Kilis (given its administrative connection to the Janbulad rulers of Kurd-Dagh) and the central Sancak of Aleppo itself, as well as any files explicitly referencing "Ekrad Sancağı" or "Kurd-Dagh".

The primary repository for central government documents is the *T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı - Osmanlı Arşivi* (BOA) in Istanbul. Collections such as the *Halep Ahkâm Defterleri* (Aleppo Judgment Registers) within the BOA contain copies of imperial orders (*hüküm*) sent from the capital to the entire province, including its various districts and sub-districts like those in the Afrin area. Similarly, land and tax registers (*Tapu Tahrir Defterleri*) for the Vilayet of Aleppo, which provide detailed demographic and economic data, are preserved in Turkish state archives. This administrative structure suggests that documents related to Afrin would be of two primary types: "external" documents issued by the imperial center to the province, and "internal" documents generated by the provincial or local administration itself. This distinction is fundamental to understanding which calligraphic and linguistic styles were most commonly used.

Table 1: Administrative Hierarchy for the Ottoman Afrin Region (Kurd-Dagh)

Level of Administration	Ottoman Term	Specific Name/Entity	Entity Location of Primary	
			Records	
Empire	Devlet-i Âliyye	The Sublime Porte	Istanbul (BOA)	
Province	Vilayet / Eyalet	Vilayet of Aleppo	Istanbul (BOA),	
			Damascus	
District	Sancak / Liva	Sancak of the Kurds	Istanbul (BOA),	
		(Ekrad Sancağı),	Damascus	
		Sancak of Kilis		
Sub-district	Kaza	Afrin, Rajo, Jindires,	Damascus, Aleppo	
		etc.		

Section II: The Languages of Governance in Ottoman Syria

The concept of "Ottoman Turkish" was not monolithic; it encompassed a spectrum of linguistic registers. In the context of the Syrian provinces, this complexity was amplified by the pervasive use of Arabic, which held a distinct and critical role in the machinery of provincial

governance, particularly within the judicial system.

2.1 Lisân-ı Osmânî: The Tripartite Language of the Elite

The official language of the Ottoman Empire was *Lisân-ı Osmânî*, or Ottoman Turkish. This was a highly formalized administrative and literary register of the Turkish language, written in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script.¹⁸ It was a quintessential imperial language, a hybrid creation that borrowed its vocabulary and grammatical structures extensively from two other major Islamic languages: Arabic, the language of religion, science, and law; and Persian, the language of literature, poetry, and high court culture. In some highly formal texts, the proportion of Arabic and Persian loanwords was so great that native Turkish words constituted a minority of the vocabulary, making the language largely unintelligible to the common Turkish-speaking populace.¹⁸

This official language existed in several distinct registers:

- Fasih Türkçe ("Eloquent Turkish"): This was the most ornate and complex register, heavily laden with Arabic and Persian elements. It was the language of imperial decrees (ferman), official histories, and poetry, designed to convey majesty and erudition.
- Orta Türkçe ("Middle Turkish"): A less complex form used by the educated classes for commerce, administration, and inter-office correspondence.
- **Kaba Türkçe** ("Rough Turkish"): The vernacular spoken by the rural and lower-class population, which used far fewer foreign loanwords and forms the direct ancestor of modern standard Turkish.

An Ottoman official's linguistic code-switching was a daily reality. He might use the Arabic-derived word *asel* (عسل) for honey when writing an official report but use the native Turkish word *bal* (اب) when purchasing it at the market.

2.2 The Primacy of Arabic in the Vilayet of Aleppo

While Ottoman Turkish was the language of the centrally appointed governor (*vali*) and the military-administrative apparatus, Arabic was the dominant vernacular language of the Vilayet of Aleppo and the broader Syrian region. More importantly for the documentary record, Arabic was the foundational language of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The Ottoman Empire was a Sunni state that officially followed the Hanafi school of law, a legal tradition codified and debated for centuries almost exclusively in Arabic. This legal-linguistic reality had a direct and profound impact on the nature of official documentation produced at the provincial level. The *şer'iyye sicilleri* (Sharia court registers) were the official records of the Islamic courts, which handled the vast majority of local legal affairs, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, property sales, commercial contracts, and criminal matters. In Aleppo, as in other Arab provinces, these voluminous and historically invaluable registers were kept in **Arabic**, not Ottoman Turkish. This fact is monumental, as

these court records represent one of the largest and most detailed documentary sources for the social and economic history of the region, including Afrin.

2.3 Bilingualism and Hybridization in Practice

The provincial administration was, in effect, functionally bilingual. This created a hybridized culture where Ottoman and Syrian Arab elements blended. This fusion was visible in the urban landscape, where mosques from the period often featured Ottoman architectural styles like grand domes and pencil-thin minarets, but were decorated with local Syrian details such as black-and-white striped masonry (*ablaq*).

This functional bilingualism extended to the documentary record. A single legal dispute could generate paperwork in both languages. The primary court ruling (*ilam*), detailing the case and the judge's decision based on Sharia law, would be recorded in Arabic in the court's register. However, an order from the court to another government body, such as the land registry office (*tapu*), to execute the judgment would often be written in Ottoman Turkish. This reveals a clear functional demarcation. The language of a document is a primary indicator of its administrative purpose. An order composed in Ottoman Turkish concerning Afrin is most likely a communication *from* the imperial or executive branch *to* its officials or subjects. A document written in Arabic, by contrast, is most likely a record of a legal or commercial transaction *among* the local population, adjudicated and recorded by the state's judicial arm. Therefore, any analysis of the "styles of Ottoman Turkish" in documents about Afrin must contend with the paradox that for the vast corpus of local legal records, the language used was, in fact, Arabic.

Section III: A Paleographic Survey of Ottoman Bureaucratic Scripts

The Ottoman state developed a sophisticated array of calligraphic scripts, each tailored to a specific function. The choice of script was not merely aesthetic; it conveyed information about the document's authority, confidentiality, and purpose. The evolution of these scripts from ornate, artistic hands to simplified, functional forms also mirrors the increasing bureaucratization of the empire.

3.1 Scripts of Power and Prestige: Divani and Jeli Divani

The *Divani* script was the exclusive hand of the Ottoman Imperial Council (*Divan-ı Hümayun*) and was therefore the ultimate symbol of the Sultan's authority.²⁷ Its use was reserved for the most important documents of state, including imperial decrees (

ferman), royal edicts, and grants of title or land (berat).27

Divani is a highly cursive and complex style, characterized by its ascending lines that sweep upwards from right to left across the page. Its letters are tightly interwoven, and it employs numerous "unauthorized" ligatures (connections between letters that are normally separate), making it notoriously difficult to read for the uninitiated.²⁷ This complexity was intentional, serving as a security feature to prevent forgery and ensure the confidentiality of state secrets.²⁸ An even more elaborate version,

Jeli Divani (meaning "clear" or "large" *Divani*), was used for the most ceremonial documents. In this style, the empty spaces between the letters were meticulously filled with decorative dots and marks, transforming the text into a dense, shimmering veil of ink.²⁷ Documents written in

Divani were almost always surmounted by the Sultan's intricate calligraphic monogram, the *tughra*, which served as the imperial seal.³⁰

3.2 Scripts of Bureaucratic Speed: Riq'a and Ruq'ah

In contrast to the ceremonial grandeur of *Divani*, the *Riq'a* script was developed for speed and efficiency. It was a simplified cursive hand used for everyday official and personal correspondence that did not require the security or formality of the imperial chancery script.³² It was the workhorse script of the Ottoman bureaucracy, used for internal memoranda, petitions, and provincial communications.³³

Riq'a is characterized by small, rounded letters and a compressed structure.³³ Over time, particularly during the 19th-century Tanzimat reforms which saw a massive expansion of the state bureaucracy,

Riq'a evolved into an even simpler and more rapid script known as *Ruq'ah*. Composed of short, straight strokes and simple curves, *Ruq'ah* became the standard handwriting style across the entire Ottoman and Arab world, prized for being easy to learn and quick to write.³⁶ Every literate Ottoman was expected to be able to write in *Ruq'ah*.

3.3 The Script of Clarity: Naskh (Nesih)

The *Naskh* script, whose name literally means "copying," was prized above all for its clarity and legibility. For this reason, it became the pre-eminent script for transcribing books, especially the Holy Qur'an, where textual accuracy and ease of reading were paramount.³⁰ *Naskh* is a small, round, and exquisitely balanced script. Its letters are well-proportioned and distinct, making it easy to read even in lengthy texts.³² While its primary domain was religious and literary manuscripts, its legibility also made it a practical choice for some official documents, such as the textual portions of registers or architectural inscriptions on mosques

3.4 The Secret Script of Finance: Siyakat

Siyakat was a unique and highly specialized script used exclusively by the Ottoman financial administration. ⁴⁰ It was developed for one primary purpose: to maintain the confidentiality of the state's fiscal records. Its use was mandatory for documents such as treasury accounts and, most importantly for this study, the detailed land and tax registers known as *Tapu Tahrir Defterleri*. ⁴¹

The script is a form of coded stenography. It is "defective" in that it systematically omits the diacritical dots that distinguish many letters in the Arabic alphabet. Furthermore, it employs a unique set of abbreviations, contextual ligatures, and specialized ciphers for numbers and common fiscal terms. ⁴⁰ The result was a script that was virtually illegible to anyone not specifically trained in its use, effectively safeguarding the empire's financial data. Within a single tax register, it was common to see

Siyakat used for the numerical data (tax amounts, land yields) while headings and place names were written in a more legible script like Naskh or Riq'a for reference.

Section IV: Synthesis: Script and Language in Documents Pertaining to the Afrin Region

By integrating the administrative, linguistic, and paleographic contexts, it is possible to construct a precise model of the styles used in different types of documents pertaining to the Afrin region. The "most used" styles are a direct consequence of documentary volume, which privileges the routine records of law and finance over the rare documents of imperial ceremony.

4.1 Imperial Decrees and Judgments (Ferman, Hüküm): The Voice of Istanbul

Documents representing the direct exercise of the Sultan's authority over the Vilayet of Aleppo would have been composed in the imperial capital and sent to the provincial governor for implementation. These included imperial decrees (*ferman*) and high-level judgments or orders (*hüküm*) concerning administrative, military, or major legal matters affecting the province, including the "Sancak of the Kurds." Examples of such orders are preserved in central archival collections like the *Mühimme Defterleri* (Registers of Important Affairs) and the *Halep Ahkâm Defterleri* (Aleppo Judgment Registers).¹⁴

• Language: These documents were written in Fasih Türkçe, the most formal and ornate

- register of Ottoman Turkish, filled with Arabic and Persian constructions to reflect the grandeur of the imperial court.¹⁸
- **Script:** The script would be the official chancery hand, *Divani* or, for the most solemn occasions, *Jeli Divani*. These documents would bear the Sultan's *tughra* as a seal of authenticity and power.²⁸ While of immense political importance, these documents were relatively infrequent compared to the daily paperwork of the province.

4.2 Land and Tax Registers (Tapu Tahrir Defterleri): The Fiscal Record

The Ottoman state conducted periodic cadastral surveys (*tahrir*) to create detailed registers (*defter*) of population, land, agricultural production, and tax obligations. These *Tapu Tahrir Defterleri* were fundamental tools for fiscal assessment and the allocation of military fiefs (*timar*). Detailed registers for the Eyalet of Aleppo survive from the 16th century, and the practice of land registration was systematized under the 1858 Land Code. These registers would have included detailed entries for the villages and communities of the Kurd-Dagh region.

- Language: The language of these fiscal registers was Ottoman Turkish.
- Script: These documents used a composite of scripts dictated by function. The core
 financial data—tax figures, land measurements, population counts, and revenue
 summaries—was recorded in the secret financial script, Siyakat, to ensure
 confidentiality.⁴⁰ To make the registers usable, descriptive text such as place names,
 names of household heads, and section headings were written in a more legible script,
 typically a clear

Naskh or a functional Rig'a.

4.3 Local Court Records (Şer'iyye Sicilleri): The Voice of Aleppo

The most voluminous and socially rich documents generated at the provincial level were the Sharia court registers (*şer'iyye sicilleri*). The courts in the city of Aleppo had jurisdiction over the entire province, and their registers contain the day-to-day legal and commercial life of its inhabitants, including those from Afrin. These records, numbering in the hundreds of volumes for Aleppo alone, document everything from property sales and inheritance disputes to criminal cases and the establishment of pious endowments (*waqf*).²⁴

- Language: As established previously, the working language of the Sharia courts in Aleppo was Arabic, reflecting both the language of the local population and the language of Hanafi jurisprudence.⁴
- **Script:** The script used by court scribes (*kâtips*) was a functional, unadorned hand designed for speed and clarity. This would typically be a provincial variant of *Naskh* or a cursive hand closely related to *Riq'a*. The goal was efficient record-keeping, not the high art of imperial calligraphy.

4.4 Provincial and Inter-Office Correspondence: The Bureaucratic Everyday

The daily business of governing the province required constant communication between various officials: letters and memoranda would have flowed between the governor's office in Aleppo, the local chieftain of Kurd-Dagh, district tax collectors, and other administrators.

- Language: This correspondence would have been conducted in *Orta Türkçe*, the standard administrative register of Ottoman Turkish.
- **Script:** The script of choice for this type of rapid, functional communication was *Riq'a*. In the later Ottoman period (post-mid-19th century), this would have transitioned to the even more simplified *Ruq'ah* script.³⁴

Considering the sheer volume of daily legal transactions and the comprehensive nature of fiscal surveys compared to the occasional imperial decree, it becomes evident that the most *used* styles were those of the provincial administration. The tens of thousands of entries in the Arabic-language court registers and the detailed data in the *Siyakat*-laden tax registers constitute the vast majority of the written documentary heritage concerning the Afrin region.

Table 2: Matrix of Ottoman Scripts and Languages in Afrin-Related Documents

Degument Type	Drimary Function	Doint of Origin	Drimary Language	Dominant
1	Primary Function	Point of Origin	Primary Language	
(Ottoman/Arabic				Script(s)
Term)				
Ferman / Hüküm	Imperial	Istanbul	Ottoman Turkish	Divani, Tughra
	Command		(Fasih)	
Tapu Tahrir Defteri	Fiscal/Tax Survey	Provincial	Ottoman Turkish	Siyakat (for data),
		(Surveyor)		Naskh/Rig'a (for
				text)
Şer'iyye Sicili /	Judicial Ruling	Aleppo (Local	Arabic	Functional <i>Naskh</i>
İlam		Court)		or Riq'a
Provincial	Administrative	Aleppo /	Ottoman Turkish	Riq'a / Ruq'ah
Correspondence	Communication	Kurd-Dagh	(Orta)	

Conclusion

This investigation reveals that the "styles of Ottoman Turkish" used in documents concerning the Afrin region were diverse and functionally specific. The script and language of any given document were dictated by its purpose and its point of origin within the imperial administrative structure. High imperial commands issued from Istanbul were written in the formal Fasih Türkçe register using the prestigious and secure Divani script. The critical fiscal

records of the state, such as the *Tapu Tahrir Defterleri* (land and tax registers), employed a dual-script system: the secretarial *Siyakat* script was used for sensitive financial data, while more legible *Naskh* or *Riq'a* was used for textual descriptions.

However, the analysis demonstrates that the most voluminous and frequently used records at the local level—the Sharia court registers (şer'iyye sicilleri) of the Vilayet of Aleppo—were maintained not in Ottoman Turkish but in **Arabic**. These records were written in a functional, everyday version of the *Naskh* or *Riq'a* script. Similarly, routine bureaucratic correspondence within the province relied on the efficient *Riq'a* and later *Ruq'ah* scripts. Consequently, a quantitative assessment shows that the "most used" styles were the practical, workhorse scripts of provincial administration and finance, not the ornate hands of the imperial court. The documentary landscape of Ottoman Afrin is thus defined by the functional Arabic of its courts, the secret *Siyakat* of its tax collectors, and the efficient *Riq'a* of its administrators, punctuated only occasionally by the imperial flourish of *Divani*.

Avenues for Further Research

- Primary Source Analysis: The conclusions of this report are based on the established functions of Ottoman document types. Direct paleographic analysis of surviving *Tapu Tahrir Defterleri* for the Sancak of Kilis and Aleppo (housed in the BOA) and the Aleppo Şer'iyye Sicilleri (primarily housed at the Center of Historical Documents in Damascus) is necessary to confirm the precise variants of *Siyakat* and Arabic *Naskh* used in practice.¹⁷
- Local Kurd-Dagh Records: An intensive search for any surviving local administrative documents generated by the "Sancak of the Kurds" itself could yield invaluable information. Such documents, if they exist in private, regional, or even monastic collections, might reveal unique stylistic variations or linguistic features reflecting the sanjak's semi-autonomous Kurdish character.
- Digital Humanities: The ongoing digitization of archives presents a significant opportunity. Projects like the Syrian Heritage Archive Project and other digital collections should be systematically monitored for the potential discovery and accessibility of Ottoman-era documents from the Aleppo province, which could then be subjected to large-scale paleographic and linguistic analysis.⁴⁸

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