Ottoman Chronogram Poems:
Formal, Factual, and Fictional Aspects

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Edith Gülçin Ambros

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Images on the cover: *top*: Aqueduct of Mustafa Pasha,
(late 1490s), near Skopje
Photo © Machiel Kiel, 2005.
below: Entrance to the "Institut für
Orient- und Asienwissenschaften"
formerly called Orientalisches
Seminar, Bonn
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> Polonius – What do you read, my lord?
> Hamlet – Words, words, words.
>   Hamlet, Act II, Scene II

A Genre for All Occasions

The chronogram in Persian, Ottoman, and Arabic literature[1] is an encoded date, the code being the numerical value of the letters of the Arabo-Persian alphabet, *ebced* (Ar. *abjad* ابجد)[2]. In Turkish this construct is called *tārīḫ* (< *ta'rīḫ*, literally "date; history", pl. *tevārīḫ*), the act of composing it, *tārīḫ düşürmek*.[3] Ottoman chronograms may consist of one or more words that are either independent of any poetic construct or are

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[1]   This is the general opinion on the sequence of origin; on this, Ottoman writing of chronograms, and detailed bibliographic information see Turgut Karabey, "Tarih Düşürme", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Istanbul: TDV İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2011, https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tarih-dusurme (accessed 17 April 2020). For further bibliographic information see Alev Masarwa, "Performing the Occasion: The chronograms of Māmayya ar-Rūmī (930–985 or 987/1534–1577 or 1579)", Stephan Conermann / Gül Şen (eds.), *The Mamluk-Ottoman Transition: Continuity and Change in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām in the Sixteenth Century*, Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2017, footnote 5 on pp. 178–79.

[2]   For information on *ebced* see Mustafa İsmet Uzun, "Ebced", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Istanbul: TDV İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi, 1994, https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ebced (accessed 17 April 2020).

[3]   For detailed information and extensive exemplification of Ottoman chronograms see İsmail Yakıt, *Türk-İslâm Kültüründe Ebced Hesabı ve Tarih Düşürme*, Istanbul: Ötüken, 1992. For an example of the use of *ebced* outside the composition of chronograms, see Fikret Turan on the use of *ebced* in the interpretation of dreams: "Eski Bir Türkçe Tabirnâmede *Ebced* Hesabı", *Bir*, 9–10 (1998), pp. 671–84.

imbedded in a matrix of verses of varying length. In the latter case, the chronogram itself usually makes up a hemistich, and the whole poem is composed according to the rules of Arabo-Persian prosody (*ʿarūḍ*). Such a poem, with one or more embedded chronograms, is literally a "chronogram poem" and called *tārīḫ şiʿri/tārīḫ manẓūmesi* ("chronogram poem") in Turkish. However, more often than not, it is simply called *tārīḫ* ("chronogram; date"), so that the difference between a chronogram and a chronogram poem is not evident. Yet this difference needs to be kept in mind, so in the following the term "chronogram" will refer only to the chronogram word, words, or hemistich without a matrix, whereas the term "chronogram poem" will refer to a chronogram with a matrix.

Due to formal and thematic characteristics that are special to them, chronogram poems constitute a literary genre. This is a genre that not only conveys historical dates but reflects personal and social attitudes. As the genre was extremely popular with the Ottomans through the centuries, there are innumerable chronograms and chronogram poems waiting to be studied systematically. Clearly, these literary compositions contain new or additional information on historical, literary, and social life. Less clear seems to be the need for caution in interpreting them or taking their message too literally. The need for corroboration through external sources cannot be stressed enough. The present study will give an overview of these aspects of chronograms and chronogram poems.

The word, words or hemistichs that constitute chronograms vary in informativeness. There are instances when the wording is such that the reason for writing it is only known to the initiated, who, though numerous contemporaneously, get less and less in number as time goes by. And the later readers of such chronograms can only understand the chronogram fully with the aid of outside help. The following chronogram is a good example of this.

Sultan Süleymān I the Magnificent (r. 1520–66) composed the following chronogram on the death of his son Meḥemmed in 950/1543.

"*Şehzādeler güzīdesi Sulṭān Meḥemmedüm*"[4]
شهزادەلر گزیدەسی سلطان محمدم [5]
132 + 150 + 116   +   552 = 950

"The choicest of princes, my Prince Meḥemmed."[6]

The total of the numerical values of the letters in this chronogram is 950; this *hicrī* date corresponds to *milādī* or CE 1543. So, the chronogram is correct.

It is reported that sultan Süleymān loved his son Meḥemmed very much and this simple naming of the prince expresses great affection.[7] However, the wording itself does not imply the beloved son's death. The author being the sultan and the events concerning him and his family being of importance and interest to the population, the people in the know would probably remember for a long time that the occasion for his composing this chronogram was the death of this beloved son of his. However, this chronogram is not as informative as it could have been because it does not say or hint at why it was composed.

In comparison, the following chronogram written in the 18th century by Silahşor İbrahim Yâver (d. 1188/1774–75?), a not very well- known poet who was skilled in composing chronograms, on the death of his daughter is much more informative.

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[4] *Muhibbî Dîvânı – İzahlı Metin – Kanûnî Sultan Süleyman*, Coşkun Ak (ed.), Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1987, p. 5. Metre: *możāriʿ*: – – u / – u – u / u – – u / – u –.
The transcription of verses quoted from various sources has been unified by me. All chronograms will be written in bold type.
[5] Gemination (not indicated here by the sign *teşdīd* over the second letter *mīm*) is ignored in the calculation of *tārīḫs*; on rules for chronograms and the table of numerical values see the section "Pitfalls of orthography and puzzles of composition".
[6] All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
[7] Sultan Süleymān had the architect Sinān build (in 1543–48) the Şehzadebaşı Mosque in Istanbul in memory of his son *şehzāde* (prince) Meḥemmed.