

# Decorative Motifs Used on the Ottoman Flag Finials

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## Introduction

While doing research on the forerunners of modern flags I have realized that fabric flags apparently originate in the enlargement of till then merely decorative ribbons. They were attached to the standards or vexilloids in order to facilitate their better identification from distance due to their colour. The ribbons also contributed to greater decorativeness of the standard when more colours were used. The signs used as standards' emblems started to be painted or embroidered on that piece of cloth. However, its shape lost previous feature of a ribbon and it was fastened to the staff laterally in order to enable better visibility of the painted sign.

While the main element of a flag, ie. field of cloth, developed from the ribbons during the history, those elements characteristic for ancient standards – ie. staff and emblem – lost their significance gradually and the emblem was transformed to the finial on the flagpole. As flags proved their greater practicality and aesthetic appeal than standards they spread all around the world during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium. They displaced other forms of this symbol, including the standards as defined above. This development happened in China and was so strong that the use of standards has almost disappeared except for rare cases. And there were the Huns, the Mongols and other nomadic people living around China who adopted this new symbol and brought it as far as Europe.

The same images standing for strength and victory and being earlier engraved or cauterised in the spearheads were later weaved-in, embroidered or painted on the banners' cloth. This fact bears witness to the continuity of ornaments and their symbolism in case of both spears, spears adorned with a banner, and banners themselves.

However, the victory of fabric flags was not overwhelming at all. There are symptoms in some societies that “perfect” silk flags were used simultaneously with their primitive predecessors – standards made of horse-hair or feathers (eg. in China). The parallel existence of more advanced flags did not exclude a dignified approach toward their forerunners, because their symbolism was probably not identical with that one attached to the flags. Even when I met the ceremonies during which both staff and banner were handled as two equivalent components of one symbol in the present time, I was notwithstanding taken by surprise when I realized the

importance attached to the flagstaves and especially to their metal finials in Turkey. Many of these technically excellent artefacts are exhibited in the Ethnographical Museum in Ankara, in the Military Museum in Istanbul, but first of all in the museum of the former Imperial Palace Topkapı.

For that reason, when the first comprehensive publication about collection of the finials in the Topkapı Palace Museum got into my hands thanks to the book *Türk Sancak Alemleri* (Turkish Flag Finials) written by Dr. Hülya Tezcan and Turgay Tezcan, I decided to prepare a short overview on decorative elements used on the Ottoman finials exhibited in the said collection.

## Ottoman finials in the Topkapı Palace Museum

There are forty-eight Ottoman finials in the weapons collection of the Topkapı Palace Museum. They are made of various metals, especially of tombac (gilding on copper), and there exist those made of gold or silver, too. Unlike the Mamluk finials, the use of the Ottoman finials in the armed forces was limited to the symbolical one – as a decoration of banners. Therefore, they show a great variety of shapes, eg. the flat ones, spherical, in shape of leaf etc. and plasticity; in general, they are hollow.

## Main features of the Ottoman metal handicrafts

Expanding Turks were regularly affected by the culture of people living in their newly conquered territories. The impact of the Sassanide arts can be seen in the metal handicrafts of the early Islamic era. The hey-day of the Islamic metalwork comes together with the Seljuk Turks. Primary Central Asian features mixed on the Seljuk metal objects with local characteristic elements that originated in the antique period and transformed during the Christian rule. As a result, there appear several novelties in materials, techniques, forms, and decoration used on them, and also a wider choice of metal products available.

*The Seljuk contribution* as for the material used is brass poured since the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century. The colour of this alloy that is suitable for malleabilizing is lighter and brighter than that of bronze. The novelty among

techniques used during the processing of metal is an ornamental inlaying and perforation (*ajouré*). One of the contributions provided by Seljuks to the metal handicrafts is an increase of variety of the tent finials. No Seljuk flag finial survived till now. However, the sources inform us about finials either in the form of crescent or horn. Moreover, the heart-shaped and gilded finials placed on the top of tents as depicted on the Seljuk miniatures resemble the early Ottoman finials surprisingly. Geometric design and Sufistic idea of infinity are essential for the decoration of the time. Moreover, the friezes inscribed in calligraphic styles of *kûfî* (Cufic script), *nasîb*, floral *kûfî*, floral *nasîb* and knitted *kûfî* are very important novelty brought to the Islamic metal handicrafts by the Seljuks. Fig. 1 shows an example of the use of ductus known as floral Cufic script (finial of the flag belonging to the Akkoyonlu ruler Hasan The Tall /1453-1478/).



1. Hasan The Tall

Moreover, the presence of the motif of *Selçuklu geçmesi* or crossing with knots, which is characteristic for Seljuks, in the decoration of the Ottoman flag finials supports an idea that the Seljuk tent finials had been their predecessors.

**The influence of Iranian arts** coming from the East is visible in the Ottoman metal crafts, too. Through the work of artists brought from Tabriz by Sultan Selim I The Cruel after his victorious battle against Iran in Çaldıran (1514) the decorative style of adornment born in Herât during the last years of 15<sup>th</sup> century influenced the Palace arts. Curved branches form another influential style in the Ottoman metal works and jewellery. They are threadlike thin so as the ornaments known as *Rûmî* - an arabesque decoration, that has been known at least since 17<sup>th</sup> cen-

tury. It came to refer from traditional Seljuk arabesque decoration because the Rum Sultanate was the biggest state established by the Anatolian Seljuks in the Asia Minor. *Rûmî* ornaments were found both on weapons of the Royal collection and on the finials presented in the museum. The *Rûmî* decoration is used on the central medallion from the finial of Sultan Selim II from 1567, as given in Fig. 2. In addition to many inscriptions (Quranic verse II/255, names of Muhammad and four caliphs and *Kelîme-i Tewbîd*) this floral design is present, too.



2. Sultan Selim II

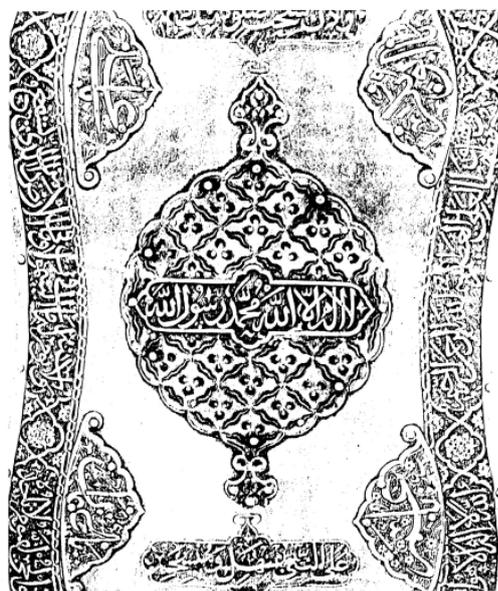
There existed also **a Western impact** on the Ottoman arts. The clear influence of the Byzantine metal handicrafts, of the goldsmith's trade in particular, is visible after the conquest of Constantinople. The most eye-striking example of this influence is opening rose calyces inlaid with stones. The Western influence appears in the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the classical motifs in decoration the new ones appeared – bunches of flowers, but also single blooms or bouquets sprinkled among inscriptions fascinate us when examining the finials from this period. Roses in plastic relief, floral garlands, fluttering ribbons and bowknots prevail among the decorative motifs during 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The **Ottoman metal handicrafts** produced finials individual in their shape and decoration by making the synthesis of all influences they met. Typical motifs of

decoration in the classical period (16<sup>th</sup> century) are naturalistic tulips, carnations, roses, peonies, *çintemanî* pattern. Fig. 3 exemplifies the existence of more floral and leaf patterns used later in the bordure and central medallion. This finial from 1573 belongs to Sultan Mehmed III and shows also many winding lines and *Hatâyî* motifs. The *çintemanî* motif is finely represented on Fig. 4 that depicts detail of a golden flag finial manufactured in 16<sup>th</sup> century for Selim II. A cartouche with inscription *Kelîme-i Tevbîd* is placed over central medallion adorned by this decorative design.



3. Sultan Mehmed III



4. Sultan Selim II

## Decorative elements on the Ottoman flag finials

**Techniques of decoration:** The most frequent techniques in decorating finials are engraving, relief, perforation, gilding and, rarely, nielloing. Those techniques were sometimes applied separately, sometimes together with others.

The richness of Ottoman decoration is eye-striking – naturalistic flowers like tulips, cauliflowers and motifs known as *Saz*, *Rûmî* and *Hatâyî*. The last mentioned motif is shown on flag finial of Sultan Murad IV (Fig. 5, 17<sup>th</sup> century). Inscription *Kelîme-i Tevbîd* is situated in the upper and lower cartouche, while another cartouche bearing verse LXI/13 is incorporated into central medallion decorated with *Hatâyî*. Generally, the motifs of writing and naturalistic flowers are the most frequent among **decorative elements** used on the finials.



5. Sultan Murad IV

The **inscriptions** in *sülûs* (one of the styles of Arabic script), that were more popular, are sometimes freely dispersed over background and sometimes written in form of regular lines of writing inside the sections marked off by lines. They are used in the bordure or inside the cartouches, too. Knotted inscriptions present on the Seljuk crossings are found on one of the earliest examples.

Verses from Quran (verse LXI/13 of the as-Saff sura, II/255 and *Kelîme-i Tevbîd* - the verses promising victory and telling that God is one and Muhammad is his Prophet) are the most frequent quotations on the flag finials. However, names of Allah, Muhammad and four caliphs, names of sultans and *vefk* inscriptions (ie. a kind of talisman composed of a written formula) can be found on the finials, as well.

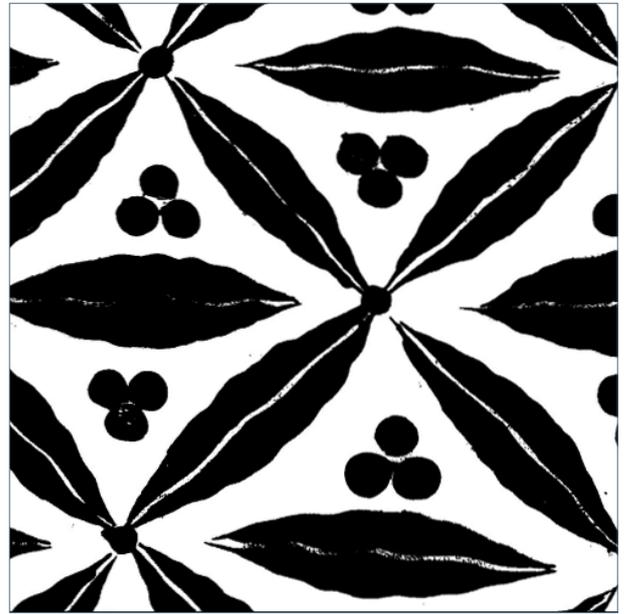
Motifs of *naturalistic flowers* are either sprinkled among the inscriptions or they are used to fill up the plain background. These motifs are usually small verbenas, peonies, *Rûmî* design, and palmettos appropriate to the period of their origin. Sometimes the space surrounding an inscription is sprinkled with bouquets of flowers. The use of those bouquets spread among the letters of an inscription is a characteristic feature of the era of Sultan Ahmed III (1730-1754).

I would like to demonstrate various motifs as used in the ceramics and pottery that is, unlike monochromatic metal finials, decorated in colours. Their characteristics become more evident in this case.

In order to fill a plain field two designs were used: the *saz* design formed by naturalist flowers with large leaves and a motif known as *çintemanî*. *Saz* design (Fig. 6) is defined as floral motif including tiny serrated leaves. However, it also represents many designers' extravaganzas of overgrown foliage in combination of the rotational movement of the leaves from the tree known due to the shape of those leaves as *kbanjar* - short curved dagger. This movement is contrasting with the static role of rosettes, which often act as pivot in the design. The *Çintemanî* (Fig. 7) is a popular motif through Ottoman art in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It consisted of two elements, a broad stripe which has been identified either as a cloud or a tiger-stripe, and three balls, often shaped like crescent moons.



6. *Saz* design



7. *Çintemanî* design

*Rûmî* is already known as a traditional Seljuk arabesque decoration (Fig. 8), while another style known as *Hatâyî* represents chinoiserie in Ottoman art, that was called traditionally "from Cathay – Hatayi", China (Fig. 9). Both terms are useful as they distinguish between scrolling Ottoman floral elements inspired by the taste for abstract, geometrically arranged Islamic motifs of Western Asiatic origin on the one hand, and for chinoiserie on the other.

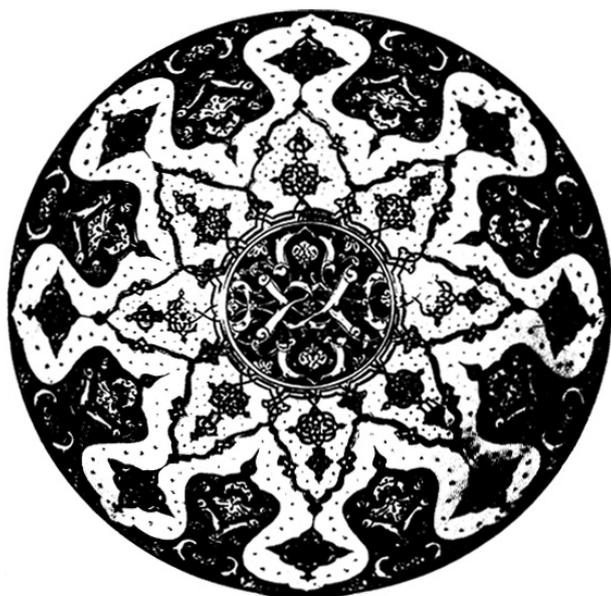


8. *Rûmî* design

Another popular decorative motif used on the finials is a big knot known as *Selçuklu geçmesi* (the Seljuk crossing). Those crossings with knots had been already used in calligraphy, architectural decoration or on the metalwork in the Seljuk times. The motif of crossing with knots (Fig. 10) is depicted on some Mamluk finials and reflects the use of this traditional motif in the metalwork, as well.



9. Hatayi design



10. Selçuklu geçmesi design

## Conclusion

The flags played an important role during the Ottoman era. Until the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent the number of the official flags of the Sultanate called *livâ-i saâdet* was four. It rose to seven in March 1529. Every Sultan had to have seven flags with inscription of his name made when acceded to the throne. Flags of the Sultanate were displayed behind the Sultan in the time of war. Since the sultans did not personally attend the war campaigns from the 17<sup>th</sup> century any more “their” flags were carried at the presence of the Commander-in-Chief

of the army. From the fact that the Ottoman flag finials were found on the top of those flags of the Sultanate, we can presume that they represented the Sultan himself. This is the reason why they were worthy to be made of gold, silver and other precious metals and that their workmanship shows a high level of care provided by jewellers. Their religious background becomes evident.

The religious mysticism (Sufism) expresses a specific thinking, behaviour and creation; it leads a believer to the direct rapprochement or even fusion with the divine substance. It has been reflected mainly in the Islamic poetry, music and decorative arts in an extraordinary manner. An abstract ornament and various calligraphical ducti of the Arabic writing are the basic elements of the decoration used in the Islamic world. While the ornament introduces an order and regularity, the writing forms an asymmetric factor. Combinations of both elements constitute a perfect harmony in a whole. It is associated with an Islamic doctrine of Monotheism.

The way the Ottoman flag finials are decorated supports an idea that Sufism lies in the foundation of Anatolian art in general. Sufism has symbols expressing the eternity of God, the reflection of many images of God. Symbols of the light like a candle, the sun, the moon and stars are a reminder of burning with the love for God. The Central Asia Turks also used the sky (clouds), trees (floral motifs) and birds as forms related to their former religion - shamanism. Geometrical, plant and figure examples were organized according to these common characteristics. This common point is concerned with the infinity and eternity variety. The element of ornament ongoing beyond their limits, creating new and various images at the same time and all of sudden by continuous intersection, gaining meaning due to these continuous changes and regenerations explain the reflection of God by various and innumerable images of the Earth.

## Literature

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