



# Document of the Month 1/25: An Early Calligraphic Signature

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## *Nishān, ‘Alāma, or Ṭughrā:* A Case Study from the Firuzkuh papers by Edward Shawe-Taylor

How often do you have to sign your name to something? Whether it's a contract, a form, or even a colleague's farewell card, adding your signature is such a mundane act that we rarely consider its purpose or value. Now imagine that each time you signed something, you had to create a large, elaborate signature as intricate and precise as a great work of art. This month's *Document of the Month* may contain the earliest known example of one of history's most elaborate forms of signage: the *ṭughrā*.

### The Firuzkuh papers and the *Dīwān al-Ikhtiyārī*

The document, [Firuzkuh 28](#), is part of a cache of paper documents from medieval Afghanistan. These were discovered by treasure-hunters in the village of Shahr-e Khuru, located in the Ghalmin province of Ghur. While searching for gold in the nearby Kamara cliffs, they stumbled upon a cave containing 101 paper documents. The documents were later sold to Mirza Khwāja Muḥammad, a government official in Ghalmin, who pasted them into his personal notebook. In 2009, Khwāja Muḥammad published a monograph on the documents with the assistance of Nabi Saqee, now a key member of the Invisible East team. In 2020, the documents were donated to the Afghanistan National Archives, where they remain today. You can read more about the Firuzkuh papers in [a blog](#) by Nabi Saqee.



Fig. 1: Kamara Cliffs, from *“Striking Gold: The Discovery of Medieval documents from Afghanistan”*, a documentary produced by the Invisible East

Firuzkuh 28 is one of a number of documents in this corpus produced by the same office: *al-Dīwān al-Ikhtiyārī*. The documents are dated between 1217-1220 CE, the period immediately after the last Ghurid ruler was overthrown by the Khwārazmshāhs. No sources from any part of the Islamic world mention an office by this name, so it is most likely that the office was named after the senior official in charge of administering this specific region, who must have had the *laqab* (a type of honorific title) “Ikhtiyār al-Dīn” (the Choice of the Faith).

The document contains an order to a certain Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd asking him to move some of the money that the office received from the tithe (*‘ushr*) tax and pay it to the lord Tāj al-Dawla to cover his travel expenses. The lower half of the document is missing.

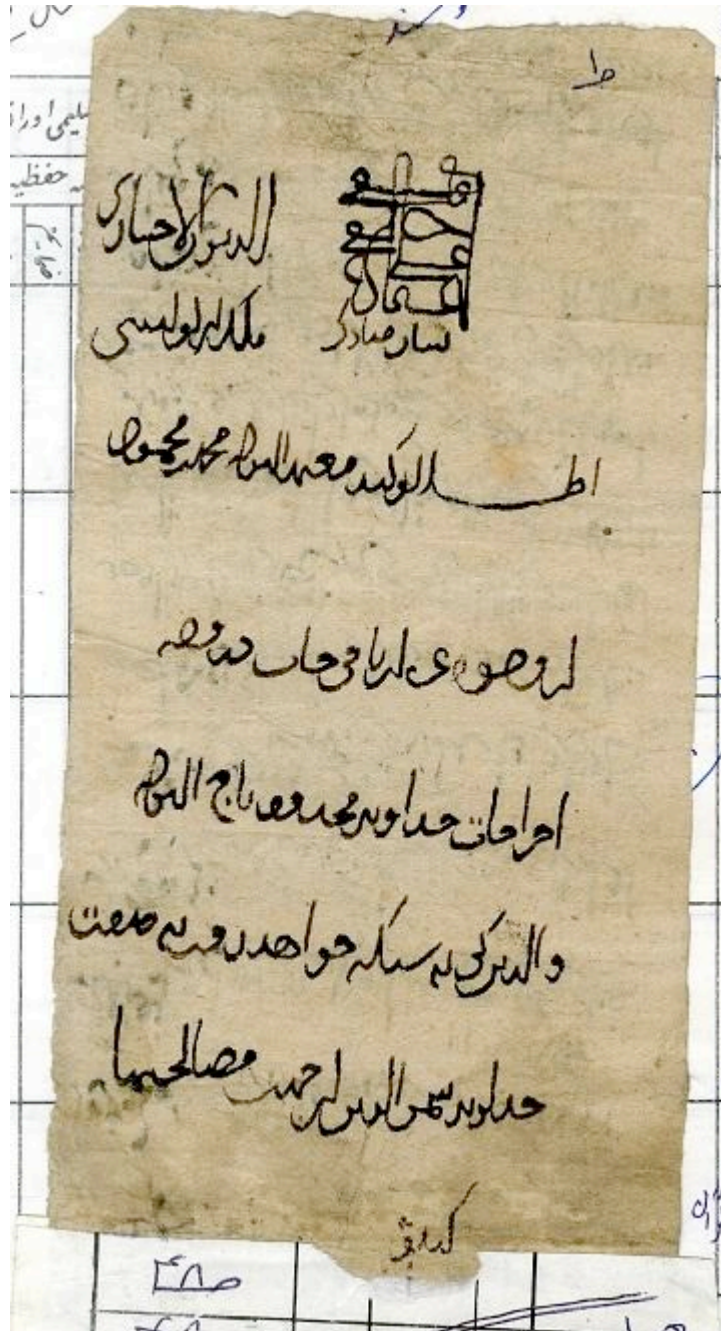


Fig. 2: Firuzkuh 28 (image courtesy of Nabi Saqee). Full details of the document, including a transcription and English translation can be found in the *Invisible East Digital Corpus*

The document follows a similar layout to others in the corpus. The title of the office, *al-Dīwān al-Ikhtiyārī*, is written in the top left-hand corner, with the name of an official written beneath. The two-part name is hard to decipher, but the first word appears to be “Malik”. In the middle of the page, above the first line of the main text there is a feature that is unique

in the corpus: an elaborate calligraphic signature, in which Arabic letters overlap to form a sort of square seal. Beneath is written, “the blessed sign” (*nishān mubārak*).



Fig. 3: Detail of Firuzkuh 28, showing a calligraphic signature at the top of the document (image courtesy of Nabi Saqee)

### A calligraphic signature

To interpret the signature in Firuzkuh 28, we can compare its positioning to other documents in the corpus. For instance, [Firuzkuh 47](#) features a similar layout, with the office name in the top left and the name of an official (“Ulugh Arsalān”) below. However, in the same central position occupied by the signature, Firuzkuh 47 contains the Arabic phrase “Glory be to God” (*li-llāh al-‘izza*).

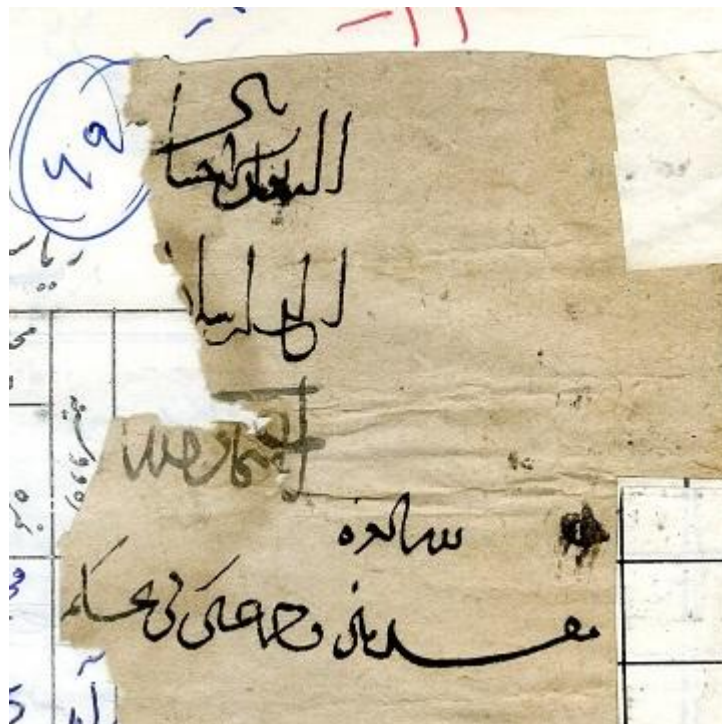


Fig. 4: Detail of Firuzkuh 47, showing the office name and the name of an official in the top left and the pious phrase “Glory be to God” (*li-llāh al-‘izza*) in the centre, above the first line of the main text (image courtesy of Nabi Saqee)

Pious phrases such as these are common in chancery documents from across the Islamic world. They are known as *‘alā’im* (sing. *‘alāma*) and they served as signatures for rulers and government officials. While official documents may be written by scribes, the *‘alāma* was required, at least ostensibly, to be written by the ruler or minister himself. The overlapping Arabic letters in the Firuzkuh 28 signature make it difficult to decipher, but the words *i‘timād* and *‘alā* are discernible at the base (the signature is to be read from the bottom up). Researchers in the Invisible East team have initially suggested that the reading begins with, “reliance upon Muḥammad the seal of...” of which phrase, one of the most common conclusions is “the prophets” (*i‘timād ‘alā Muḥammad khātīm al-anbiyā*). However, after this article was published online, Boris Liebrecht of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig, got in touch with a suggested revision of the reading: “my reliance is upon my creator, and this suffices” (*i‘timādī ‘alā khāliqī wa-kafā*). We are grateful to Boris for this correction. It is interesting that the ruling Khwārazmshāh at this date, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad had a similar *‘alāma*: “My trust is in God alone” (*i‘timādī ‘alā Allāh waḥdahu*). Perhaps the official who drafted this document chose an *‘alāma* for himself that was similar to that of the ruler. It is interesting to note that this sign is labelled in Firuzkuh 28 not as an *‘alāma*, but as a “*nishān*.” This Persian word meaning “mark” or “signet” is not found in the sources which discuss Persian chancery practices, but its meaning mirrors exactly the meaning of the Arabic word *‘alāma*. Perhaps “*nishān*” is simply a Persian calque of this technical Arabic term.

### An early form of the *ṭughrā*?

Syntactically, our signature appears to have served the same bureaucratic function as the Arabic *‘alāma*. However, visually, it represents something very different. Students of Ottoman or late Mamluk history will be familiar with the placement and visual style of such a symbol. The earliest surviving documents from the Ottoman chancery, dating from the reign of Orhan (r. 1323/4–1362), exhibit similar signatures, positioned centrally above the opening line of the document. However, unlike the Arabic *‘alāma*, which contained a pious phrase, these signatures – known as *ṭughrās* – contained the sultan’s name, their patronymic, and, in later examples, honorific epithets.

Over time, the Ottoman *ṭughrā* evolved into an increasingly elaborate emblem, until, by the reign of Süleiman the Magnificent (r.1520-1566), it had become an ornate work of art in and of itself, showcasing the mastery of the Ottoman court’s calligraphers and illuminators.

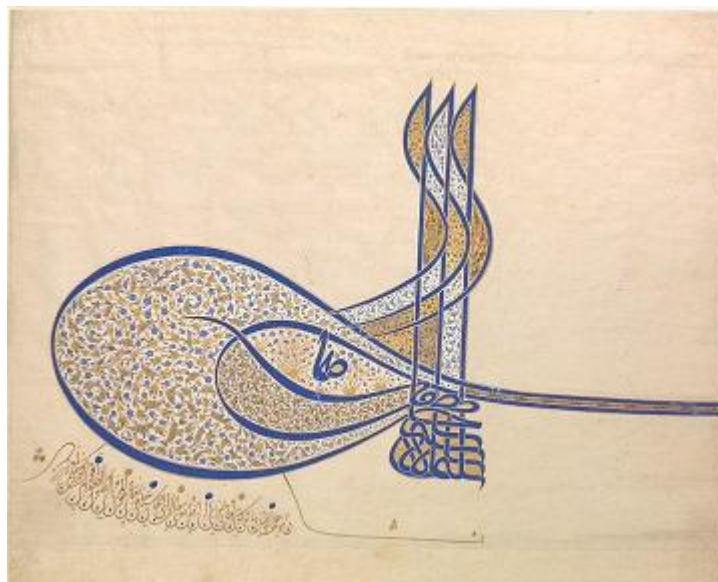


Fig. 5: *Ṭughrā* of Sultan Süleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66). *The Met, New York, Rogers Fund, 1938 (38.149.1)* (image in public domain)

The origins of the *ṭughrā*, however, lie in a much earlier period of Islamic history. Its roots can be traced back to the Seljuqs, a Turco-Persian dynasty that dominated the eastern Islamic world from the 11th to the 13th centuries. Both the Ghurids and the Khwārazmshāhīs began their political careers as Seljuq vassals, and it is fair to assume that Seljuq bureaucratic traditions deeply influenced their practices. The Seljuqs were the first to incorporate a Turkic tribal mark known as the *tamgha* into their signage. This pictorial mark, a round-headed staff beside an arch shape, appears in the coinage of the Seljuqs.



Fig. 6: Gold dinar of the founder of the Great Seljuq Empire Tughril Beg (Rayy, 440 AH / 1048–1049 AD), showing the round-headed staff beside an arch shape tribal mark. American Numismatic Society 1922.211.126. ©2024 American Numismatic Society (Public Domain Mark). <https://numismatics.org/collection/1922.211.126>

With no chancery documents surviving from the early Seljuq period, all our information about the nature of the *ṭughrā* comes from literary sources. Some of these sources describe the tribal mark being combined with the names and titles of the ruler – in a manner similar to the Ottoman *ṭughrā*. Other sources, however, suggest that the *tamgha* (a tribal mark) was incorporated with the *‘alāma* (a pious phrase) in the signage of documents. One 12th-century source, *Mujmal al-Tawārīkh*, even applies the name *ṭughrā* directly to this pious phrase.

Could this alternative form of the *ṭughrā* explain the signature in Firuzkuh 28? It would come as no surprise that the Ghurids and Khwārazmshāhs emulated the administrative norms of their former rulers, the Seljuqs. Indeed, the influence of the Seljuq chancery was far-reaching, stretching as far as Ayyubid Egypt. As previously mentioned, the Khwārazmshāh ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad used an *‘alāma* with similar wording to Firuzkuh 28. Unfortunately, no documents bearing the signatures of the Khwārazmshāh rulers have survived. Al-Nasawī (d. 1250), secretary to ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s son, recorded that ‘Alā’ al-Dīn had a stamp made of his *‘alāma*, enabling his daughter to sign documents on his behalf. This account implies that the *‘alāma* already exhibited a degree of graphic ornamentation, akin to the visual sophistication seen in later *ṭughrās*. We see something of this complexity in the *‘alāma* of Firuzkuh 28. The provincial official who signed the document appears to have adopted an *‘alāma* that followed a similar syntactic format and, more significantly, executed it in the same grand monographic style employed by the Seljuq and Khwārazmshāhī ruling elite. With its graphic, square layout, it is easy to imagine the design being reproduced as a stamp.

## Conclusion

Firuzkuh 28 was certainly not issued by the highest echelons of the Khwārazmshāhī bureaucracy. The document originated from *al-Dīwān al-Ikhtiyārī*, a provincial office tasked with overseeing the taxation of a relatively small region ruled by the Firuzkuh branch of the Ghurid confederation and its Khwārazmshāhī heirs. Nevertheless, the visual impact of its signature demonstrates how the bureaucratic practices of the Khwārazmshāhs, and, by extension, the Seljuqs permeated even local levels of administration. The incorporation of such a signature would have lent the document an aura of authority and gravitas, mirroring the stylistic conventions of the loftier bureaus that issued documents on behalf of the ruling elite. While many of the chancery practices of the Seljuqs and their successors remain known to us only through literary sources, this modest, fragmentary document may preserve the earliest known example of a calligraphic motif that would later evolve into one of Islam’s most iconic bureaucratic symbols: the *ṭughrā*.

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This *Document of the Month* was updated on 27 January 2025 to reflect a superior reading of the signature suggested by Boris Liebrecht (Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Leipzig).

## About the author

Edward Shawe-Taylor is Invisible East's Assistant Database Manager for our Digital Corpus. He is writing his thesis on medieval manuscripts of Jaḥīz's *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*. His other research interests include Islamic book production before the Mongol invasions, the *tirāz* textile industry in the medieval Mediterranean and illustrated bestiaries from the Mamlūk and Ilkhanid periods.

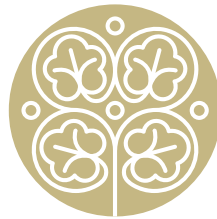
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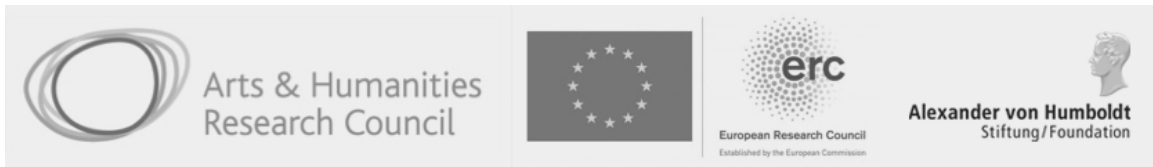
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