

Handwritten letter in Ottoman Turkish script, featuring red ink for headings and titles, and black ink for the main body of the text. The script is dense and characteristic of the period.

First letter from Sultana Safiye to Queen Elizabeth I, December 1593

Susan Skilliter, "Three Letters from the Ottoman 'Sultana' Safiye to Queen Elizabeth I" in Samuel M. Stern (ed.), *Documents from Islamic Chanceries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970).

Nero B. viii, where they occupy folios 61-3 of the new foliation, as follows:

"40. A paper in Arabic. 55.

41. The Sultana, wife of Amurat III, to queen Elizabeth; complimentary. (an Italian translation, perhaps of the preceding article.) 57b." ⁷

It is well known that the great antiquary Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1634), in his zeal to enrich his collection of historical records, was accustomed to use his influence in Court circles to convey a large quantity of State papers into his private library, and this may explain why we find the Sultana's letter and its translation there. The collection remained with his family until it was acquired by the State at the beginning of the eighteenth century and in 1729, after some temporary homes, it was moved for greater safety to Ashburnham House, Westminster. There, however, it suffered on 23 October 1731 the ravages of a great fire after which of the original 958 volumes 861 remained, many of those left in a pitiful state from the effects of fire and water. Nero B. viii is one of the volumes so damaged; it has badly charred edges and much of its contents, including the Sultana's letter, is ruined by water.⁸

The document is a single sheet of Oriental paper, which at first sight resembles parchment and is thick, yellowish and inclined to break at the folds. There is no watermark. The paper is 31½ cm. wide and now 57½ cm. long. The rough upper edge, however, suggests that something is missing from the top and indeed, as we shall see, the original length must have been about 63 cm. The side used for writing has been smoothed and liberally flecked with gold. The upper half is empty except for a brief *invocatio*, placed to the right of the centre and now very near the top but originally at some distance from it. The twenty-four lines of the text occupy 28 cm. of the lower half, reaching down to the bottom of the paper. Each of them begins at a distance of 7½ cm. from the right edge, where a still-discernible impressed line runs from top to bottom. The lines are horizontal and, contrary to the usage observed in Imperial letters, they do not curve upwards at the end, neither are they made to reach the left edge, nor are their final letters elongated. The script is a beautiful calligraphic *naskh*, partially vocalized. It may be noted that the *i* of the

⁷ *Catalogue of the manuscripts in the Cottonian library deposited in the British Museum*, (1802), p. 226. The folio numbers refer to a superseded foliation. It is from this entry that P. Wittek concluded (see above, p. 119, n. 4) that item 40 was probably the original of which item 41 was the translation.

⁸ For a history of the Cotton collection see A. Esdaile, *The British Museum Library* (1946), pp. 26-7, 226-31.

idāfe is sometimes expressed by a small perpendicular stroke. In every line except the last the scribe changes the ink at least three times, using altogether five colours, black, blue, crimson, gold, and scarlet. In these changes of colour purely aesthetic considerations seem to have prevailed; thus the last line is written entirely in black, suggesting an intention to stress the closing. Damp, resulting from the 1731 disaster, has mottled the paper with patches of purple mould and has so much affected the passages in blue ink that they have become to a great degree illegible and have in some places entirely disappeared. The original way of folding, over and over from bottom to top, as is usual in Ottoman documents, can still be seen from the faint marks which remain. Of the resulting rectangles, of which twelve are preserved, the lowest is 4 cm. high. The height of the following rectangles increases in proportion to the progress of the folding, the uppermost being 5 cm. high. As has already been observed, the upper edge is rough and must be regarded as representing the thirteenth fold, so that the loss of a rectangle measuring at least 5 cm. may be assumed. Possibly this rectangle was torn off because of the valuable jewel-studded seal which it bore on its verso. This seal, which has not been traced, is described in the inventory which accompanied the letter and gifts (see below, p. 148): it must have been removed, together with the strip, some time after the letter had been presented to the Queen.

This loss, however, was not the worst mutilation the document was to suffer. Before its upper strip was removed, the sheet of paper had been folded in half horizontally and remained so even after the loss of the strip. Later it was folded in half again, this time across, and it was in this condition when the document suffered the soaking. As its lower half was no longer covered by the upper half, the two halves of the final lines (19-24) offset over on to themselves, whereas the remaining major part of the text (lines 1-18) offset on to the blank upper half of the document, the *invocatio* at the same time leaving its impression on the lower part of the text, in line 18. This enables us to establish the approximate height of the missing strip. Due to these vagaries of fortune, with its text damaged and in parts irrevocably lost, the Sultana's letter, once an outstanding specimen of Turkish calligraphy, today affords only a pitiful reminder of its beauty and colour at the hour of its presentation to Queen Elizabeth.

Just as the letter is beautiful from the point of view of decoration and calligraphy, so is it elaborate in its style, being composed in a very involved and flowery rhyming prose (*saj'*) with many poetical comparisons (*tashbīh*). In this showpiece of rhetoric, the actual communication which

the Sultana has to make occupies less than half of the twenty-four lines—i.e. lines 14–23. Here and there the writer reproduces, more or less faithfully, established formulas of Imperial letters—so, for example, the long series of titles of the Sultan (lines 7–10) and of the Queen of England (lines 12–13). The use of an archaism in line 17 can be noted: — *سوریو* from *سوریمک* instead of the usual *سورو* from *سورمک*. Also noteworthy is the *خدمتلی* used in line 11 as a form of address to the Crown-prince, instead of the expected *حضرتلی*.

In the following transcription of the Turkish original the sections written in blue ink have been rendered, as far as they could be deciphered, from the faint marks still to be seen on the manuscript, although not visible on the photograph, or sometimes reconstructed with the help of the Italian translation. Sections offered by the latter but no longer legible on the original are left blank in the transcription but appear between square brackets in my English rendering. In order to simplify printing, the vocalization which is used occasionally in the original has been omitted altogether from my transcription.