

An Ottoman Gift to America

M. Uğur Derman

Translated by Mohamed Zakariya

IN JUNE OF 1959, I saw the exhibition “150 Years of Turkish-American Friendship” at the American Information Center on Istiklal Street in Istanbul’s Beyoğlu District. What drew my attention most was a photo of an Ottoman inscription inside the Washington Monument in Washington, DC. I read the poem that was shown inscribed in stone. At that time, my mentor, Dr. Süheyl Ünver (1898–1986), was in the United States. With excitement, I wrote to him, asking that he go see it. He answered my letter from New York, writing that although he had been in the vicinity of the monument, the wait to enter the monument had been too long because of the huge crowds. Essentially, because he had no proof that such an inscription existed, he explained that he could not justify a return to Washington to search for it.

Finally, about forty years later, on September 15, 1998, I was able to see the inscription up close.¹ I was able to climb a ladder to exactly its level, touch it with my hands, and take some photographs of it. How did this Ottoman inscription, the like of which has not been encountered in any other country, come into being and find its way to such an honorable spot in the Washington Monument? It will be easier to explain this, I

think, with a few preliminary facts.

From the time the United States gained its independence in 1776, the Ottoman state was interested in establishing trade relations with the new country. The first such treaty was concluded in 1830, during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839). As a result of this treaty, the warship *Nusratiye* was built with the help of two American naval officers who were sent to Istanbul to supervise the project. It was launched in 1835.

Close relations between the two countries were further strengthened during the reign of Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861). As a result of the rebellion that broke out in 1848 in France, the Hungarians rebelled against the Austrian Empire, and the Poles rose in rebellion against the Russians; both rebellions were eventually stifled. As the Austrian Empire and Russia began to extirpate the rebellion forces, they were soon pushing against the Ottoman borders. Our country Turkey was not intimidated by the Austrian and Russian threats and, in fact, opened its arms to the refugees who were streaming in. The Ottomans protected these newcomers; the house of Lajos Kussuth, the leader of the Hungarian uprising, remains a museum in Kütahya to this day. Now, this behavior awakened in Europe an admiration

Translator’s Note: This article consists of the impressions of a renowned Turkish art historian. It was originally published in the Turkish magazine *Antik ve Dekor* 150 (January 1999):146–8. I believe it is valuable to have such candid views of scholars from other countries in mind when we consider the character of our own national treasures. Note that in this translation, I have used Turkish spellings. “Abdülmecid” is pronounced “Abdülmejid”; “paşa” is pronounced “pasha”; “Haşim” is “Hashim”; “kuruş” is “kurush”; and “Hicri” is “Hijri.” In the Ottoman state, a pasha is a high civil rank. “Bey” is a title for a military or civilian gentleman, and “efendi” is a title for a scholar or member of the religious or literary establishment.

and enthusiasm for the Ottoman state.

The Americans, too, received a large volume of information about these events. This show of affection led the American ambassador in Istanbul to propose to the Sublime Porte that a legation consisting of the secretary of the embassy and a minister from the Department of the Navy be sent to the United States to find ways to secure the benefits of new scientific advances and to gather impressions of the country.² The US government let

States for six months.³ Both then returned to Istanbul, where Emin Bey personally reported to Sultan Abdülmecid that the Americans had shown much sympathy to the Ottoman state.

This is how the inscription that is the subject of this article came to be: In honor of the founding president of the United States, George Washington (1732–1799), the Washington National Monument Society sponsored the construction of a monument designed in the shape of an obelisk. It was to be



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PLAQUE - GENERAL VIEW

it be known that it was pleased with this plan.

Upon receiving consent from the Porte, an educator from the Department of the Navy, Commander Emin Bey, was detailed to accompany the chief clerk of the embassy to the United States. The American president received Commander Emin Bey with all the honor and dignity due to a president of a country, and they remained in the United

erected on a foundation of 16.8 x 16.8 meters [55 ft x 55 ft] and was to rise to 169 meters [555 ft] in the capital city, Washington, DC. On July 4, 1848, the cornerstone was laid. By 1853, the monument had risen to a height of 46 meters [152 ft], but construction was stalled for nearly twenty-five years due to the Civil War and financial difficulties. When con-

Born in 1935, M. Uğur Derman is the leading world authority on Islamic calligraphy, its Ottoman Turkish phase in particular. He is a professor at Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul, and is a trained calligrapher. He is the founder and curator of the Türkp petrol Vakfı Calligraphy Museum in Istanbul and the author of a large number of books and articles on the subject of calligraphy.

struction resumed, financed by funds raised by subscription by the Society, the state of Alabama offered an inscribed stone to be placed in the monument itself. This idea received a wide acceptance, and the governments of thirty-one states and organizations began to contribute commemorative inscription plaques as reminders of their financial contributions. Finally, funds were solicited from foreign governments. One hundred and ninety-eight commemorative plaques were actually installed.

In Istanbul, the American Embassy approached the Sublime Porte on February 9, 1853. The office of the Grand Vizier proposed the following resolution: To the people of the United States of America, to honor them, and as a sign of the friendship of the Padişah (Sultan Abdülmecid) that an inscribed marble plaque be made, 2 *endaze* wide [130 cm or 4 ft 4 in] by 1 *endaze* high [65 cm or 2 ft 2 in], bearing the imperial cipher (*tuğra*) and a chronogram verse (a verse in which the tally of the numerical values of all the Arabic letters equals the date which commemorates the event).⁴

Sultan Abdülmecid, who was personally moved by the affection shown to Commander Emin Bey in the United States, decided to have this marble inscription plaque prepared and sent to express his desire for friendship. A poem appropriate to this topic was sought from the poet Ziver Paşa (1793–1861). He composed three poems containing the chronogram and informed the sultan that he should choose the best one for the job. Sultan Abdülmecid liked one of the three, and truly it was the most beautiful. In translation, it reads:

In support of eternal friendship, Abdülmecid Han allowed his honorable name to be written in the tall stone [monument] in Washington.⁵

This is the Turkish version:

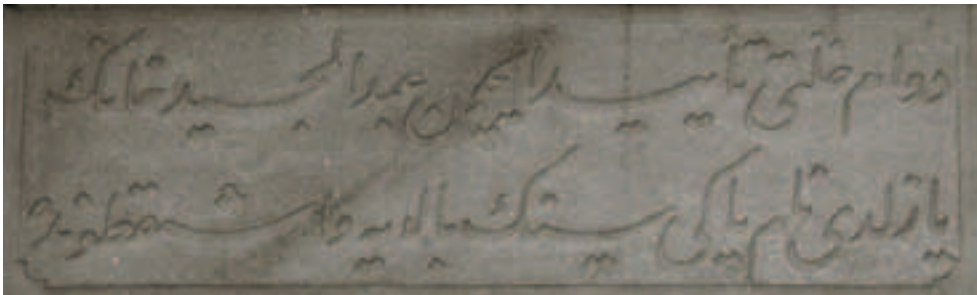
*Devam-ı hulleti te'yid için Abdülmecid
Han'ın yazıldı nam-ı paki seng-i balaya
Vaşinkton'da.*

Kadiasker Mustafa Izzet Efendi (1801–1876),⁶ who had reached the pinnacle of accomplishment in the arts of calligraphy and music, was commissioned to calligraph the poem in the *celi talik* style. The *tuğra* of Sultan Abdülmecid, written by the late Mehmed Haşim (d. 1846), was placed in an oval above the poem.



A Europeanized look that was popular at that time was employed in the design of the piece. Then, it was sculpted in marble. The cost of 3,750 *kuruş* was paid by the Sublime Porte. The work was finished in September of 1853 and submitted to the American Embassy for shipment to Washington.

Around the beginning of 1854, the Porte paid 390 *kuruş* to ship the gift to the United



States. According to American records, it arrived in New York on May 11, 1854. It is not known how and when the plaque was transported to Washington.

Work was resumed on the monument, after a hiatus of nearly twenty-five years, with material help from the federal government. It was completed on December 6, 1884, at a cost to the US Treasury of \$1,350,000, and dedicated on February 12, 1885.⁷

The monument is constructed of white marble. Aside from its entrance and the two windows on each of the four sides at the fiftieth floor, there are no other openings looking out on the outside world. The fifty-foot high, pyramid shaped summit is topped with a thirty-three hundred pound marble capstone, which is, in turn, capped with a nine-inch cast aluminum pyramid.

One ascends to the fiftieth level in seventy seconds in the capacious elevator. Looking out of one of the windows at the observation floor at the monument's summit, the observer sees the four quarters of the city of Washington, as well as the alluring curves of the Potomac River, as it wanders past the city. It gives the impression one would have while flying over the city, and the view fills the human mind with beauty and wonder. Finally, after tirelessly descending by foot all 896 steps of the staircase that surrounds the elevator, the observer exits through the entrance gate. Spaced every 305 centimeters (10 ft), there is a wide landing. These landings—the floors of the monument—are connected by stairways. Set into the interior walls of the building are 198 inscribed plaques of various sizes and materials; the plaques were donated to the monument and generally consist of eulogies to George Washington. There are few plaques on the highest levels, second to the highest being the Alaska plaque, which was the last to be installed. Made of jade mined in Alaska, it is quite valuable. At each level, there is a list of plaques found at that level to simplify identi-

cation.

When one descends to the level of one hundred ninety feet (the seventeenth floor level; the two lowest levels, at ten feet and twenty feet, have no landings and are not counted as floors), we find the plaques for Brazil, the Greek Islands, Greece, Siam (Thailand), Bremen (Germany), and Switzerland; set higher than the others, at 220 centimeters [7 ft 2 in] above the floor, the Ottoman gift to the United States presents itself to view. Its exact dimensions are 152.7 centimeters wide by 83.9 centimeters high at the center [60.1 in x 33.3 in], and it is set into a specially cut mortise in the wall. "The Hicri (Islamic calendar) year 1269" (1853 AD) is inscribed in a section to the right side of the verse and, like the verse itself, is written in the *celi talik* script. On the left of the verse, in a composition in the *celi talik* script, we read, "Written by (the calligrapher) Mustafa Izzet." The imperial monogram, or *tuğra*, of Sultan Abdülmecid reads, "Abdülmecid Han, son of Mahmud (II), the ever victorious." Under it, and slightly to the left is the signature of the *tuğra* calligrapher Haşim.⁸



From some traces of gold leaf still remaining in the upper right and left cornices, we can see that before the plaque was sent to America, the calligraphy and decoration cut in bas relief were gilded with gold leaf. In spite of the broken letter *elif* in the *lam-elif* of *bala* (high, lofty) and the fact that the dot over the letter *nun* (n) of *Vaşinkton* has fallen off, and that some of the finials are later restorations, the plaque has fared quite well over its 147-year existence.

This artifact left me pondering its complex meanings and implications as I bid it farewell

and began to descend the remaining 340 steps. Although the stone was not of the same practical benefit as things of our time, and ought not be given a retrospective significance, I nevertheless have no doubt that it was with sincere feeling that the stone was sent to Washington and installed there by the Americans with reciprocal sentiment. It was felt to have value equal to the other plaques in praise of George Washington. Even in that time of Ottoman decline, was it not a literary and eternal expression of dignity and refinement?

It must be that, over the years, this piece of stone has had the silent good fortune to be like a grand ambassador of our Ottoman Turkishness, its *tuğra* representing us without being defaced, its calligraphy suffering no intentional mishap or accident and remaining protected from the catastrophes that have befallen so many inscriptions in its own homeland. Kept in a semi-private place out of the elements, it did not suffer any deterioration.

In the same vein, the poet Hami-i Amidi (d.1747) said in the following verse: “*Ehl-i Dil Aram eder, her kande kim rağbetlenir. Gah olur gurbet vatan, gahi vatan gurbetlenir.*” This means, roughly, “Some among the sensitive and cultured people come to live where they find their hearts’ desire. To some, strange places will become home, and sometimes some will stay home but not knowing its value, will suffer the pain of alienation.”⁹

NOTES

¹ Because the interior of the monument was closed to the public for restoration during my visit to Washington in 1998, the American calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya and his friend David Shayt, who works in the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of American History, were able to get a special waiver and a guide from the National Park Service so we could examine the interior and the plaque. For this I am grateful.

² “Sublime Porte” refers to the central office of the Ottoman imperial government.—Trans.

³ The president at the time was probably either Zachary Taylor, 1849–1850, or Millard Fillmore, 1850–1853.—Trans.

⁴ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi I. HR. 4660/1. Talip Mert, who is in charge of the sciences section of the archives of the Arts and Literature College of Marmara University was most helpful with documentation about the inscription stone. Although he gave me his unstinting and continuous aid with this material, I did not want to compromise his research, so I did not use it here. I am thankful to him.

⁵ The Ottoman spelling of the name Vaşington (Washington) is usually spelled using a *gayin*, but here in the plaque it is spelled with a *kaf* (k), Vaşinkton. I retained this unusual feature in the article. It would be pronounced, “Vashinkton.”

⁶ Kadiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1801–1876) was one of the most interesting figures of the late Ottoman empire. He was an important figure in the highest levels of the religious establishment, an illustrious calligrapher, and a singer, flute player, and composer. Many of his works are still performed in Turkey. He learned the *celi talik* script from Yesarizade Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d.1849). Works by the Kadiasker in the *celi talik* script are rare.

⁷ It was officially opened to the public on October 9, 1888.—Trans.

⁸ Mehmed Haşim Efendi came originally from the Caucasus region. He became a student of the foundational master calligrapher Mustafa Rakim Efendi (1758–1826). A master of several scripts, Haşim was famous for his skill in writing *tuğras*. He died in 1845.

⁹ In addition to personal observation, I utilized the following sources: Mehmed İhsan, “The Washington National Monument and the Late Lamented (Cennet Mekan—Dwelling in Heaven) Sultan Abdülmecid Han’s Imperial Gifts” (Sehbal 9/15 August 1325/1907 AD), 171. İbrahim (Kemal) Baybura, “America: Its History, Historical Turkish American Relations, Excursion Notes” (no publishing information available), 150–2. Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History brochure.