

## Background Reading of Coffee in the Arab World

Coffee originated in the Arab World. Several romantic stories are told about the origins of the heralded bean. One story claims that an Ethiopian goatherd noticed his flock was particularly energetic after consuming the “brownish purple cherries from a particular tree. He then tried eating them himself, noted their stimulating powers, and passed his discovery on to a local imam” (Standage 137). The imam boiled the berries to produce a hot drink, which he in turn used to keep himself awake during overnight religious ceremonies. Another story claims that a man named Omar, who was condemned to die in the desert outside Mocha in Yemen, survived on berries, which in turn saved his life. This was a sign that God had spared him in order to pass along the knowledge of said berry. This became a popular drink in Mocha.

Regardless of which story is true, both Ethiopia and Yemen take claim to the origin of coffee. As far as a drink, coffee was first popular in Yemen in the mid-fifteenth century, although people may have been chewing on the berry for centuries for their invigorating effects. The innovation of the Yemeni drink is attributed to Muhammad al-Dhabhani, a scholar and member of the Sufi sect of Islam, who died around 1470. Coffee, or *qahwah* in Arabic, was used to ward off sleep during night-time religious ceremonies of dancing and swaying.

Coffee reached Mecca and Cairo by 1510, where the physical effects became a controversial subject. Coffee, which began as a religious drink during religious ceremonies, became a social drink, sold by the cup on the street, in the market, and eventually in designated coffeehouses. But, Islamic religious leaders were not convinced of coffee’s legality in a religion that bans intoxicating substances. Coffee’s opponents tried to argue that any change in the drinker’s physical or mental state was grounds on which to ban coffee. Muhammad clearly stated that intoxicants were forbidden in Islam; but, was coffee an intoxicant? Authorities disagreed on this question, thus policies under various rulers differed.

In 1511, authorities in Mecca banned the consumption of coffee; coffee was seized and burned, vendors and some customers were beaten, and traders stopped bringing coffee to Mecca. Within a few months, however, higher authorities overturned the ban, possibly for economic reasons, and coffee was once again permissible to drink on religious grounds. So, for a while coffee was an acceptable religious drink. In fact, it was not so much the effects of coffee that worried authorities, it was the coffeehouses themselves. Coffeehouses were hotbeds of gossip, rumor, political debate, and satirical discussion (Standage 139). People were actually discussing politics and questioning authority within the confines of coffeehouses, thus they became questionable establishments. People even played chess and backgammon in coffeehouses, and placed bets on these games, which was banned under Islamic law. Coffeehouses became questionable establishments.

Two other attempts to close down coffeehouses took place in Mecca in 1524 and Cairo in 1539, but both were short-lived. By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, European travelers in the Arab world commented on the widespread popularity of the coffeehouses, and their role as meeting places and sources of news. William Biddulph, an English traveler, noted in 1609 that “their Coffa houses are more common than Ale-houses in England....If there be any news it is talked of there” (Standage 140). Within a half a century, this exotic novelty was fast becoming commonplace in parts of Western Europe. Coffee first entered Europe via Vienna but quickly spread to England in the 1650s and in Amsterdam during the 1660s.

Coffee arrived to the Ottoman Empire around 1555. The Ottoman Turks occupied Yemen in 1536, and soon afterward the coffee bean became an important export throughout the Turkish Empire. The beans generally were exported from the Yemeni port of Mocha where it was then shipped to Suez and then transported to Turkey. Because the coffee trade had become a major source of income, the Turks jealously guarded their monopoly over the trees' cultivation. No berries were allowed to leave Yemen unless they had first been steeped in boiling water or partially roasted to prevent germination (Pendergrast 7). Thus, the Turks controlled the coffee trade.

Istanbul's coffeehouses were the first truly secular settings for coffee. Here, men lounged and smoked and drank. Some cafes offered poetry readings while others had singing girls and puppet shows. Most coffeehouses were devoted to gossip and political talk (Allen 134). Some coffeehouses were more risqué than others, offering "special" coffees containing drugs and spices that included pepper, opium, and saffron. Treats included honey-hash balls and *sheera*, hash or marijuana mixed with tobacco which could be smoked in water pipes—or mixed into coffee, creating an early "speedball." Some coffeehouses promoted "working girls," or prostitutes, as some coffeehouses doubled as brothels.

It was in this atmosphere that the most severe ban on coffee and coffeehouses took place in 1633. A nasty sultan, Murad IV, ordered that all coffeehouses be destroyed immediately and all those discovered drinking coffee executed. Supposedly he often wandered the city in disguise searching for traitors. One night in 1633 he crept out into the darkened city and stopped in one of the many coffeehouses in Istanbul. It was here he overheard many "persons soberly discoursing on the affairs of the empire, blaming the administration" for a variety of problems. Sultan Murad listened for a while and then crept back to the palace. It was soon after this that he banned coffee. Istanbul's cafes were destroyed and people caught drinking coffee were beaten. If apprehended twice, they were sewn into a leather bag and tossed into the Bosphorus to drown. Ships carrying coffee were sunk. Murad claimed coffeehouses were a fire hazard but his real concern was that they encouraged insubordination by providing his subjects with a meeting place that invited sober, thoughtful discussion. According to foreign visitors, Murad started roaming the streets with his executioner, instantly beheading anyone he found drinking coffee or smoking. It is estimated from 10,000 to 100,000 people were executed for drinking coffee or smoking. For decades Istanbul remained desolate of cafes. After he died, coffeehouses gradually began to reappear. However, the damage had been done as dispossessed coffee vendors had gone to Italy, France, and Austria to work in their trade.

The Ottoman hold over the coffee bean did not persevere. In the 1600s, a Muslim pilgrim named Baba Budan smuggled out seven seeds by taping them to his stomach and successfully cultivated them in India. From its offspring, the Dutch brought the bean to Ceylon by 1658. In 1699, the Dutch transplanted trees from Ceylon to Java and other islands in the East Indies (Pendergrast 7). For many years, the production of the Dutch East Indies determined the price of coffee in the world market. During the 1700s, coffee from Java and Mocha became the most sought after coffees, hence the synonymous names to coffee. The monopoly the Arabs had over coffee was over, although it would be most hurt by the transplant of coffee to the New World. In 1723, a French naval officer, Gabriel Mathieu de Clieu, introduced coffee cultivation to the French colony at Martinique, from which it spread to Brazil and later to Venezuela, Columbia, and most of Central America. Ironically, in a strange twist of fate, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became cheaper for Arabs to purchase coffee from the New World than from Yemen. The port of Mocha closed in 1869. It was the end of an era.

**Works Cited:**

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# **IMPERIAL DECREE!**

**EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY BY THE  
ORDERS OF SULTAN MURAD IV:**

**ALL COFFEEHOUSES TO BE  
SHUTTERED AND DESTROYED!**

**NO EXCEPTIONS!**

**THOSE WHO FAIL TO HEED SUCH  
DECREE RISK THE FOLLOWING:**

Fines  
Imprisonment  
Death by beheading

ATTENTION  
CITIZENS!

Effective  
Immediately!  
All  
coffeehouses  
to be  
shuttered and  
destroyed!  
We are  
looking for  
your input!!  
Please let us  
know how you  
feel about this  
change of  
events! Post  
your tweet  
below.

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*Students:*

*In a twitter feed of 140 characters  
or less, tweet how the following  
citizen(s) might feel about the  
Imperial Decree of 1633.*

- ❖ An Ottoman Janissary
- ❖ A Yemeni trader
- ❖ An Ottoman Imam
- ❖ A foreign traveler from Europe
- ❖ An Ottoman married mother of three
- ❖ A coffeehouse owner
- ❖ A suq market-seller
- ❖ A Sufi mystic
- ❖ An Ottoman businessman, age 25
- ❖ An Ottoman businessman, age 55
- ❖ A young “lady of the night”
- ❖ A tobacco salesman
- ❖ A captain of a trading vessel in the Mediterranean Sea
- ❖ A widow, age 65
- ❖ A chef in Topkapi Palace