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Serving Up Charity: The Ottoman Public Kitchen

Ottoman public kitchens, known as *'imaret*, *aşhane*, *darü'l-iḫ'am*, or *darü'z-ziyafe*, handed out food, free of charge, to specific groups and to fortunate individuals. These public kitchens were constructed throughout the territories of the Ottoman Empire, from the fourteenth century into the nineteenth. Prior to the Ottoman era, there is no indication that purpose-built public kitchens were established on a wide scale in any Islamic society, though food distributions of various kinds were not unknown and took place on many occasions in public venues and from the houses of individuals. An investigation of these kitchens reveals a nexus of patronage, charity, and hospitality. It also introduces many of the broader issues surrounding charity: Why do people give? What are the implications of giving and receiving, and what meaning informs these actions? Individual examples reveal the specific and quotidian aspects of the public kitchens: Who decided what to give, to whom, how much, when, and where? What kind of charity was the soup kitchen, and what kind of “poverty” did it address? How much food was distributed at one meal, and was it sufficient to constitute a minimally nourishing meal?¹

In the present discussion, charity refers to a range of acts denoted by such terms as philanthropy, welfare, and beneficent aid. At its simplest level, charity is a reflection of a donor's wishes, inspired by spiritual, social, economic, or political motives, possibly including self-interest and ambition. Attaining paradise in the afterlife or social standing among the living, seeking economic advantage through tax reduction or protection of property, and

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1 For general discussions of imarets, see Clément Huart, “Imaret,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1927), II, 475; M. Baha Tanman, “Imaretler,” *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul, 1993–1995), IV, 164–166; Singer, “Imarets,” in *The Turks. III. The Ottomans* (Ankara, 2002), 657–664.

consolidating the support of constituencies all constitute possible motives for what may be termed charitable or beneficent acts.

Acts of charity can also say something about the beneficiaries, implying the presence of need, poverty, or destitution—whether material, emotional, or spiritual in nature. Charity often requires the presence of needy people or specific recipients but is not perforce inspired by them. When charity addresses poverty, it comes in response to a giver's perception of both the need and the deservedness of the recipient. What qualifies as need or deservedness, however, is far from universal; it may or may not be related to material poverty or indigence. Rather, these key concepts are shaped by the worldview of the givers.

For Muslims, the precepts of the Qur'an and the examples from Muhammad's life stored up in traditions (*hadith*) contribute fundamentally, but not exclusively, to the formation of their worldview. The Qur'an commands believers repeatedly, in a single phrase, to pray and to pay the alms tax. The other three obligations of all Muslims are faith, fasting at Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. In the Qur'an, the alms tax is distributed to the poor and needy, to those who work to collect the alms tax, to those whose hearts need to be reconciled to Islam, to debtors, in God's way (often for those engaged in jihad), and to travelers (9:60, Tawba). It also supplied funds for the ransoming of slaves. The Qur'an states more generally that people are to be good and contribute to parents and close relatives, as well as to orphans and the needy (2:83, Baqara).²

Two categories of charity evolved from these basic Qur'anic injunctions. The first, the obligatory alms tax (*zakat*), is explicitly enjoined annually on all Muslims who possess a minimum level of wealth and income. The second category comprises voluntary donations, referred to generally as *sadaqa*, which are recommended to every Muslim, even if only a prayer for the health of another person or as little as half a date. The voluntary donations are the chief focus of the discussion in this article—everything from vast endowments sustaining extensive socioreligious building complexes to the smallest acts of charity.³

² All Qur'an references are quotations or paraphrases from Arthur J. Arberry (trans.), *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1955).

³ For more extensive discussions of these basic concepts, see Thomas H. Weir and Aaron Zysow, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (CD ROM) (Leiden, 1999) (hereinafter *EI*¹), VIII, 708–716; Zysow, *EI*², XI, 406–422.

Distribution of food as sustenance is one of the basic acts of human charity, along with the provision of shelter and clothing. In many of the Qur'anic verses about beneficence, words based on the Arabic roots *r-z-q* and *n-f-q* are used. The first refers chiefly to God's own beneficence as provider of sustenance (*rizq*), whereas the latter points to various human obligations (*nafaqa*). More specifically, the Qur'an says, "they give food, for the love of Him, to the needy, the orphan, the captive: 'We feed you only for the Face of God; we desire no recompense from you, no thankfulness'" (76:8–9, al-Insan).⁴

A story later repeated about the second Caliph 'Umar illustrates that this obligation came to be seen as personal, in the eyes of both givers and recipients, and emphasizes the expectation of individual responsibility. One night, while in disguise, 'Umar met a destitute woman and her two children. Not recognizing him, the woman cursed the Caliph for ignoring their hunger. Without revealing himself, 'Umar, much chastised, went away and returned to her as soon as possible carrying food. He then built a cooking fire and prepared bread and soup for the woman and her children with his own hands. Notably, bread and soup are presented as the most basic forms of sustenance.⁵

For the Ottomans, Muslim teachings and traditions were only part of the context in which the public kitchen evolved as a widespread institution, supported by the charitable investments of the imperial family and its most prominent officials. Apart from the teachings of scholars steeped in Qur'anic interpretation and legal treatises, the practices and texts of the Muslim mystics (*sufis*) were crowded with food, whether actually served up at sufi residences to dervishes and guests, or scattered as images and metaphors in the writings and practices of the various orders. Furthermore, the confluence of Turco-Mongol, Arab, and Byzantine practices that Ottomans adopted and adapted, together with the demands placed on the new Ottoman sultanate, contributed to a worldview that emphasized imperial charity and gave rise to the particular form of the imaret.⁶

4 On *rizq* and *nafaqa* in the Qur'an, see suras ii and ix, especially ii.3, ii. 184, ii. 195, ii. 215, ii.219, ii. 254 (*anfaku mimma razaknakum*), ix.53–54. For a more general discussion of *rizq*, see C. Edmund Bosworth, "Rizq," *EI*², VIII, 567–568.

5 This story is found in the eleventh-century mirrors-for-princes text of Nizām al-Mulk, *The Book of Government* (London, 1960), 143–144.

6 Singer, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence: An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem* (Albany, 2002), 152–157. On *sufis*, see David Waines, Halil Inalcik, and John Burton-Page,

Charitable food distributions in the imarets provide a means to understanding who was deemed deserving, how need was defined, and what the relationship was between deservedness, need, and poverty. A picture emerges of how givers who chose this form of charitable endeavor understood their purpose and their own society, and how the distribution of food was both a vehicle for charitable aid and for constructing and affirming a particular social order.

ENDOWMENTS Ottoman public kitchens were endowments. The express goal of the founders was to draw closer to God and attain a place in paradise after death. These endowments, or *waqfs*, were a form of sadaqa, sustaining much voluntary charitable activity throughout Islamic societies from a relatively early point in Islamic history, though they became more popular from about the tenth century. Waqfs maintained an enormous range of social and economic institutions, supporting education, health, welfare, public services, and public works.⁷

In establishing a waqf, the founders transferred to God the title of their properties permanently for the benefit of a specific institution or purpose (mosque, college, public kitchen, waterworks, bridge, family members, or the local poor). The properties could be large or small (an entire house or a single room, an orchard or a single tree), and the beneficiaries either a new or an existing institution. In Ottoman practice, founders defined the following elements in a written document (*waqfiyya*): (1) the precise property to be endowed; (2) the precise beneficiary of the revenues from the property; and (3) the person who would manage the endowed property. The waqfs fixed their ultimate beneficiaries as “the poor” in order to ensure that the irreversible endowment would serve an eternal purpose, whether it originally supported the founder’s family or a public institution. A waqf made in favor of

“Matbakh,” *EI*², VI, 810–812; Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study in the Works of Jalalüddin Rumi* (London, 1980), 138–152; Ayla Algar, “Food in the Life of the Tekke,” in Raymond Lifchez (ed.), *Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey* (Berkeley, 1992), 302.

⁷ Although the schools of Islamic law differ on the details of what is possible and permissible in founding and running these endowments, the brief sketch herein is based on the Hanafi, which predominated in the Ottoman Empire. See also John Robert Barnes, *An Introduction to Religious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire* (Leiden, 1987); Rudolph Peters, et al., *EI*², XI, 59–99.

family members was not inconsistent with the institution's charitable intent, since the Qur'an names close relations as those deserving of sadaqa and emphasizes the responsibility and merit of caring for the extended family.

Public kitchens were often one unit in a waqf complex (*külliye*), a group of buildings, which could include such beneficiaries as mosques, colleges, hospices, hospitals, and caravansaries. The endowed revenue-producing properties of these complexes could encompass markets, with shops that were rented out; baths, the income from which contributed to the waqf; extensive agricultural properties, from which revenues formerly levied as taxes were redirected to the waqf institutions; and industrial facilities, such as mills, soap factories, and looms. These large multi-purpose complexes had extensive (and often far-flung) properties, requiring not only a manager, but a staff as well, all of whom had to be compensated from the endowment revenues. The beneficiaries were not only the buildings (which had to be maintained) but also the clients of the various institutions, whether people praying, scholars, students, patients, weary travelers, pilgrims, or the general poor.

So far as historians are concerned, the endowments have the advantage of visibility and durability. The largest complexes comprised stone buildings, some of which have endured in their original functions until today. These large complexes were usually endowed by rulers or wealthy and powerful members of society who tended to record their acts in extensive and sometimes richly calligraphed texts. To investigate the endowments of the Ottoman sultans, written reports and accounts registers are also available. Altogether, these documents record much detail about the kitchens—the menus, the size of portions, the identities of those included and excluded from the distributions, and the order in which people ate.

THE FOOD SERVED IN IMARETS “Whoever gives one dirham of sadaqa in Jerusalem gains his ransom from hellfire, and whoever gives a loaf of bread there is like one who has given [the weight of] the earth's mountains in gold.” The spirit of this maxim—attributed to al-Hasan al-Basri, an eighth-century preacher—may well have inspired Hurrem Sultan, wife of Sultan Süleyman I, to endow a public kitchen in mid-sixteenth-century Jerusalem. She

charged that it prepare and distribute meals to 500 people, twice a day, every day. Were the maxim to have been realized literally, the earth would long ago have collapsed under the weight of the gold, since the imaret distributed around 1,000 loaves of bread daily. The recipients of the distributions of bread and soup included the employees, the people living in the caravansary of the imaret, the followers of a local sufi shaykh, and 400 people characterized as “poor and wretched, weak and needy.”⁸

Each morning meal comprised rice soup, made with clarified butter; chick peas; onions; salt; and, according to the season, squash, yogurt, lemon, or pepper for additional flavor. In the evening, bulgar (crushed wheat) soup was made with clarified butter, chickpeas, onions, salt, and cumin. Meals always included bread. On special days, however, everyone was entitled to richer dishes: Friday nights (the night between Thursday and Friday); the nights of Ramadan; the nights of Aşure, Mevlud, Regaib, and Berat; the great sacrifice festival (*kurban bayramı* / *ʿid al-adḥa*) during the annual *ḥajj* (pilgrimage); and the celebrations marking the end of Ramadan (*şeker bayramı* / *ʿid al-fiṭr*). At such times, *dane* (mutton and rice) and *zerde* (rice sweetened with honey and saffron) replaced the regular evening wheat soup. These two special dishes were familiar ceremonial staples, expected to be on every table, no matter the rank of the guest. For example, they appeared on the tables of rich and poor alike at the circumcision feast of Süleyman’s sons, the Princes Bayezid and Cihangir, in 1539.⁹

Employees at the Jerusalem imaret received one ladle of soup and two loaves of bread per meal and the guests one ladle and one loaf. The sufis and the largest category of the poor received one-half a ladle and one loaf each per meal. On Fridays, each person received *dane* and *zerde*, but the poor had only one-half a piece of meat each, whereas the others had a whole piece each. People ate in shifts—first the employees of the imaret, then the caravansary residents, and finally the poor. The poor had to enter in shifts because they were too numerous—first the learned poor, then ap-

8 Al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), as quoted in Weir and Zysow, “Şadaqa,” *EI*², VIII, 710. The discussion of the Jerusalem imaret in this section is based on the *waqfiyya* of the imaret, as well as reports on it submitted to the Topkapı Palace. See Singer, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence*, 39–70, for further details and references.

9 On the various festivals, see the relevant articles in *EI*². On the circumcision feast, see Semih Tezcan, *Bir Ziyafet Defteri* (Istanbul, 1998), 43, 58.

parently the men, and finally the women. As an exceptional privilege, the sufis were allowed to send someone to collect their food from the imaret and bring it back to their residence across the city. Everyone else had to eat in the imaret refectory.

Strict prescriptions defined who ate, what they ate, how much they received, where the food was distributed and eaten, and in what order. These conditions were stipulated in the endowment and refined in subsequent orders and reports concerning the early operations of the imaret. Hand in hand with the image of imperial generosity is that of a strictly run establishment, carefully regulating the movements and benefits of its clients.

The Hasseki Sultan imaret in Jerusalem is one example of an Ottoman public kitchen, but Jerusalem was only a provincial town, even if an important one. The imperial capital in Istanbul had more numerous and extensive operations at work in the huge imarets of the Fatih and Süleymaniye complexes. Mehmed the Conqueror, known in Turkish as Fatih Mehmed, constructed an enormous complex in Istanbul between 1463 and 1471, which gave its name (“Fatih”) to an entire quarter of the city. By the mid-sixteenth century, approximately 1,500 people were fed twice a day at the imaret there. Among the diverse group of regular clients were visiting dignitaries, travelers, scholars and students from the prestigious Fatih colleges, the doorkeepers and guards of these colleges, the students of three other nearby colleges and four nearby *zaviyes* or dervish lodges, 600 student candidates (*softa/suhte*) and their eight proctors (*emir*), 56 members of the Fatih imaret staff, 47 hospital staff members and 51 other functionaries of the complex, including staffs of the mosque and tombs. After all these people finished eating, what was left over was distributed to the indigent poor. These details are recorded in a distribution list (*tevzi’name*), drawn up in 952/1545 as a result of too much food being cooked, presumably exceeding or taxing the budget of the place. The list reiterated who exactly had the right to eat at the Fatih imaret, as well as what and how much they ate, to ensure no waste and to prevent abuse due to the “wrong” people being fed or the “right” people receiving too much.¹⁰

As elsewhere, the principal dishes cooked at the Fatih imaret were rice soup in the mornings and wheat soup at night. How-

10 A. Süheyl Ünver, *Fatih Aşhânesi Tevzi’namesi* (Ankara, 1953), 3–6.

ever, the fare at Fatih was heartier than in Jerusalem, since both soups were made daily with meat and parsley. The soups were enriched with salt, onions, cumin, pepper, chick peas, squash, and sour grape or yogurt and chard. About 3,300 loaves of bread were baked and distributed every day. On Friday evenings, the menu comprised *dane*, *zerde*, and *zirbaç* (a sweet pudding with raisins, plums, figs, or almonds). The portions for the 600 student candidates were cooked in separate cauldrons. During Ramadan, everything was cooked for one meal only in the evenings.

Travelers who came to stay at the caravansaray of the Fatih complex received honey and bread at the imaret immediately upon their arrival, to revive them after their journey. The Fatih imaret seems to have expected about 160 high-ranking guests per day, who were to be served at tables (*sofra*) laid for four. They received daily meals of *dane* and sometimes *zerde* as well, the dishes that most others ate only once a week. At times, the guests might be treated to meat stew with plums and fresh fruits. Visitors of an even more exalted status, such as members of the *aşraf* (descendants of Muhammad), had sheeps' trotters (*paça*) served for breakfast as a great delicacy, as well as a dish made of pumpkin/squash, honey, jam, cinnamon, and cloves. They had generous portions of meat and rice as well.

As to the order of service, the guests ate first, followed by the Fatih college scholars, students, and staffs. After them came the students from the nearby colleges and the dervishes, and then the 600 candidate students and their proctors, all of them eating in the imaret. Next came the staff of the imaret and the rest of the Fatih complex. If someone held two positions in the complex, each one entitling him to eat, he was only to be served one portion at any meal.

The last line of the document above the date reads, “[W]hen there is sufficient food remaining leftover from the aforementioned allocations, then a quantity may be distributed to the poor.” The word “poor” (*faqir/fuqara*) in all these texts is problematic; it refers to material poverty, which may have several different causes. Sometimes the causes are distinguishable in context, but they are often buried within a single term. A person called *faqir* may be poor because incapable of working due to illness, injury, age, infirmity, or socioeconomic conditions. *Faqir* can also refer to a dervish who has chosen material poverty to pursue a spiritual

goal. It also applies to people who are poor and have a right to be supported because they are learned or members of Muhammad's family. Finally, *faqir* refers to someone in a subordinate position, often used rhetorically by authors for self-reference. When the poor are named to receive the leftovers at the Fatih imaret, they rank lower than the poor scholars, students, dervishes, and members of Muhammad's family, having no qualifications other than indigence to earn them a more permanent place in the distribution lists.

Daily fare at Fatih was richer than that in Jerusalem, and not only for the high-ranking guests. The quantity of meat cooked daily was sufficient for each of the regular customers to receive at least one-half a portion. Like Jerusalem, Fatih had a hierarchy. The students at the prestigious Fatih colleges received a piece of stewed meat, a ladle of soup, and two loaves of bread per meal; their teachers received a double portion of soup. Allotments for the nearby colleges did not list numbers of students, only the number of portions per college. The student candidates, those waiting for a post in one of the colleges, received half as much as the senior students. Two would have to split a bowl of soup and a piece of meat, though each received a loaf of bread (similar to the poor of Jerusalem). Among the senior staff, the scribe and chief steward of the waqf and the shaykh and steward of the imaret each were entitled to double helpings of soup; the rest of the staff had single portions.

Comparable to the Fatih imaret was that of the Süleymaniye in Istanbul, built as part of an enormous mosque complex by Sultan Süleyman, the "Lawgiver" or the "Magnificent," in the 1550s. Though the number of people who came to either of these large kitchens is difficult to determine, the capacity of the Süleymaniye seems to have been smaller than that of Fatih. By the sixteenth century, Fatih's kitchen featured a larger staff and baked 35 percent more bread daily for distribution than the Süleymaniye. The menus, however, were almost identical, as were the privileges accorded to high-ranking guests; the distinctions between the guests and regular clients like students, staff, and poor people; and the order of service.¹¹

11 On the Süleymaniye imaret, see Kemal Edib Kürkçüoğlu, *Süleymaniye Vakfiyesi* (Ankara, 1962).

The Süleymaniye imaret seemed to expect approximately 200 high-ranking guests per day at tables spread with richer dishes. No precise portions are on record, but the endowment deed notes that orphans and children of the poor who were present in the primary school (*mekteb*) on any given day should be served from the two meals cooked for the poor in the imaret. Two children were to split a bowl of soup, a portion of meat, and two loaves of bread. The standard serving for the majority of staff, college students, and scholars, though unspecified, was probably one serving of soup apiece and a loaf of bread.¹²

The Süleymaniye imaret, like Jerusalem's, placed a clear restriction on removing food from its premises. Strangers, presumably not on the approved list, who came to the imaret with buckets, could not take away food and bread. However, the poor among the scholars, the descendants of Muhammad, and the blind, paralyzed, and sick could.¹³

That the imaret of Bayezid II in Edirne seems to resemble the large imperial imarets of Istanbul more than other provincial imarets is not surprising, given its construction by a sultan in a former capital of the empire, which continued to serve as an alternate residence for him. Like those of Fatih and Süleymaniye, the imaret of Bayezid II was part of a huge, multi-institutional complex. It had separate courtyards for the kitchen and the bakery, the latter also housing a candle works (candles had to be cooked). The menu there had the customary meat cooked everyday and the special provisions for privileged diners.¹⁴

The imarets in provincial towns that were not former capitals were generally smaller, though a comprehensive picture for the entire empire is lacking. Standard features reappear in almost all of them—hot soup with bread served often twice a day and special dishes cooked on Thursday nights and holy days. All of the kitchens seem to have been alert to class distinctions among their clients. The imarets themselves, however, were not equal in wealth; the regular fare varied accordingly. Not everywhere was meat a part of the daily diet.

The population fed by imarets divided most obviously along

¹² *Ibid.*, 42–43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31, 76–77.

¹⁴ Ratip Kazancıgil, *Edirne İmaretleri* (Istanbul, 1991), 96–100.

lines of class or profession, but it also divided into regulars and transients. The imarets stood ready to welcome every traveler—merchant, officials on the move, and pilgrims. Niceties—such as prompt and especially attentive service, including the offer of honey or other reviving sweets for new arrivals—was reserved for the more prestigious. Small details stress how important the function of host was in the imarets. In Kastamonu, for example, travelers who arrived too late for the regular cooked meal received snacks (cold but nourishing) of walnuts, honey, and cheese. The extent of the hosting functions depended on whether the town was on a main or secondary route, and whether it had some special attraction. Unlike the regulars, however, travelers could expect only the traditional three-day welcome.

Local regulars at the imarets usually included at least the staffs and some group (whether precisely defined or not) of indigents. Notably, no military corps were among them; they had their own barracks and camps. The population fed by each imaret also varied with the character of its locale: the administrative status of the town, the presence and size of the local student population or local sufi communities, the state of the economy, and its financial soundness. Jerusalem had far more pilgrims than Istanbul, and many fewer religious students. In Damascus, the *han* (inn) of Murad Çelebi functioned like an imaret, serving *dane* and *zerde* twice a week during the four months when pilgrims passed through the city on their way to and from the *hajj*.¹⁵

The clientele could also depend on local circumstances. Followers of Shaykh Ahmad al-Dajjani, the sufi leader in Jerusalem, were not listed in the endowment deed but were added a few years later to the list of diners at the Haseki Sultan imaret. The kadi in Konya appealed to Istanbul that the twenty-five poor dervishes who lived in the *zaviye* of the renowned fourteenth-century sufi Mevlana Celaluddin Rumi be fed at the nearby imaret of Selim II, since they were overwhelmed by the smell of cooking

15 On other imarets, see İ. H. Uzunçarlılı, “Karamanoğulları Devri Vesikalarında İbrahim Bey’in Karaman İmaretı Vakfiyesi,” *Belleten*, I (1937), 99, 101 (Larende); Muhammed A. Simsar, *The Waqfiyah of ‘Ahmed Pāšā* (Philadelphia, 1940), 100 (Dil-Hersek); Yusuf Küçükdağ, *Karapınar Sultan Selim Külliyesi* (Konya, 1997) (Karapınar); Yvette Sauvan, “Une Liste de Fondations Pieuses (Waqfiyya) au Temps de Selim II,” *Bulletin d’études orientales*, XXVIII (1975), 243 (Aleppo).

food wafting from it. An imperial order was issued granting the request and increasing the imaret's budget accordingly.¹⁶

THE HISTORY OF IMARETS Under various names, the large kitchens became an integral component of the Ottoman project of settlement, colonization, legitimization, and urban development. Research on the imarets as discrete units within large waqf complexes or as stand-alone institutions, however, is sparse. This article marks the beginning of an extensive project on the subject, aiming to cover the entire Ottoman Empire. There exists no comprehensive map of these institutions across the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷

Imarets were primarily urban institutions. Bursa, Edirne, and Istanbul each had many imarets, probably because they served as capitals to the empire, but also because sultans invested heavily in their capitals. In addition, each was an important large commercial city, located on the main routes to Anatolia and the Balkans, and obliged to host large numbers and kinds of travelers. The less prominent cities of the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Arab provinces, as well as some towns and occasional villages, also had imarets that served local indigents, staff in the greater waqf complex, and possibly travelers. The menus mostly comprised bread and soup, the ingredients of which might vary according to local produce, climate, and economic conditions.

Consolidation of the form and function of the imarets was one facet in an ongoing process of canonization affecting imperial institutions and cultural norms that culminated under Süleyman in the sixteenth century. Along with the emergence of identifiably Ottoman idioms of aesthetic creation and legal codifications evolved the standard layout of the imaret as cooking spaces, food storage facilities, and a refectory surrounding a courtyard. The actual shape of an imaret was not fixed and varied with how much money or space was available for building, and whether the construction was new or renovated.¹⁸

Ottoman origin of the imaret is attested by its presence

¹⁶ Ibrahim Hakki Konyalı, *Âbideleri ve Kitabeleri ile Konya Tarihi* (Konya, 1964), 972–973, 977.

¹⁷ One of the initial phases of the present project includes an attempt to map the imarets based on the writings of Evliya Çelebi, the seventeenth-century traveler. For the first part of that work, see Singer, “Evliya on ‘imarets,’” in Ami Ayalon and David J. Wasserstein (eds.), *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honor of Michael Winter* (London, forthcoming).

¹⁸ On sixteenth-century canons, see Gülru Necipoğlu, “*A Kânûn* for the State, a Canon for

throughout Ottoman lands—Anatolia, the Balkans, the Arab provinces—and its absence elsewhere. Institutional features shared among all these regions were frequently the product of an ongoing Ottoman rule and cultural synthesis. Moreover, at least one architectural historian claims that no known earlier structures are analogous to the Ottoman imarets, and none is described in numerous books on Islamic architecture. Formal measures for emergency food assistance to address conjunctural poverty had existed prior to the Ottoman era in the Middle East. However, the daily distribution of cooked meals to large numbers of urban dwellers year-round from a special building designed for that purpose appears to have been an Ottoman innovation, at least outside the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and of Hebron.¹⁹

Mecca and Medina had an older endowment, dating at least to the Mamluks, for the regular distribution of grain. The example of Hebron is the most well-known from the pre-Ottoman period. The table of Abraham (*simat al-Khalil*) is said to have originated in his practice of hosting and feeding all travelers. According to the eleventh-century Persian traveler Nasr-i Khusrau, anyone who came to Hebron received one round loaf of bread, a bowl of lentils cooked in olive oil, and raisins every day. The Mamluk sultan Qāyrbāy (r. 1468–1496) restored the Hebron *simat* during his reign, taking it as a model when he stipulated that wheat be sent annually to his own college in Medina for the poor and visitors, no matter what their status.²⁰

In the early sixteenth century, the local chronicler Mujir al-Din al-Hanbali (d. 1521) found that the daily fare at the *simat* was still lentils and that on Thursday evening, seasoned rice (*ruzz al-mufalfal*) and pomegranate seeds were served. More sumptuous dishes were prepared for holidays. Mujir al-Din described the daily procedure at the *simat* as one of the world's wonders, rare even among kings:

the Arts: Conceptualizing the Classical Synthesis of Ottoman Arts and Architecture,” in Gilles Veinstein (ed.), *Soliman le Magnifique et Son Temps* (Paris, 1992), 195–216.

19 On Islamic and Ottoman architecture, see Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning* (New York, 1994); Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (Baltimore, 1971); Tanman, “Sinan Mimârîsi İmâretler,” *Mimarbaş Koca Sinan Yaşadığı Çağ ve Eserleri*, I (1988), 333–353 (Istanbul).

20 Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “Qāyrbāy’s Foundation in Medina, the *Madrasah*, the *Ribât* and the *Dashushah*,” *Mamluk Studies Review*, II (1998), 66; Nasir-i Khusraw (ed. and tran. Charles Schefer), *Sefer Nameh* (Paris, 1881), 57–58.

[A]t the door of the kitchen a drum is struck each day after the afternoon prayer, at the time of the distribution from the generous table. The people of the town and pious sojourners eat from it; the bread is made daily and distributed at three times: early morning, after the midday prayer to the people of the town, and after the afternoon prayer a general distribution to the people of the town and the newcomers. And the quantity of bread baked each day is 14,000 flat loaves, but sometimes it reaches 15,000. And as for the capacity of its waqf, it can scarcely be determined; and no one is kept from his generous table, neither of the rich nor of the poor.²¹

Evliya, the seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler, attested to the continuing vitality of this public kitchen, recounting that “each person had his bowl filled with the soup of Abraham, enough for the subsistence of men with their families. I [Evliya] was also fortunately among the group of those poor. I received a plate of wheat soup, a gift from God. I never witnessed such a tasty meal at the table of either viziers or men of learning.” This thriving table in Hebron may have been both a long-term inspiration for pious rulers, as well as the specific inspiration for Hurrem’s imaret in Jerusalem. Hebron and Jerusalem were called “al-Haramayn,” the two sanctuaries, in echo of the two noble sanctuaries, al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn, Mecca and Medina. In adding a public kitchen to Jerusalem, Hurrem ensured that each of the four holy cities had an institution to feed the hungry.²²

The first Ottoman imarets were reportedly built in Iznik and Bursa by Orhan, the second Ottoman sultan, in the 1330s. During the first centuries, the number of imarets grew, and their capacities expanded with the size of the complexes in which they were located, reflecting the increased wealth and power of the sultans and the Ottoman empire in general. By the 1530s, no fewer than eighty-three imarets had emerged in the Ottoman realms. However, this figure does not include the numerous building projects undertaken by Süleyman I and later sultans—not to mention their mothers, consorts, daughters, and viziers—in Istanbul, Egypt, and the Hijaz. An early seventeenth-century treatise says that the renowned architect Sinan (d. 1588) built seventeen imarets. Hence,

21 Muḥjir al-Dīn al-Hanbalī, *Al-Uns al-Jalīl Bi-Ta’rīkh al-Quds Wa’l-Khalīl* (Amman, 1973), I, 58–59; II, 443.

22 Evliya, *Seyahatnamesi* (Istanbul, 1935), IX, 510.

even before 1600, 100 imarets seem to have existed, and many more were founded later, including those in the Sultan Aḥmet, Nuruosmaniyye, and Mihrişah Sultan complexes in Istanbul alone.²³

Individual imarets were impressive and significant by themselves, but the cumulative impact of multiple imarets in a town was enormous. Istanbul had numerous imarets, in addition to those of Fatih and Süleymaniye. In sixteenth-century Edirne, for example, three imperial imarets in complexes and eight other endowed public kitchens fed an estimated 2,600 people daily out of a population of about 22,000. If the residents of Edirne constituted the chief clientele of the imarets, more than 10 percent of them ate regularly in public kitchens. However, Edirne remained a popular temporary residence for sultans, as well as a busy transit point on the road to and from the Balkans. As in Istanbul, the large number of imarets may have existed to bear some of the burden of hosting the many travelers who came through the city.²⁴

Evliya remarked that in all his journeys, he saw “nothing like our enviable institution.” In the 212th chapter of his Book of Travels, he praised the imarets of Istanbul and the Ottoman empire. He cited the Qur’anic verse: “No creature is there crawling on the earth, but its provision rests on God” (11:6, Hud). Evliya also provides confirmation for the assessment that the imarets were unique to the Ottomans. Despite his penchant for exaggeration and borrowing, he traveled to many of the places that he mentioned (“the territories of eighteen rulers”). His assertion that he found no institution comparable to the imaret in his travels is tell-

23 Ömer Lütfi Barkan, “Osmanlı, İmparatorluğunda İmâret Sitelerinin Kuruluş ve İşleyiş Tarzına âit Araştırmalar,” *İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, XXIII (1962/63), 242–243; Ca’fer Efendi, *Risâle-i Mi’mâriyye*, in Howard Crane (ed.), *An Early-Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Treatise on Architecture* (Leiden, 1987), 107/86v. The same treatise lists kitchens (*maṭbah*) separately, confirming that an imaret denoted something more than just a cooking facility, perhaps a building of a certain minimal size or capacity, or one with the regular distribution of meals on the premises. See Huart, “Imaret,” II, 475; Crane, “The Ottoman Sultan’s Mosques: Icons of Imperial Legitimacy,” in Irene A. Bierman, Rifâat Abou-el-Haj, and Donald Preziosi (eds.), *The Ottoman City and Its Parts: Urban Structure and Social Order* (New Rochelle, 1991), 174; Tanman, “İmaretler,” IV, 166.

24 The calculations in Haim Gerber, “The Waqf Institution in Early Ottoman Edirne,” *Asian and African Studies*, XVII (1983), 43–44, imply that only men ate in these imarets. However, the examples of the Hasseki Sultan, the Süleymaniye, and the Jerusalem imarets do not confirm this assumption.

ing. As a man of some standing, Evliya's experience of the imarets was probably that of a traveler to whom particular attention was paid, and not that of a candidate student or an indigent.²⁵

Evliya's inclusion of the Topkapı Palace in his list of imarets raises another important point. Daily food distributions at Topkapı were extensive, feeding the huge palace staff and those who worked in the palace workshops, as well as officials and those present on business. Anyone who came to the palace had the right to a meal there before leaving it. The daily meals at Topkapı Palace were an outgrowth of Turcoman practices from Osman's time and earlier, a ritual reconfirmation of leadership and loyalty. In the early Ottoman period, the sultan also appeared regularly during communal meals, participation in which was an affirmation of loyalty to him. This practice continued until the introduction of the formal seclusion of the sultan at the end of Mehmed the Conqueror's reign in the late fifteenth century. Even after the sultan had disappeared from public view, however, food was distributed daily to all who came to the palace. The symbolic effect of these distributions grew as a result of the sultan's own absence, signaled to all by the huge palace kitchen chimneys on the skyline.²⁶

Other evidence reveals that the palaces of princesses and the homes of wealthy and powerful people distributed food daily to the needy of their neighborhoods, in addition to feeding large households of family, servants, and retainers. Whether these households had formal rules about who was to receive food is unclear, but their kitchens are not easily classed as either "public" or "private." Food distributions also took place in sufi lodges and in homes at various levels on the economic scale, including those whose owners had a right to eat at the imarets, thus making them both beneficiaries and benefactors. Other distributions occurred during major festivals, private family celebrations, or emergencies. Ottoman consumption patterns need to be examined, to understand more fully how paradigms of distribution defined and mirrored entitlements and obligations throughout Ottoman society.²⁷

25 Evliya (ed. Orhan Saik Gokyay), *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi. I. Kitap: İstanbul* (Istanbul, 1996; orig. pub. seventeenth century), 132(a).

26 Konstantin Mihailovic (trans. Benjamin Stolz, commentary by Srat Soucek), *Memoirs of a Janissary* (Ann Arbor, 1975), 31; Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 55.

27 See examples in Robert Dankoff (trans.), *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis* (Leiden, 1990), 147; Ca'fer Efendi, *Risāle-i Mi'māriyye*, 42; Cahit Uçuk, *Bir İmparatorluk Çökerken* (Istanbul, 1995),

The routine of urban life and administration under the Ottomans offered numerous occasions for and types of food distributions. Some fulfilled religious or political obligations; others were part of the larger supply mechanisms, such as providing bread and meat at fixed cheap prices alongside more choice fare in the markets. Yet even the cheapest prices exceeded some people's means. Food distributions were common in all cities, reflecting an institutionalized recognition of the social demands imposed by structural poverty. The destitute and indigent hungry were recognized as people whose condition had to be alleviated, if only because of the Muslim obligations to charity and the political wisdom of reducing the number of chronically hungry persons living in any urban area.²⁸

THE MEANING OF MEALS Not all of the people who benefited from food distributions were indigent or economically needy, though all of them were deemed deserving of support. Scholars and students qualified because of their devotion to the study of Islamic subjects; merchants and travelers because of their predicament as strangers; descendants of Muhammad and imperial dignitaries because of their status; sufis because of their piety; staffs because of their service; and the indigent because of their material poverty. Each public kitchen had a specifically defined clientele; it did not necessarily feed everyone who arrived. The quantity of food as well as the hierarchies at individual imarets determined what and how much particular groups would eat. In some places, distinguished guests received more food and choicer dishes, such as they might eat at their own table at home. In other places, distinctions of rank were marked only by the quantity of the same food distributed to everyone. These policies were hardly corruptions of the soup kitchens' intended function but part of the implicit purpose to host people in a manner commensurate to their rank, within the limits prescribed by the means of the local endowment.

The hierarchies were also evident in the time and place in

51; and the discussion in Tülay Artan, "Aspects of the Ottoman Elite's Food Consumption: Looking for 'Staples,' 'Luxuries,' and 'Delicacies,' in a Changing Century," in Donald Quataert (ed.), *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922. An Introduction* (Albany, 2000), 143.

28 Mübahat Küttükoğlu, "Narkh," *EI*², VIII, 964–965.

which people ate. Wherever and whenever possible, dignitaries rated more comfortable and private eating spaces, provided with trays as they would be at home or at a feast. The less privileged ate in the refectory (*me'kel*) with their peers. Given the large number of people fed at some of the imarets, more than one seating was necessary. Those who received the least were fed last. Even the indigent poor were subject to a hierarchy that decided the order in which they ate, as noted in Jerusalem.

When the food ran out at the Süleymaniye, the indigents went unfed; when it ran out at the Jerusalem imaret, the poor women remained hungry. Although not specifically mentioned, small children probably accompanied women, and older male children accompanying men earlier in the serving. Hence, in Jerusalem, the chances of women and small children being able to obtain food were the worst. However, those permitted to eat at the imaret at all were in a better position than those who were refused admission outright.

In their function of providing food to people who were indigent or otherwise incapacitated, the imarets served as welfare agents, sustaining the weakest among the urban population. Yet material poverty was only one criterion for gaining a seat at the table or a place in line at the cauldron of an Ottoman public kitchen. Those who worked in an imaret, or in the various institutions of the complex to which it belonged, received meals as part of their remuneration. Scholars and students who ate at the imarets were enjoying a kind of stipendiary or scholarship privilege as members of a college within a complex (like the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge), though the diet was, at best, modest. Higher-ranking and more well-endowed colleges offered their students and teachers better salaries, stipends, and meals in recognition of their standing in a society that valued learning and scholarship and needed trained scholars to serve as judges, legal experts, teachers, and preachers. The production and reproduction of this learned class was the responsibility of the ruling family, and in accepting this imperial patronage, the learned class conferred legitimacy on Ottoman rule.

Travelers eating at the imarets benefited from a long-standing tradition of hospitality that had its roots in Turkish and Arab cultures, nomadic and sedentary, of Central Asia and the Middle East. Traveling strangers were typically entitled to three days' hospital-

ity, not only at the imarets but in the guesthouses of villages and towns, as specified in the Qur'an. The dignitaries who sat down to eat at an imaret could thank their status for the meal, or any combination of attributes that made them eligible. Thus did the public kitchens serve several purposes simultaneously.²⁹

The number of imarets and the number of diners expected in the largest ones suggests that the distribution of food was a common occurrence, lacking the stigma often attached to eating in a public kitchen today. For many, taking a place in the queue at an imaret or at one of its tables was an enviable privilege. Food distributions had both a physical and a symbolic impact on their recipients. The ability of the Ottomans to feed so many people—as well as to ensure sufficient food supplies to urban centers, the army, the pilgrimage caravans, and the palaces—was an integral component of their power and legitimacy.

Soup and bread were the most basic forms of nourishment in the imarets. The quantities of the ingredients in each were precisely determined, but not the amount of water in the soup. Since the size of the cauldrons used is uncertain (although they were certainly huge), the total amount of soup prepared in any kitchen cannot be easily calculated. But the very fluidity of soup made it an appropriate dish for a public kitchen. When pressed, the cooks could easily increase the quantity of soup to feed more people, though, in the process, they might diminish its nutritional value. That the results were not always appetizing is evident, if Mustafa'Ali, a late-sixteenth-century historian, is to be trusted. He described the bread in Istanbul as “a lump of dry clay,” the soup as “dishwater,” the rice and puddings as “vomited matter,” and the meat as “made of . . . emaciated sheep that were slaughtered after having died.” Although the chief objective in serving soup was not always to furnish a caloric minimum, its symbolic effect might suffer from its presentation and flavor.³⁰

Conscious of God's commands to do good and give generously, Ottoman donors could choose from a wide spectrum of bene-

29 See Franz Rosenthal, “The Stranger in Medieval Islam,” *Arabica*, XLIV (1997), 35–75, on the status of the traveler, not only as a stranger but also as someone deserving of charitable support.

30 Andreas Tietze (ed. and trans.), *Muṣṭafā 'Alī's Counsels for Sultans* (Vienna, 1979), II, 27, 144.

ficiaries. Beneficence in this context was not linked to economic poverty or weakness alone; in fact, it may have had little to do with it. Food distributions through Ottoman public kitchens also confirmed and preserved economic and social status and broadcasted political power and individual piety. Indigents and hungry people were clearly among the happy recipients, but they were not always the main beneficiaries. They were only one group among those labeled “poor,” the poor of all types were only one group among those privileged to receive sustenance from food distributions.

Charitable endeavors in the Ottoman world surely drew their inspiration from Muslims’ obligation to do good, but Ottoman imperial charity was only partly informed by religious notions of merit and need. The study of imarets reveals the articulation of Ottoman society as envisaged and preserved through imperial food distributions. For some fortunate people, a bowl of soup filled an immediate need, symbolism being only one ingredient along with the cumin, the onions, and the salt.