

## Community and Subterfuge in Turkey's Coffeehouses

Circa 1550, Istanbul: Ottoman coffeehouses began opening, quickly becoming popular community gathering places—and causing a decrease in attendance at mosques.

The Ottoman Empire controlled or had an administrative presence in much of southeastern Europe, North Africa, and western Asia for much of the second millennium. Founded in the 1300s, the capital of the Empire was, for the majority of the era, Istanbul. Historians believe that *kahve* (coffee) was introduced to Turkish society after the Ottoman Empire seized Yemen in 1538, during the reign of Sultan Süleyman (known as Suleiman the Magnificent in the West). In Yemen, members of mystical orders, or Sufis, drank coffee to stay awake for their nightly religious devotions. Others believe it may have arrived in Turkey via Egypt (ruled by the Ottomans since 1517) where coffee is believed to have been introduced a few decades earlier.

Cemal Kafadar, professor of Turkish studies at Harvard University, notes in his essay *How Dark is the History of the Night, How Black the Story of Coffee, How Bitter the Tale of Love: The Changing Measure of Leisure and Pleasure in Early Modern Istanbul* that the earliest mention found, thus far, of coffee in Istanbul was in 1539. A grand admiral registered property that

included a *kahve odası*, a Turkish coffee room or chamber. Kafadar also notes that the Ottoman historian İbrahim Peçevi's records around a century later are widely accepted to detail the first *kahvehanes* (coffeehouses) in Istanbul, which Peçevi said started to appear around the 1550s.

Ottoman coffeehouses quickly became part of the everyday fabric of society. They were secular spaces, providing a “third place” for men from various ethnic and religious backgrounds to meet, discuss, and share stories and knowledge. Coffee's stimulating effects were beloved in Ottoman society—and the caffeinated fervor of these places was a key draw. Packed with intellectuals, writers, businessmen, dissidents, and spies, coffeehouses were meeting places, hothouses of debate, and community gathering spaces.

The Turkish brewing method results in an extremely hot, strong coffee filled with *telve* (coffee sediment), which needs to settle before the drink is sipped. It was drunk without milk, and initially without sugar, which was not widely available at the time. Drinking coffee was not supposed to be done on the go—the development of the coffeehouse created a dedicated space in which to sit and enjoy your brew with leisure.

Gradually, as the *kahvehanes* became a central part of Ottoman social life, some religious men became displeased at the decreased attendance at mosques. Peçevi states in his seventeenth-century record of the Ottoman Empire, *Tarih-i Peçevi (Peçevi's History)*, that “the Imams and muezzins and pious hypocrites said: ‘people have become addicts of the coffeehouse; nobody comes to the mosques!’ The *ulema* (Muslim scholars with specialist knowledge of Islamic law) said, ‘It is a house of evil deeds; it is better to go to the wine tavern than there.’ The preachers, in particular, made great efforts to forbid it.”

Throughout the seventeenth century, the government linked periods of social unrest to coffeehouses. →

