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AramcoWorld





4 Rites of Flight: Falconry in Japan

Written by Matthew Teller

Photos and video by Steve Shelton

For more than 1,000 years, falconry—hunting with birds of prey—symbolized power for the emperor and, later, the elite *samurai*. The most highly trained keepers of the tradition were based in the mountains west of Tokyo, where late last year the 18th generational head of what is today called the Suwa Falconry Preservation Society received her title, prepared to teach a new generation devoted to Japan’s place in global falconry culture.

14 The Great Migration of the Bani Hilal

Written by Caroline Stone

Illustrated by Ivy Johnson

In the 10th century, herders fled drought in Arabia, but the sultan of Egypt used them against his rivals. Their story went viral—oral-folklore style—as *Sirat Bani Hilal*, or the *Romance of the People of the Crescent Moon*.

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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

Front Cover: A female kestrel perches on a gloved hand at the Suwa Falconry Preservation Society. “A falconer has a completely different role from, say, an animal trainer,” says master Zenjiro Tagomori. “There’s a communication between falcon and falconer.” Photo by Steve Shelton.

Back Cover: Baked to chewy, golden-crust perfection, sesame-seed-encrusted rings of twisted bread called *simit* come from recipes dating back to the early 16th century. Today *simit* can be found almost anywhere in Istanbul, from pushcarts to pish bakeries. Photo by Eric Hansen.



20 Street Food, Istanbul Style

Written and photographed by Eric Hansen

From an eggy morning *menemen* to an afternoon *tantuni* wrap to a late-night handful of roasted *kestane* and more than a dozen delectables all in between, a search for the very best proves why Istanbul claims title as the street food capital of the world.

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Written by Agnieszka Dobrowolska and Jarosław Dobrowolski
Photographed by Matjaž Kačičnik/NNIC

In 1759 the Ottoman sultan adorned a public water fountain and school along a canal in Cairo with some 2,500 tiles painted in Amsterdam. Recent restoration revealed a remarkable story at the *sabil-kuttab* of Sultan Mustafa III.

34 Malika V. Nur Jahan

Written by Tom Verde
Art by Leonor Solans

Wife and mother, businesswoman, fashion designer, real estate developer, garden planner, philanthropist devoted to women, battle commander, tiger hunter: For the woman with a royal name meaning "Light of the World," those were all part of Nur Jahan's main job—running the Mughal empire.

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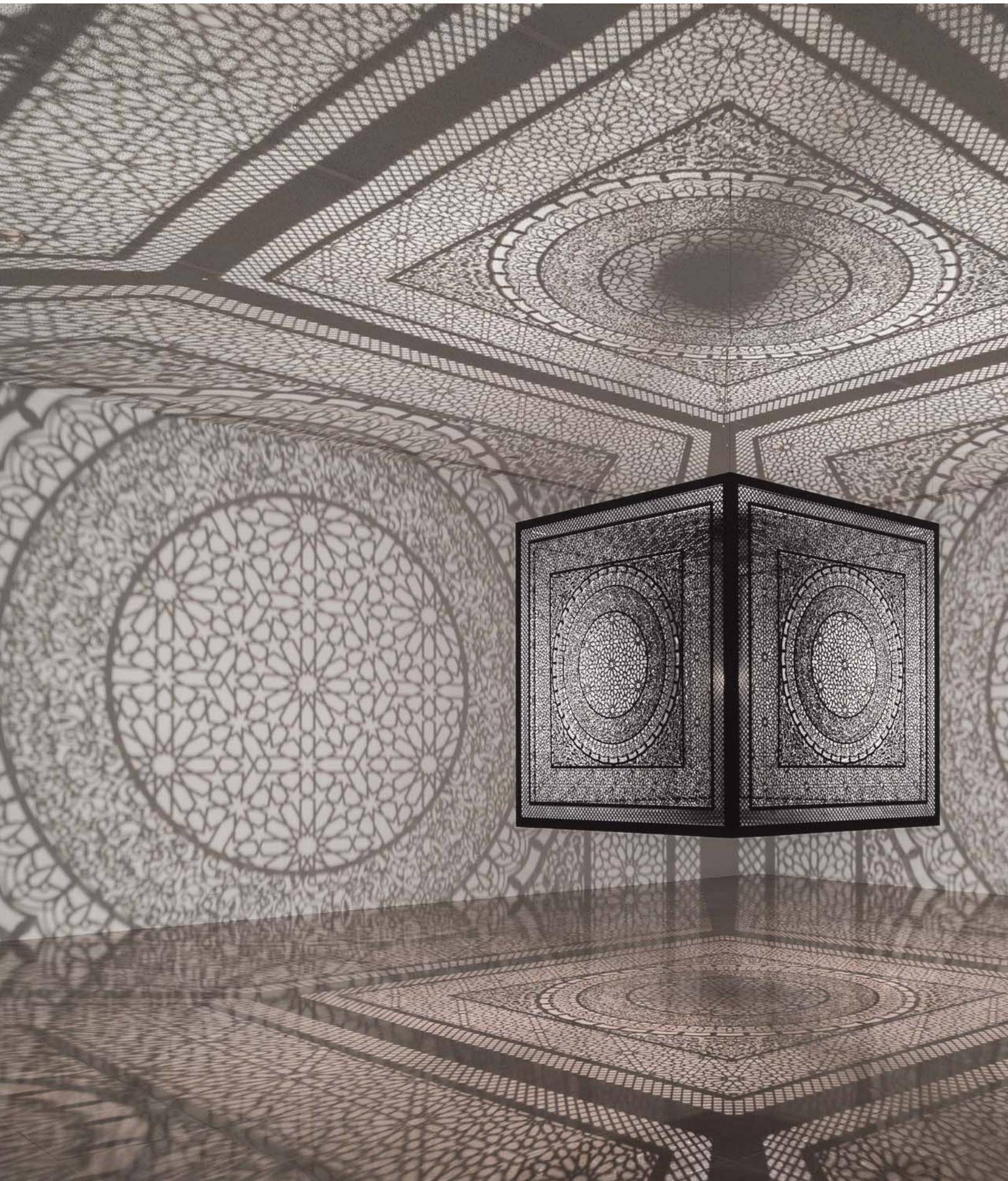
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FIRST LOOK

Intersections

Installation by
Anila Quayyum Agha
Photograph by
Nash Baker

Using a single light suspended from the ceiling to shine through a laser-cut sculpture in wood that is painted black, Pakistani-American artist Anila Quayyum Agha transforms the Rice Art Gallery in Houston into an allusion to Islamic sacred spaces where geometric ornamentation and patterns themselves allude to the infinity of creation. The artwork was inspired, Agha says, by her visit to the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, where the Nasrid palace's all-encompassing beauty of interlacing designs prompted reflection upon her own childhood in Lahore, Pakistan, where culture barred her and other women from the creativity and community of the mosque—an experience she says led to “complex expressions of both wonder and the feelings of exclusion.”

Working from these contradictory emotions, *Intersections* creates a contemplative space, open to all, that repeats a symmetrical pattern she designed by combining and adapting decorative elements of the Alhambra. As the geometry becomes shadows, it covers not only surfaces, but visitors themselves, dissolving boundaries and allowing the pattern itself to change with each movement.

In 2014 *Intersections* won Art-Prize's Public Vote Grand Prize and split its Juried Grand Prize. Her current exhibit, *Walking with My Mother's Shadow*, is on view at Aicon Gallery, New York, through November 26. www.anilaagha.com

Nash Baker is a Houston-based freelance photographer who has documented installations in the Rice Gallery since 2007. www.nashbaker.com

rites of FLIGHT: FALCONRY

IN JAPAN

Written by MATTHEW TELLER
Photos and video by STEVE SHELTON



He stands. The hubbub dies down. Those seated, awaiting their food, listen with respect as a speech dwelling on the importance of tradition flows past their ears. The master's words reach back across the centuries to highlight those who came before, then link forward to mark the path the listeners themselves have chosen. Somber yet informal, stooped but spry, his thinning white hair combed straight back, he carries the listeners with him.

"He knew what the hawk thinks and feels," says Noriko Otsuka, 45, of her first meeting 20 years ago with mentor Zenjiro Tagomori, 68, who is the 17th-generation head of the Suwa Falconry Preservation Society. Left: In a field outside Tokyo, Tagomori and Otsuka prepare a flight and, above, Tagomori sets his falcon to wing. Late last year Tagomori named Otsuka the 18th falcon master of the society whose practices were embraced for more than 1,200 years by the elite warriors known as samurai.



Toward the end he gestures, and a younger woman by his right side stands to join him. She bows her head as he talks, then smiles as he hands her a scroll. The listeners applaud and take pictures with their mobiles.

But this is not an awards event, nor a prize-giving. The setting is not an arena, nor a banquet hall.

The walls of this cluttered room are sliding panels of paper. Overhead hangs a single bulb. A poster pinned behind the speaker shows a cursive character encircled in white on a blue field; it reads “wind.” The listeners are nine women and two men. They sit shoeless on floor mats around a low table, and their legs are folded beneath them.

The speaker, Zenjiro Tagomori, is the 17th-generation head of the Suwa school of falconry, a tradition of Japan’s emperors that extends back centuries to the era of the *samurai*. Around the table is his current crop of students. Bird pictures crowd the walls. And the reason for the festive gathering is that Tagomori, who is 68, is stepping down. As of this night, the recipient of that scroll—Tagomori’s protégé of 20 years, Noriko Otsuka—is Suwa’s 18th-generation falcon master.

She smiles, says a few words marking the honor of the occasion, takes more applause, and the cheerful hubbub resumes as everyone reaches across the table to pass bowls of vegetables and fish, and tucks in.

Right: During a weekend workshop for young falconers, Otsuka and Tagomori train students how to care for raptors—prune feathers, clip and sharpen talons, feed with pigeons and recognize when a bird is stressed or sick. Lower: A student holds a pigeon that will be used in the demonstration.

From the darkness outside this cramped little party, in this tumbledown shack on a rural mountainside in Mitake, west of Tokyo, an unearthly screech breaks the still of the enveloping forest.

In 2010 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared falconry to be part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Perhaps most familiar in the West from its prominence in the courts of medieval England, falconry—or “hawking,” as it has also been called—is a catch-all term for the sport of hunting with raptors, or birds of prey, and the long process of training that enables a human handler to work effectively with a wild raptor.

Falconry is older than recorded history. It probably began when nomadic herders observed eagles killing prey in open country and glimpsed the potential in training them to hunt for human benefit. One popular theory suggests that happened first in Mongolia, perhaps more than 5,000 years ago. Another claims it was in Persia, or it may have been somewhere on the vast Central Asian steppe in between.

Either way, there is evidence that falconry was already being held in high esteem in Mongolia during the first millennium BCE, when military campaigns brought the practice westward. Coins from Greece show Alexander the Great (who died in 332 BCE) with a falcon on his fist. Celtic tribes introduced falconry to the Romans in the fourth century CE, after which falconry remained popular in Europe for more than a millennium.

But as the necessity of hunting for food receded, falconry became loaded with cultural meaning. In England, it became tightly woven into the aristocratic world of knights and nobles, codifying divisions between social classes. In Arabia, poets extolled the virtues of patience, endurance



and self-reliance cultivated by hunting with birds.

Practiced chiefly by social elites across much of the world, with regional variations but a broadly similar base level of knowledge, falconry took on further layers of significance as a form of diplomatic communication. Kings and princes exchanged falcons, compared techniques and developed vast holdings of lands, birds and handlers.

One example centers on Frederick II, Holy Roman emperor between 1220 and 1250, and king of Sicily. Falconry, which is mentioned in the Qur’an, had been practiced in Arabia for many centuries before Frederick began to establish links between Arabian and European traditions: From his court in





Under Otsuka's eye, a student coaxes a tethered bird toward his arm at the Suwa Falconry Preservation Society. Otsuka says that for the first three years of her training, "I just watched and helped," before she could fly and care for falcons herself.

Palermo, Sicily, he consulted with Arab falconers, imported Arab falcons and ordered a number of Arabic and Persian treatises on falconry translated into Latin for wider European consumption.

And falconry also went east. It is documented from as early as the seventh century BCE in China, and then, via the Korean peninsula, it crossed the sea to Japan, where written records date its arrival at 355 CE.

"Japanese falconry is closely related to the prestige of the emperor," says history professor Yasuhiro Nihonmatsu, one of the few researchers in the field.

A key function of emperors throughout Japanese history has been to secure the cultivation of rice. The most powerful symbol of successful rice stewardship is the crane—a grayish-white, long-necked, leggy bird that would fly in after the harvest to feed on abandoned rice husks.

"So the emperors were also compelled to protect and manage the crane population," says Nihonmatsu. "They did that by bringing in falcons."

An added layer of complexity references Japan's indigenous religion, Shinto, in which everything—animal, plant and mineral—is deemed to have a spirit.

"Falconry is related to keeping the rice spirit in the human world," says Nihonmatsu. "The emperor had to prevent the spirit's being removed, and did so by training

falcons to catch the cranes that would try to leave the paddies with a bellyful of rice. We have ancient recipes for cooking cranes."

Over more than 1,000 years, Japanese falconry also took on a military aspect, as local lords (*daimyo*) rode out on horseback with falcons on their fists to assert dominance over their territory. Falconry became bound up with sovereignty, law and religion, permitted only for the emperor and the aristocracy.

But as the elite warrior caste known as samurai rose to prominence, they consistently flouted imperial prohibitions on falconry. Ten such edicts are recorded between 794 and 1333, even while samurai pilgrimage flourished to the important Shinto shrine devoted to the falcon at Suwa, in the Nagano mountains, to learn the Suwa style of falconry—reverent, tradition-based and esoteric.

In 1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) was proclaimed *shogun*, the military ruler of Japan who exercised power in the name of the emperor, founding a dynasty that would endure for the next two and a half centuries. Ieyasu was a keen falconry enthusiast, and with his approval the samurai openly embraced falconry as a symbol of a new national order.

A demonstration of falconry became a demonstration of power, embodied for more than half a millennium by the leaders of the Suwa school.



“Japanese falconry is closely related to the prestige of the emperor,” explains Yasuhiro Nihonmatsu of Shizuoka University of Art and Culture, where he is an assistant professor and one of the few researchers of the history of Japanese falconry. “Falconry is related to keeping the rice spirit in the human world,” he says, referencing Japan’s indigenous religion, Shinto. “The emperor had to prevent the spirit’s being removed, and did so by training falcons to catch the cranes that would try to leave the paddies with a bellyful of rice.” *Right:* This annotated illustration by renowned calligrapher and falconer Jimyoin Motoharu dates to the late 16th or early 17th century, and he copied it from an original dated 1328.

Noriko Otsuka talks slowly, quietly and very carefully. She weighs each thought before speaking, sometimes for minutes at a time. In a week with her—at the festivities in Mitake, at a training session with students, eating together, watching her fly hawks in riverside fields—I got the distinct impression that unspoken communication matters more to her than words. She listens. She notices. She waits.

“The first time I held a falcon, I felt she was very sensitive, with this noble atmosphere. I don’t know why, but I thought: ‘I can handle this bird; I understand what she feels.’”

Now 45, Otsuka was born in Chiba, south of Tokyo. Her father is a successful businessman.

“He said I have to be like him,” she says. “Study hard, no friends, no enjoyment, and get a good job. But I thought, ‘I want to see nature.’”

In college Otsuka began to explore urban parks—“artificial places,” as she calls them. For her 1994 graduate paper in sports anthropology, she searched for a subject that could embody a link between people and nature.

“I asked some falconers, but they rejected me because I’m a woman and was so young. But then I met Mr. Tagomori, and he showed me how to fly the hawks. I was so impressed, and also surprised: He seemed to know what the hawk was thinking and feeling. After I wrote my paper, I asked if I could become his pupil.”

Under Tagomori’s guidance, Otsuka watched and learned, although she was shunned by her fellow students. (“All old men, they didn’t want to help me or have me involved at all,” she says.)

“To start with, I couldn’t do anything. Nature is severe, not artificial. I knew I had to grow a sixth sense about survival and hunting. That’s so hard! But I had the idea I could connect with nature and with animals. It made me feel truly human.”

After three years of study, Otsuka scraped together enough money, and confidence, to buy her own falcon. Now, 20 years on, she trains her own students, like many Japanese falconers using birds bought from European breeders. Japanese law on local capture of wild raptors is strict.

In the Mitake forests, I watch as Otsuka and Tagomori lead a class through some of the basics. The venue is Tagomori’s home, a wooden shack set amid broadleaf woodland a short hike above a country road on the slopes of Mount Mitake—a holy mountain whose summit hosts a 2,000-year-old Shinto shrine.

It’s October, and the leaves are starting to turn.

“This is the season to start educating the falcon,” Otsuka says, as she guides me behind the house, past tall, meshed enclosures set into the tree cover, past a dog kennel, to a small grass clearing.

Below, a stream gurgles away to join the Tama River, which flows on through Tokyo and out to the Pacific. Above, hidden by the foliage, a waterfall crashes. Silent in the deep shade of its enclosure, an erect Harris hawk watches us pass. As a dog barks ahead of us, the hawk suddenly screeches, the same sound I heard during the evening celebration—a cold noise of rending metal close to my ear that squirts danger and ancient superstition and wild fear into my muscles. I stumble a little.

Death is close, but not mine.

Eleven students are gathered in the clearing. An ax has been thwacked into a stump by its blade. Logs smolder in a rusted oil drum. Simply dressed in a hiker's vest and narrow-leg jeans, her hair tied back, Otsuka holds a live pigeon in one hand, gripping lightly but firmly behind its wings so the bird is immobilized.

She is explaining the importance of patience, respect and gratitude for the falcons and for the nature all around. The students, a touch incongruous in their urban casualwear, are mostly in their 20s and 30s with office jobs in the city. They have each paid ¥30,000 (roughly US\$300) to sign up for Otsuka's October-to-March half-year course.

I chat with one, Fumihiro Kasahara, 37, a bright-eyed man with highlighted hair and two silver rings in his left ear. "I read a newspaper article about hawking," he says. "It was my dream as a kid to have a pet hawk. I'd love to be a falcon master."

Otsuka talks while gathering equipment.

"When I was young, I knew nothing about nature or animals or where my food came from," she's saying. "I just went to school and studied hard because my parents said so. But then, luckily, I came across falconry. I understood there was another world."

She passes the pigeon to Tagomori and prepares a table, spreading it with a large sheet of paper marked out in squares, each labeled with a body part: "heart," "wing," "neck."

At the back of the group, Satoko Sakakibara, 28, a reserved, bespectacled office administrator, has brought out the Harris hawk. It perches on her gloved fist. Its name is Nowaki, which means "Fall Storms." Half a meter tall, the bird bobs and stares, all curves—curved black talons, curved pin-sharp beak, hooked yellow toes, coiled energy beneath an arched back of chestnut-brown plumage.

"I first handled birds in 2011," Sakakibara tells me. There's no danger, but it's still disconcerting to chat with such a beak so close.

"They didn't listen to a word I said. But the distance



between me and them has reduced now. It's a spiritual connection. We are not in charge. This hawk controls me, not the other way around. You just have to keep calm. Falconry has helped me develop as a person."

As she talks, Tagomori—avuncular, slightly stooped, in a simple fleece top—is apologizing ("I'm no good at this; I feel too sorry") as he quickly and without fuss ends the pigeon's life, its neck squeezed between his knuckles.

Within a few minutes, the pigeon has been plucked and its organs laid out on the blood-smeared table for the students to identify. Death is integral to falconry. Otsuka discusses raptor nutrition. All the meat will be used.

But Nowaki isn't here to eat. Instead, Otsuka demonstrates *wamawari*—walking around the clearing with the hawk (which weighs almost a kilogram) perched calmly on her outstretched fist. Her body absorbs the unevenness of the ground; the hawk feels no wobbles. Strength and poise can be learnt, but it strikes me that the inner discipline required for falconry perhaps cannot.

Some students copy Otsuka, making a circuit with Nowaki. Less confident beginners walk instead with a liter bottle of water balanced on a forearm.

"The water shouldn't slop," warns Tagomori. "Keep it steady."

Otsuka and Tagomori's reverence for nature, and the emphasis they place on discipline and calm, brings home that their falconry isn't a sport, and that these birds aren't pets. It's also no longer about hunting for food. So what is it?

"I was 10 or 11 when I got interested in hawks, going to the library, reading up."

Tagomori sits on the floor matting in his Mitake house, beside a low table crowded with books and papers. He sips tea as he tells the story of browsing Tokyo libraries as a young man in the mid-1960s and unearthing a work by Kaoru Hanami, at that time falconer to the Japanese imperial household and

Outside Sunpu Castle in Shizuoka city, a statue of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder in 1603 of the Tokugawa shogunate, shows the military leader's enthusiasm for falconry as both sport and symbol of power.





This Northern Goshawk is among the birds cared for and flown by students at the Suwa Falconry Preservation Society. Lower: A heavy gauntlet protects Otsuka against sharp talons.

16th-generation head of the much reduced Suwa school. A sympathetic archivist guided him to meet Hanami in person.

By then the formal link between falconry and the imperial family had been broken: Although the Imperial Household retained the post of falconer, since 1945 traditional forms of hunting and ceremony had been ended.

Hanami nonetheless accepted Tagomori as a pupil and, on his retirement in 1976, continued supporting efforts to keep falconry skills alive amid rapid social change. With an eye for a slogan, Hanami redefined the Suwa tradition as *Jinyoh-Ittai*, or “Human and Hawk as One.” He named Tagomori his successor.

“It took 18 years after I met Mr. Hanami for me to be

able to call myself a master,” says Tagomori. “I realized from him that a falconer is very different from what most people understand. It’s not about control. A falconer has a

completely different role from, say, an animal trainer. There’s a communication between falcon and falconer. We have a spiritual connection.”

This chimes with the atmosphere at Mitake. But the Suwa school—now retitled the Suwa Falconry Preservation Society—is a shoestring operation in the hands of a few individuals, reliant on tradition, isolated within its own country. How could it secure a viable future?



Soon after Hanami’s memoir, *The Emperor’s Falconer*, was published posthumously in 2002, Tagomori was contacted by the organizers of the Abu Dhabi International

Otsuka emerges from a thicket after retrieving a falcon that had sought refuge upon capturing a pigeon. Training as a falconer, she says, “was not easy,” and she emphasizes the difficulty connecting with the birds. “I didn’t understand what [the falcon] feels, so it took a very long time to fly.”

Hunting and Equestrian Exhibition (ADIHEX), an annual world gathering of experts and practitioners of field sports. They’d seen the memoir, and with Japanese falconry largely unknown outside Japan, they were inviting Tagomori to ADIHEX for mutual benefit, to broaden knowledge and share experience.

Falconry in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula has become one of the symbols of nationhood, a cultural endeavor rooted in centuries of practice. According to the International Association for Falconry, the Middle East hosts half of the world’s falconers. As it was a thousand years ago, the Peninsula is again a center for world falconry. And everybody goes to ADIHEX.

“Mr. Tagomori asked his students who wants to come with him,” says Otsuka with a smile. “He wanted to show Japanese falconry to the world, and to learn from them too. I said I wanted to go.”

Otsuka visited ADIHEX with Tagomori in 2005 at the invitation of the Emirates Falconers Club and has been back every year since. She has done a three-month internship at Abu Dhabi’s world-renowned falcon hospital, she has compared techniques and traditions with Arab falconers (including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi), and she is exploring ways of forging deeper links with the region to help raise awareness of Japanese falconry.

She also senses an affinity between traditions.

“In Europe they focus on data, what the weight of the hawk is, how its health is, using statistics. In Arabia, as in Japan, they feel the bird’s condition. You rest your hand on the



falcon’s breast. If there’s stress, you feel the tension. We share a connection with the bird and a way of trying to understand it.”

October 19 in Japan marks an important festival date. Every year on that day, the former imperial capital of Kyoto commemorates the city’s conquest in 1568 by the daimyo Oda Nobunaga—one of the early allies of the falcon-loving shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. Celebrations focus on Kyoto’s Kenkun Shrine, a Shinto holy place dedicated to Nobunaga—now a national hero—which hosts a religious service mixed with cultural performances.

This year the Suwa falconers are guests of honor, participating in the public worship and also offering a demonstration of their skills.

I’m with them backstage as they prepare. Otsuka has brought both Nowaki and her smaller goshawk Murakumo (“Gathering Clouds”). She, like her companions, is in traditional costume:

a cross-fronted tunic, knee-length cape, beret-style cap and distinctive split-toed boots, with a whistle, lure and a box at her waist that holds raw meat scraps.

“Arab falconers use falcons,” Otsuka tells me, checking

**“In Arabia, as in Japan,
they feel the bird’s condition.
We share a connection with the bird.”**



In ceremonial procession, priests of the Kenkun Shrine in Kyoto lead the Suwa falconers to one of the cultural performances during the Funaoka Grand Festival, held annually on October 19. *Right:* Now standing as a falcon master, Otsuka carries on the traditions.

everything is in order. “They fly for as much as five kilometers—perfect for hunting in huge deserts. But here in Japan we have mountains and not much open countryside. That’s why we use hawks. They fly fast, but can’t go for more than about 500 meters.”

She smiles and straightens up.

“For most people, today will be just a bird show. Only a few get that it is more—a very important aspect of culture linking nature and human beings.”

As the event begins, led by white-robed, wooden-clogged Shinto priests, the shrine compound is packed with hundreds of people, observing in silence as rice, fish, seaweed and salt are solemnly presented to the deified spirit of Nobunaga residing within the inner sanctum. A ritualized performance of *noh* theater is followed by *bugaku*, a 1,200-year-old form of masked dance, its reedy, discordant music of high flute and slow drum leaving—from the looks on faces all around—a 21st-century audience spellbound.

Senior priest Takako Matsubara steps forward to deliver an address.



“Falconry has a 5,000-year history,” she says. “Nobunaga is known to have loved it. He kept 140 hawks, and to lighten the spirits of his battle-weary fighters, he would stage a performance of falconry for the emperor. Others followed him, bestowing the role of falconer, until today, 17 generations later, we have Mr. Tagomori and Ms. Otsuka.”

They take their bows.

Their display adheres precisely to a tradition that reaches back centuries, faithfully maintained by the Suwa falcon



"I try to explain to people that birds of prey are sensitive, and that falconry is a sustainable, very ancient practice," says Otsuka. "From the hawk you learn who you are," adds Tagomori.

masters. It passes in the sunshine of midday to murmurs of wonder rippling around the crowd as the hawk swoops.

High school student Sorato Nakano, 16, tells me his whole school has been given the day off. "I've loved falconry since I was a kid. I want to be an independent falconer, self-sufficient."

Chieko Yoshii nearby is beaming. "I forgot my age today to see the falconry," she grins, telling me she is 90 years old. "It's a dream day."

Later, as the falconers pack up, Otsuka reflects on her journey.

"I think it's not that men should do falconry, or women should, but the person who understands it. My father wanted me to have social status and a good income, and that is very important, but I am now trying to benefit my culture [through falconry]. I try to explain to people that birds of prey are sensitive, and that falconry is a sustainable, very ancient practice. If this culture is rebuilt, then I think my breakthrough will be understood."

Tagomori adds a thought.

"From the hawk you learn who you are, what a human being should be. This spiritual element goes along with nature, and it should be handed on to the future."

And he looks across at Otsuka, his pupil-turned-successor.

"I think this will last very well," he says. 🌐



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"Rites of Flight"

Video at aramcoworld.com



THE GREAT MIGRATION OF THE BANI HILAL

written by

CAROLINE STONE

illustrations by

IVY JOHNSON



Everybody
understands eloquence
in his own dialect.

—IBN KHALDUN,
THE MUQADDIMA, 1377 CE

Then the poet would begin to recite in a wonderfully
sweet tone the doings of Abu Zayd, Khalifa and
Dhi'ab, and his hearers would remain silent except
when ecstasy enlivened them or desire startled them.

—TAHA HUSSEIN,
THE DAYS: AN EGYPTIAN CHILDHOOD, 1932

These words come at the beginning of Taha Hussein's autobiography, where he tells us how he would creep out of his parents' house to listen to tales that had held audiences across the Arab world spellbound for centuries: *Sirat Bani Hilal*—the *Romance of the People of the Crescent Moon*. For Hussein, living in a village in Upper Egypt and blind since childhood, the adventures of the tribe that had emigrated from Arabia 1,000 years before opened up a new and wonderful world. He was to become one of Egypt's most influential writers and educators.

Sadly, this centuries-old oral tradition, passed on from one generation to the next, is now almost at an end. The café and market-square patrons, who once listened enraptured, have found new entertainments, and the few remaining *rawis*—reciters—are very old and have no successors.

To a limited extent—as with the Arthurian legends—the old stories have transferred to new media. There have also been efforts to preserve and record versions of the epic in the Arab world, and in 2003 the United Nations declared it one of the masterpieces of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Like most of the great Arab epics as well as those from Europe and the Byzantine Empire, there is a loose historical basis for these stories. Minor characters from the original sources were often promoted to heroes, and actual events were modified to suit the narrative or resonate with a particular audience.

Yet in a world of widespread illiteracy, the recitation of these epics gave ordinary people a sense of history while inculcating virtues such as courage, pride and—when necessary—ven-



geance. Cunning was valued, in the sense of outwitting one's opponent, much like "wily Odysseus" in Homer's *Odyssey*—in contrast to European chivalric romances in which cunning was often a villain's mark.

The *Sirat* is divided into three parts: the tribe's origins and journey out of Arabia, its time in Egypt and Syria, and what is often called "the Westering of the Bani Hilal," that is, the tribe's invasion of North Africa from Egypt to the Atlantic. Many versions of the story describe a prolonged drought in Najd in Central Arabia, in which herds died, bringing famine. Tribes cast lots to determine which would stay and which would go in search of new grazing lands. Over time there were in fact several waves of migrations, but for the purposes of the romance, they were all attributed to the Bani Hilal. What began as a struggle for survival turned gradually into politics: Early sources say that when the tribes reached Egypt, the Fatimid ruler loosed them on the Zenata Berber dynasty of Tunisia. This ridded Egypt of what the Fatimids regarded as a dangerous and destructive presence and punished allies who had become rivals.

Three main characters who reappear in almost every version are Abu Zayd, Khalifa and Dhi'ab. Khalifa al-Zanati at least is a known historical figure, chief general of the Berber

ruler of Tlemcen (now in Algeria), although he appears in different guises in different versions of the epic in order to appeal to the local audience. Ibn Khaldun, who in the 14th century wrote down the first surviving passages from the *Sirat* that are very similar to versions collected in the early 20th century in the same region, commented on the wide variations in plot, setting and style.

In addition to these three, the *Sirat* has a huge cast, which also varies—and sometimes the same name is used in different places for different characters. Al-Khadra, for example, can variously be Dhi'ab's prized white mare, Abu Zayd's mother or a slave girl. None of this would have been confusing to listeners, because they would have been listening to one coherent, local tale. It only becomes complicated when discussing the *Sirat* as a whole.

Extremely popular in North and West Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula, the *Sirat Bani Hilal* does not seem to have traveled east—unlike the *Iskandar Nama* (*The Story of Alexander the Great*), which was a favorite in Iran, Afghanistan and as far afield as Malaysia and Indonesia, or the *Sirat Hamza*, the legendary adventures of the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. Nor does it seem to have entered the



Ottoman repertoire: Considering the Turks' protracted political problems with the Bedouin, stories of Bedouin conquests may have held scant appeal.

The geographical spread produced some truly exotic variants, for example, one episode from Sub-Saharan Africa in which Abu Zayd battles a giant crocodile. Tales collected in Bornu, Nigeria, are so far from the originals that they are hard to recognize apart from some of the names. Individual

1836, Cairo

Edward Lane, in his *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, first published in 1836, devotes three chapters to "Public Recitations of Romances."

The number of these *Sho'ara* [poets] in Cairo is about fifty; and they recite nothing but the adventures related in the romance of Aboo-Zeyd.... The *Sha'er* [poet] always commits his subject to memory, and recites without a book. The poetry he chants; and after every verse he plays a few notes in a viol which has but a single cord, and which is called "the poet's viol," or the "Aboo-Zeydee viol" from its only being used in these recitations.

reciters took the story in whatever direction they felt would appeal. In one Syrian version, the *Sirat* is set in the 14th century, the time of Amir Timur (known in the West as Tamerlane), and the Bani Hilal go on to conquer India. In another version from Egypt, they exchange letters with the King of China.

In an episode recorded in the mid-20th century in Dhofar, in southwestern Oman, Abu Zayd has an adventure clearly adapted from "St. George and the Dragon" although, by now an old man, he neither marries the princess he has rescued nor takes over the kingdom: Instead, in some versions of the story, he continues on his way and ends his days as a holy man. Dragons are rare in North African and Arabian folklore, so scholars believe this story most probably crossed from Ethiopia, where St. George is known and much esteemed.

Elsewhere, "modern" elements crept in: muskets, Turkish soldiers, Genoese merchants and even prickly pears, which were introduced from Mexico in the 16th century. In a 19th-century version from Beirut, Abu Zayd was bullied at school for being black and presumably illegitimate: Of course he puts his tormentors in their places. Although chess was known in the Arab world from early Silk Road times, scenes with the heroine Jazia playing chess, or of Bedouin writing letters, show urban norms continuing to modernize the tales.

There are also additional, subtle differences. Giovanni Canova, collecting tales in Yemen in the late 1980s and '90s, pointed out that distinct from Syrian, Egyptian and North African versions, in Yemen the heroes of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* were praised more for their shrewdness and wiliness than for their feats of arms. These were themes that harked back to pre-Islamic times, and the noble and chivalric

deeds that appealed to the Mediterranean world and that became characteristic also of European folk epics and cycles such as the King Arthur tales were fewer.

An interesting feature of several of the Arab epics is that the leading hero Abu Zayd is often said to have been "black"—in spite of the fact that the stories evolved in areas where blacks of African origin were a small minority.

Equally interesting are the portrayals of women. In epic

The Birth of Abu Zayd

Recorded by Abderrahman Guiga,
circa 1925, Takrouna, Tunisia

From this marriage with Amir Rizq a daughter was born to whom the Sharif gave the name Shiha. Then the young woman ceased to bear children.

Desperate, one day she said to herself: "My last hope is to offer a plate of couscous to the birds of the air. Perhaps they will intercede with Allah on my behalf, so that he gives me a male child."

after epic, women participate in tribal councils, decide policy and even lead troops. The main heroine of the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, Jazia, for example, is not only befittingly beautiful, but she also often shares power with Abu Zayd, and she is considered as "one whose words are worth hearing." There are episodes in which she takes up weapons to defend the tribe and even, in one version, to revenge herself on Dhi'ab for divorcing her, by challenging him to a duel—in which she dies.

Other popular episodes, however, tended to reinforce the medieval view, shared by the Christian as well as the Muslim world, of women as dangerous. For example, in one episode, a Berber princess seduces Yunis, a young Hilali, and keeps him prisoner in Tunis, "the city of high towers." In another, Jazia lets down her magnificent hair so that it blows against the thorn bushes because she knows that Khalifa loves her too much to make her cut it, and the resulting delay while it is disentangled is enough to give her own people (the Bani Hilal) the advantage in the attack.

Although many of the historical events were adapted to suit local tastes in plot, the basic storyline remains fact: The Bani Hilal were Arab Bedouin pastoralists who brought with them Islam—then still a fairly new religion—to an area that was predominantly ethnic Berber farmers, and religiously largely Jewish and Christian. The conflicts that resulted were recorded also by authors such as Ibn Khaldun. Towns and irrigation systems were destroyed; olive groves and orchards were cut down

She set down the platter deep the desert and hid herself. The first bird to alight on the plate was a crow. At once, she uttered this prayer:

"Allah, my Lord, you who save the beasts from certain death by making the rain fall
Give me a son, just like this bird and with the same virtues
So that strokes of his sword will cause the blood of his enemies to flow."

Her prayers were heard and she gave birth to a child blacker than the night, but with the same features as a white child.

for firewood or killed off by goats; and good arable land was overgrazed. Much of the area between Tripoli in Libya and Tunis, and west into Algeria, which was once a breadbasket for the Roman Empire, lay abandoned. The conflict between the original inhabitants, who, at least along the coast, lived in cities or were settled farmers sharing pan-Mediterranean culture, and the nomads seizing land for grazing their herds was reflected repeatedly—although in different versions and from different points of view.

For example, one episode relates how the members of the tribe are starving—they need water and pasture. Khalifa al-Zanati—in this version the elderly Berber ruler of Tunis—has heard of Jazia's beauty and demands her as the price for allowing the tribes to enter his lands with their herds. Her husband Dhi'ab is persuaded to save the tribe



Horses, from Romance to Race Track

In keeping with the Bedouin origins of the *Sirat*, horses are among the few possessions described. Many feuds and quarrels in the tale are connected to prized mounts. Foremost is Dhi'ab's white mare, al-Khadra. In some versions, when al-Khadra is killed in the duel with Khalifa al-Zanati, Dhi'ab holds a magnificent funeral for her and orders a barrow raised over her grave.

It is thus fitting that the first translation into English of an episode of the *Bani Hilal* was the *The Celebrated Romance of the Stealing of the Mare*, translated in 1892 by Lady Anne Blunt and put into verse by her husband, Wilfrid: It was they who also founded the Crabbet Arabian Stud, and their importation of Arab horses became responsible for most of the world's top thoroughbred bloodlines today.

by divorcing her. Jazia goes to live with Khalifa and bears him two children, but at last her longing for the desert overwhelms her and, by a series of tricks, she escapes and returns to the Bani Hilal.

There is another version of the same story, but told presumably for a Berber audience: Khalifa is a young and handsome Berber warrior from Tunis who is out searching for lost camels when he encounters Jazia and other young women of the Bani Hilal. She falls in love with him and arranges a meeting place. When he arrives, he is challenged by the men of the Bani Hilal who had also asked for her hand and whom she had refused. Khalifa fights them all, defeats them and flees with Jazia's help. They marry and have two children. Nevertheless, cultural differences eventually lead to quarrels, and she returns to the tribe, where she marries Dhi'ab.

The location of stories also shifts. In the earliest versions, Khalifa al-Zanati is not Tunisian, but a Himyarite from Yemen and, more strangely yet, the offspring of a man and a female *djinn* (spirit). As such, he can only be killed by a thrust directly into his eyes—a detail that survived even when the story moved to North Africa, where it was a favorite motif in the much later Tunisian prints illustrating the episode. In yet other accounts, on the way out of Najd, Jazia is abducted by a sorcerer and rescued by Dhi'ab, whom she does not initially marry because of his low birth; in North African versions, however, the episode takes place in the Maghrib and the sorcerer is a merchant.

Traditionally, the *Sirat Bani Hilal* was performed with alternating passages in verse and prose, and often with a musical accompaniment, as described by Edward Lane, who lived in Cairo in the early 19th century. There were two types of reciters: those who sat in cafés and who might use a manuscript, and itinerants who were generally illiterate. Different names are used for the performers in different countries: *sha'ir* in Egypt (or *rawi* for

the more formal storytellers); *hakawati* in Syria and Palestine; *qisa khoun* in Iraq; and *fdawi* in Tunisia.

Although the recitation of stories such as the *Sirat Bani Hilal* is most often associated with urban cafés or with entertainment on festive occasions such as Ramadan or weddings, the older tradition also persisted: Isma'il Pasha, while campaigning in the Sudan in the mid-19th century, is reported to have had episodes recited to his troops to inspire them to courage and chivalry.

Bertrand Thomas, who crossed Saudi Arabia's great Rub' al-khali (Empty Quarter) in 1930 and 1931, made frequent references to the Bani Hilal, both the historic tribe and the *Sirat*, and he observed Bedouin of that region regarding it to be history. He wrote that episodes were still being told around campfires. Another Englishman, Charles Doughty, noted the same in *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, published in 1888. He mentioned being shown a rock-cut figure in Najd that was Abu Zayd and "beside him is a lesser, perhaps female figure, which they call 'Alia his wife.'"

It is very hard for anyone to tell to what extent the *Sirat Bani Hilal*—or, indeed, any of the famous folk epics—still exist today in oral form. Alfred Bel, who recorded tales in





Algeria in 1902, said that the tradition was already in decline and that the stories should be collected as soon as possible. Since then the situation has only deteriorated further.

In his book *The Last Storytellers* (Tauris, 2011), Richard Hamilton wrote, “[T]here were 18 storytellers in Marrakech [in the 1970s]; now there are only half a dozen, and they are old men who have almost retired, leaving no apprentices.” And these were not, Hamilton recorded, men who knew the *Sirat Bani Hilal* by heart, but men who read aloud, over many months, a very long, printed version, translating it into local dialect, for their audience was not only mostly illiterate but also did not understand spoken classical Arabic.

There are numerous reasons for this decline: the sheer effort in learning one of the long, complicated texts; the insecurity of the work, which traditionally was not prestigious, especially for the wandering storytellers; changes in wedding customs (a popular storytelling occasion); and, of course, the now nearly omnipresent challenge from television in cafés.

Indeed, the people who seem most interested in sampling “local culture” are tourists, but they typically do not know Arabic, and their attention span is brief. Some large hotels have hired men to put on picturesque costumes and give 10-minute excerpts of popular episodes with a musical accompaniment and perhaps a translator—but this has little relation to the original art form.

Just as the tales of the Knights of the Round Table are no longer sung to the harp in baronial halls in Britain but

are known through books, films, television series and even videogames, so with the *Sirat Bani Hilal*. They have been preserved in films—for example, in the Egyptian production *Abu Zayd al-Hilali*, with Jazia played by Omar Sharif’s wife, Faten Hamama; the cartoon strip that appeared in the Tunisian newspaper *Biladi*; or a number of excerpts available on YouTube.

Nevertheless, renewed interest in traditional culture in the Arab world, research by scholars such as the late distinguished Egyptian poet Abdel Rahman el-Abrudi, who collected versions of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* in Egypt and across North Africa, as well as initiatives such as that of UNESCO and the *Sirat Bani Hilal* Digital Archive at Cornell University in New York state, all ensure that the epic that entertained the Arab world for the better part of a millennium will be, if not continued, at least preserved. 🌐



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STREET FOOD

ISTANBUL STYLE

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED by
ERIC HANSEN

Late one night during the winter of 1973, on a wind-blown, dimly lit street corner not far from Sirkeci train station, I walked through a light rain and noticed steam wafting from an open-air food stall. A tall, vertical spit, layered with roasting meat, was illuminated by a single bare light bulb as a man with an enormous black moustache wielded a long, shiny knife and what looked like a small stainless steel dust pan. He sliced, scooped and assembled ingredients and seasonings with astonishing speed and then wrapped them up in large cones of flat bread. A half dozen eager customers were lined up, and I joined them.

Within minutes, I took my first bite of *döner*. It was like nothing I had ever tasted before. Fragrant, crisp, succulent morsels of marinated meat combined with an exquisite medley of flavors from chopped tomatoes, cumin, parsley, red onions, green chili peppers, pickled cucumbers, salt and pepper, and other ingredients I couldn't begin to guess.

The next day, when I told a Turkish friend about my discovery, he laughed and told me that döner in Istanbul was as common as hotdogs in New York city. I didn't care. It was my introduction to Istanbul street food, and that first bite tasted like a delicacy prepared in the kitchens of the Topkapı Palace, fit for an Ottoman Sultan.

Over the next few days, I wandered the waterfront neighborhood of Eminönü sampling street food in and around the 17th-century Spice Bazaar. I tried golden sundried apricots stuffed with walnuts; charcoal-roasted corn on the cob; fresh cow's-milk yogurt covered in wild-bee honey; a cheese cured in a goatskin; roasted chestnuts still hot to the touch. I even tried a grilled fish sandwich prepared on a brazier perched on a cardboard box at the edge of a parking lot. I was captivated by how Istanbul street food was, it seemed, everywhere. It was fresh, simply prepared, delicious and inexpensive. I left Istanbul a few days later wondering what other delicacies might be cooking in the backstreets. Forty-two years later, I returned to find out.



Istanbul is famous for chaotic, adrenalin-inducing pedestrian traffic that ebbs and flows throughout the city day and night. Street food is tailor-made for this human tide. Office workers and construction crews, shoppers and shopkeepers, university students and schoolchildren: All have their favorite vendors, and all know where to find them at different times of the day.

For the vendors, success is often determined by location, and this is why they often set up strategically next to bustling food markets, ferry boat terminals, and street corners and laneways with heavy foot traffic. There is nothing chic, trendy or fashionable about the stalls. The fare itself is all about familiar, favorite flavors and traditional foods for people on the move with only a few minutes to spare at a cart or at an open-air table shared with strangers. Street food culture is a part of the daily lives of the more than 15 million inhabitants of Istanbul. Each develops favorites at an early age and learns to recognize quality, which depends on fresh ingredients and a proper balance of flavors. A vendor who cannot meet these high standards will not be in business for long.

To help me sample as many of the classic street foods as possible and find the best of them, I joined forces with my friend the literary agent Nazlı Gürkaş, a longtime resident and, as it turned out, a street-food sleuth of





From food carts to open-air eateries such as this one in the central neighborhood of Eminönü, Istanbul's street cuisine draws from throughout Turkey as well as the wider Middle East, North Africa, Europe and beyond. Lower: Start the day with sesame seed-encrusted *simit* and sweet black tea; later on, try the city's best-known street dish, the iconic marinated mix of lamb and beef, *döner kebab* ("turning roast"), opposite.

the highest order. Together we visited both the European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus to explore open-air markets, working-class neighborhoods, thoroughfares, sidewalks, alleyways and tiny storefront shops with walk-up window service. We tracked down itinerant vendors, such as the cucumber man who runs his business from a homemade wooden wheelbarrow on the Galata Bridge, but we failed to cross paths with a legendary pomegranate juice-maker who was constantly on the move with his pushcart, following a schedule known only to himself, or so it seemed.

Nazlı explained how Istanbul street food has dishes from distant regions of Turkey and broadly reflects the cultural diversity of a city that has been at the crossroads of four civilizations over more than 3,000 years. The city was one of the great centers of the spice trade between Asia and Europe, and by the time of the Muslim conquest of the city by Sultan Mehmet II in 1453, Istanbul had already combined culinary traditions from Central Asia, Anatolia, Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, southern Russia, Persia, the Middle East and North Africa.





Shortly after dawn on our first morning, we stepped onto the street where we were enveloped by the fresh smell of cobblestones washed by the night's rain. The air was heavy with the fragrances of deep-roasted coffee and baked bread. Salty sea air mingled with the smoke of charcoal fires and the heady scents of an open-air flower market. A cruise liner sounded its horn, a tram rumbled by, and we could see street food vendors setting up their tables and wheeled carts. Istanbul was waking up, and for the next 10 days we wandered, sampling and searching for the best of what the vendors had to offer.

Of course, no two people in Istanbul will ever agree on exactly the same list of top street foods—or where to find the best—but as a result of our discoveries, here is a sampling we agreed is a “must-try” list.

Simit

A bagel-like, twisted ring of chewy bread, flavored with molasses and covered with toasted sesame seeds, *simit* is an Istanbul staple. Dating back to at least 1525, it is still baked throughout many regions of the former Ottoman Empire. It is found at kiosks, in wheeled food carts and stacked high on trays perched atop the heads of its vendors. The very best simit? We found ours at Galata Simitçisi (“Galata Simit-maker”), a bakery run by Emir Özdemir. If you go, sit on a chair out front to eat it hot from the oven, and order sweet black tea from across the street.

① *Galata Simitçisi, Mumhane Cadessi No. 47/A, Karaköy (Beyoğlu)*



Börek

According to some food scholars, *börek* was developed by the Turks of Central Asia, while other experts claim that a Byzantine baked dish of dough and cheese called *plakountas tetyromenous* is the common ancestor of not just modern day börek, but also baklava. Börek is baked in thin layers of dough called *yufka*, which is similar to phyllo dough, filled with an assortment of ingredients such as *kaşar* or feta cheese, spinach, potatoes, minced meats and vegetables. There are many different types of börek, but the two most commonly found on the street are *su boreği* (“water börek”), which often comes filled with spinach and feta cheese layered on flat trays, and *kol böreği* (“arm börek”), which is rolled up in tubes of yufka before being baked. Everyone holds opinions, usually strong ones, about the best type of börek and where to find it, but after sampling probably more than two dozen places, my first choice is börek filled with cheese, minced beef and walnuts. Two excellent places:

②A *Merkez Börekçisi, Mühürdar Caddesi 15, Caferaga (Kadıköy)*

②B *Çengelköy Börekçisi, Prof. Dr. Beynün Akyavaş Caddesi No. 104/A-1, Güzeltepe (Üsküdar)*



Menemen

This is a popular Turkish breakfast dish of tomatoes, garlic, onion, oregano and green peppers served with egg, all made to order. It is often brought to the table bubbling hot in a metal skillet. A pleasant place to try *menemen* is at the scenic waterfront establishment Çengelköy Çınaraltı.

③ *Çengelköy Çınaraltı, Çınarlı Çami Sokağı No. 4, Çengelköy (Üsküdar)*

Pide

The boat-shaped “Turkish pizza” has many legitimate claims to its origin, but the style sold most often in Istanbul comes from Samsun. *Pide* is like a perfect thin-crust pizza: crunchy on the edge and chewy at the center. Pide is made to order with toppings such as *kaşar* cheese, *sucuk* (a dry garlic sausage), *pastırma*



(a dry pastrami), spicy minced lamb or beef, tomatoes, eggs, roasted red peppers and long green chilies. The finished pide is often dabbed with butter and sprinkled with flecks of citrusy-flavored sumac. A centrally located place to try high-quality pide is between Sirkeci train station and the Topkapı Palace at Hocapaşa Pidecisi, where Davut Usta (master Davut) has been serving locals and visitors for nearly 30 years.

4 *Hocapaşa Pidecisi, Ankara Caddesi No. 19, Sirkeci (Fatih)*

Köfte

Charcoal-grilled, spiced lamb meatballs prepared with onion, garlic, parsley, black pepper, cumin, oregano and paprika: No one knows how many places in Istanbul serve *köfte*, but in a city that takes its meatballs seriously, we found one of the best places is the popular, hole-in-the-wall Meşhur Filibe Köftecisi, where five generations of family ownership have been refining the art of köfte for 122 years. The only other thing on the menu is *piyaz*, a salad of sliced onion, tomato, cilantro and white beans with a dressing of lemon juice and olive oil topped with a sprinkling of sumac. Both dishes are extraordinary in their perfect balance of aromatic flavors, textures and tastes.

5 *Meşhur Filibe Köftecisi, Ankara Cadessi No. 34, Sirkeci (Fatih)*



Midye dolma

Found often on street carts throughout the city, *midye dolma* are steamed mussels on the half shell stuffed with pine nuts, currants and rice seasoned with cinnamon, black pepper, chili flakes, parsley, dill and a generous squeeze of lemon juice. The fish market in Kadıköy is an excellent place to sample this delicacy at it freshest.

6 *Kadıköy Balık Pazarı (Fish Market), Caferağa (Kadıköy)*

Yoğurt

At any time of day, it's a refreshing and healthy snack. We found our favorite on the waterfront in the old Greek fishing village of Kanlıca, on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. Its slightly tangy, Bulgarian-style yoğurt comes with a choice of three toppings: powdered sugar, honey or rich, thick berry jam. The tree-shaded, open-air garden right next to Kanlıca pier is the perfect setting to watch the boat traffic.

7 *Ismailağa-Asırlık Kanlıca Yoğurtçusu (Beykoz)*





Tantuni

This is a wrap (*dürüm*) of thinly sliced, spiced beef or lamb that is first steamed in salted water and then sautéed in cottonseed oil with onions, parsley, black pepper, hot chili flakes, sumac and green peppers. It is topped with fresh lettuce and tomatoes and then rolled up in flatbread that is heated on top of the ingredients as they cook. *Tantuni* has humble origins: It was formerly considered to be a “poor man’s food” because it was originally prepared with lung, fat and offal. According to 46-year-old Nevzat Koçak, chef at Baazen Tantuni, the dish made its way from Syria via the Turkish south coastal city of Mersin. In his 35 years of kitchen work, he estimates he has made more than 3 million tantuni.



Baazen Tantuni, Levent Cadessi, No. 1, Levent



Beşalti Kirvem Tantuni ve Künefe, Mumhane Caddesi No. 35/B, Karaköy Mahallesi (Beyoğlu)

Döner Kebap

Literally, “turning roast,” from *döner* (to turn) and *kebab* (roast). In recent decades, this has become the most commonly known Turkish street food worldwide. Just as I had first seen it in 1973, döner is prepared on a vertical spit that roasts stacked layers of meat. The quality of döner can vary greatly depending on the meat (usually a mix of beef and lamb) as well as the *usta* (master). Döner is served either wrapped in pide bread with tomatoes, onion and other ingredients, or tucked in a round crusty bread roll. Karadeniz Pide ve Döner Salonu is the place to go for Istanbul’s very best.



Karadeniz Pide ve Döner Salonu, Mumcu Bakkal Sokak No. 6, Sinanpaşa (Beşiktaş)

Balık-ekmek

Literally “fish-bread,” this is the famous grilled-fish sandwich of Istanbul. First-time visitors usually try *balık-ekmek* at the floating boats of Eminönü moored at one end of the Galata Bridge, but these often serve imported frozen mackerel from Norway. At the ferry stops further up the Golden Horn, or at the temporary

stalls in the parking lot on the Karaköy side of the Galata Bridge, you will find better. (Note: It is traditionally accompanied by *şalgam suyu*, pickled purple carrot juice—which you have to try at least once.)

10 Eminönü or Karaköy side of Galata Bridge

Dürüm

This is the Turkish wrap. At its best, *dürüm* is a lightly grilled piece of flatbread (*lavaş*) smeared with juices from the cooking meat and red pepper paste, and then filled with spicy minced chicken or beef cooked on skewers over a charcoal fire. *Tavuk şiş* (chicken) or *Adana kebab* (spicy minced beef) are two favorites. *Dürüm* comes rolled up with chopped tomatoes, parsley, onions and a sprinkling of sumac. A well-prepared *dürüm* far exceeds the sum of its parts. *Dürümzade* is the most famous vendor in Istanbul.

11 *Dürümzade*, near the corner of Kamer Hatun Caddesi and Topçekenler Sokak, Hüseyinağa (Beyoğlu)

Lahmacun

From the Arabic *lahm ajin*, “meat with dough,” *lahmacun* looks like a thin-crust pizza topped with a smear of finely minced meat, onions, cumin and *salça*, a paste of tomatoes and red peppers. As soon as the lahmacun is pulled from the brick oven on a wooden paddle, it is brought to the table piping hot. The customer sprinkles parsley, lemon juice and sumac on it and then rolls it up while still warm and pliable. For this, these neighboring shops in Kadıköy tied for the best.

12A Halil Lahmacun, Güneşli Bahçe Sokağı 26A, Caferağa (Kadıköy)

12B Çiya Sofrası, Güneşli Bahçe Sokağı 43, Caferağa (Kadıköy)



“ ”

Familiar flavors reflect Istanbul's more than 3,000 years as a crossroads of civilizations.



Hamsi

The famous Turkish anchovy (*engraulis encrasicolus*) has been praised in folk poems recited by itinerant storytellers along the Black Sea coast since ancient times, according to food historian Alan Davidson in his book *Mediterranean Seafood* (Penguin, 1972). *Hamsi* is a seasonal fish, available from mid-fall until around February, depending on the weather. Dipped in flour or cornmeal, fried, salted and then drizzled with a squeeze of lemon juice, it offers street cart finger food at its very best. We found excellent hamsi at cafes and street stalls along the edge of the bustling fish market in Kadıköy. Nazlı explained that locals favor hamsi from the cold waters of the Black Sea, north of the Bosphorus, over hamsi from the warmer waters of the Sea of Marmara, at the strait's southern end.

 **13** Kadıköy Balık Pazarı (Fish Market), Caferağa (Kadıköy)

Mısır

Grilled or boiled corn on the cob. Sprinkled with salt and served on a piece of green corn husk. Found everywhere, especially during summer.

Turşu

Turkish people are wild about crisp pickled vegetables. These can include whole garlic, carrots, beets, peppers, corn on the cob, decoratively wrapped-up cabbage, green beans and many more. The window displays alone are spectacular, as clear jars show off vibrantly colored edibles. Try either of these venerable pickle shops.

 **14A** Asrı Turşucu, Ağa Hamam Caddesi No. 29/1, Cihangir (Beyoğlu)

 **14B** Meşhur Özcan Turşuları, Güneşli Bahçe Sokağı 7, Osmanağa (Kadıköy)

Kokoreç

Spicy, spit-roasted lamb sweetbreads, neck meat, offal and other specialty cuts wrapped in small intestines of lamb, *kokoreç* is roasted on a horizontal spit and then sliced into bits and cooked on a griddle with onions, tomatoes, green peppers, cumin, salt, pepper and other spices that vary from vendor to vendor. Generous portions of kokoreç are piled on a slightly toasted white bread roll. Excellent stalls with succulent and flavorful kokoreç are everywhere, especially near the main bazaars and shopping areas.

15 *Kral Kokoreç, Büyük Postane Caddesi No. 50, Sirkeci (Fatih)*

Kestane

The fragrance of charcoal-roasted chestnuts is one of the most evocative smells associated with the markets of Istanbul. Available for much of the year throughout the city, especially during fall and winter.

Kumpir

Baked potato stuffed with any or all of these ingredients: sliced hot dogs, sweet corn kernels, pickled beet root, butter, yogurt, grated kaşar cheese, grilled or fresh sliced mushrooms, green peas, sliced black and green olives, grilled red peppers and steamed carrot slices. *Kumpir*, too, is found in shops and food stalls throughout the city, but the best place to try it is along the waterfront of Ortaköy neighborhood in Beşiktaş, where Kumpir Sokağı (Baked Potato Street) was named for good reason. Although the culinary elites of Istanbul disdain kumpir, the crowds of loyal customers it draws means it is well on its way into the city's polyglot pantheon of street food classics.

Even after sampling a couple of dozen dishes each day, we concluded that there was still much work to be done. Even in a few weeks it would be impossible to sample more than a fraction of the food offered on the streets of Istanbul. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of other delicacies to tempt the passerby. Things like *salepi dondurma*, a chewy, elastic ice cream similar to gelato made from powdered orchid tubers; or *nohut dürümü*, a spicy pide wrap from the south-east of Turkey filled with garbanzo beans, onions, peppers and lemon juice; or *içli köfte*, the golden, deep-fried, torpedo-shaped bulgur wheat shells filled with onions, ground meat, parsley and secret spices. And *künefe*. How can I leave out künefe? The sweet, buttery dessert of wiry threads of *kadayıf* or shredded phyllo dough sandwiching a molten layer of salt-free *hatay* cheese all drenched in a syrup of honey and sugar, served piping hot and topped with *kaymak*, the thick cream-top skimmed from the



surface of yogurt, it is finished with a flourish of ground green pistachios.

Clearly, it is time to return to Istanbul to continue the search for these and other streetside wonders.

Afiyet olsun! (Good appetite!)



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THE SULTAN'S FOUNTAIN

Written by AGNIESZKA DOBROWOLSKA

and JAROSŁAW DOBROWOLSKI

Photographed by MATJAŽ KAČIČNIK / NVIC

Underneath the paving where traffic now crawls and honks along Port Sa'id Street in Cairo, until 120 years ago a canal wound through the city, remnant of the ancient waterway that once connected the Nile to the Red Sea. It was filled with water annually during the Nile flood, and thus for eight months of each year, it fed the city's lakes. In the 17th and 18th centuries, when Egypt was under Ottoman rule, the banks of the canal and lakes became fashionable places for the affluent to build residences. Mosques and public buildings, too, graced the seasonal watersides.

Across the canal from the famous mosque dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter Sayida Zeinab, a dual-purpose building was erected just over 250 years ago to house religious charities: a *sabil* (sa-beel) from which free drinking water was distributed, and a *kuttab*, an elementary school. The building is unusual in more than one way. It is one of only two among Cairo's more than 300 historic *sabil-kuttabs* (of which about 70 still survive) that was founded by an Ottoman sultan. Its architecture mixes styles that developed in Istanbul with the local tradition indigenous to Cairo. Most extraordinarily of all, its interior is decorated with some 2,500 blue-and-white wall tiles that depict flowers, landscapes and scenes of rural life in the Netherlands: Why did a ruler residing above the waters of the Golden Horn decide to use tiles painted in Amsterdam to adorn his charity along a canal in Cairo?

In 2008 and 2009, during our involvement in the Dutch-



*Pious deed of the sultan,
son of the sultan, Sultan Mustafa Khan
May God perpetuate his reign /
[Built in the] year 1173.*

—Translation of the inscription in Arabic
on the *sabil-kuttab* of Sultan Mustafa III

led conservation of the building, we had the opportunity to listen to how this *sabil-kuttab* answered questions about how and why it came into being because, indeed, historic buildings can speak in many ways, if we wish to listen.

What exactly was this structure, at once typical and unique? *Sabil-kuttabs* are Cairo's hallmark contri-

bution to Islamic architecture. *Sabils* offering free drinking water can be found throughout historic Muslim lands, but in Cairo, where potable water had to be bought from water-carriers because wells were brackish, they were a particularly welcome charity. Similarly, *kuttabs* endowed as charities to care for orphans are numerous, but it was in Cairo that patrons conjoined the *kuttab* and the *sabil* into a single building. Funding one was a noble act of benevolence, but also a way to commemorate deceased family members, or to advertise one's wealth and status.

When the Ottoman army under Sultan Selim Yavuz entered Cairo in 1517, the Mamluk sultanate of Egypt that had been a regional power for more than 250 years was terminated. The country became another province within the Ottoman empire, ruled by a governor appointed from Istanbul for short-term tenure. Although commissions ceased for magnificent buildings like those erected by the Mamluk sultans, Cairo nevertheless continued its own Mamluk-influenced building tradition. Indeed, many of the *sabil-kuttabs* are good examples of how Mamluk-style architecture continued with very little change. In Ottoman-

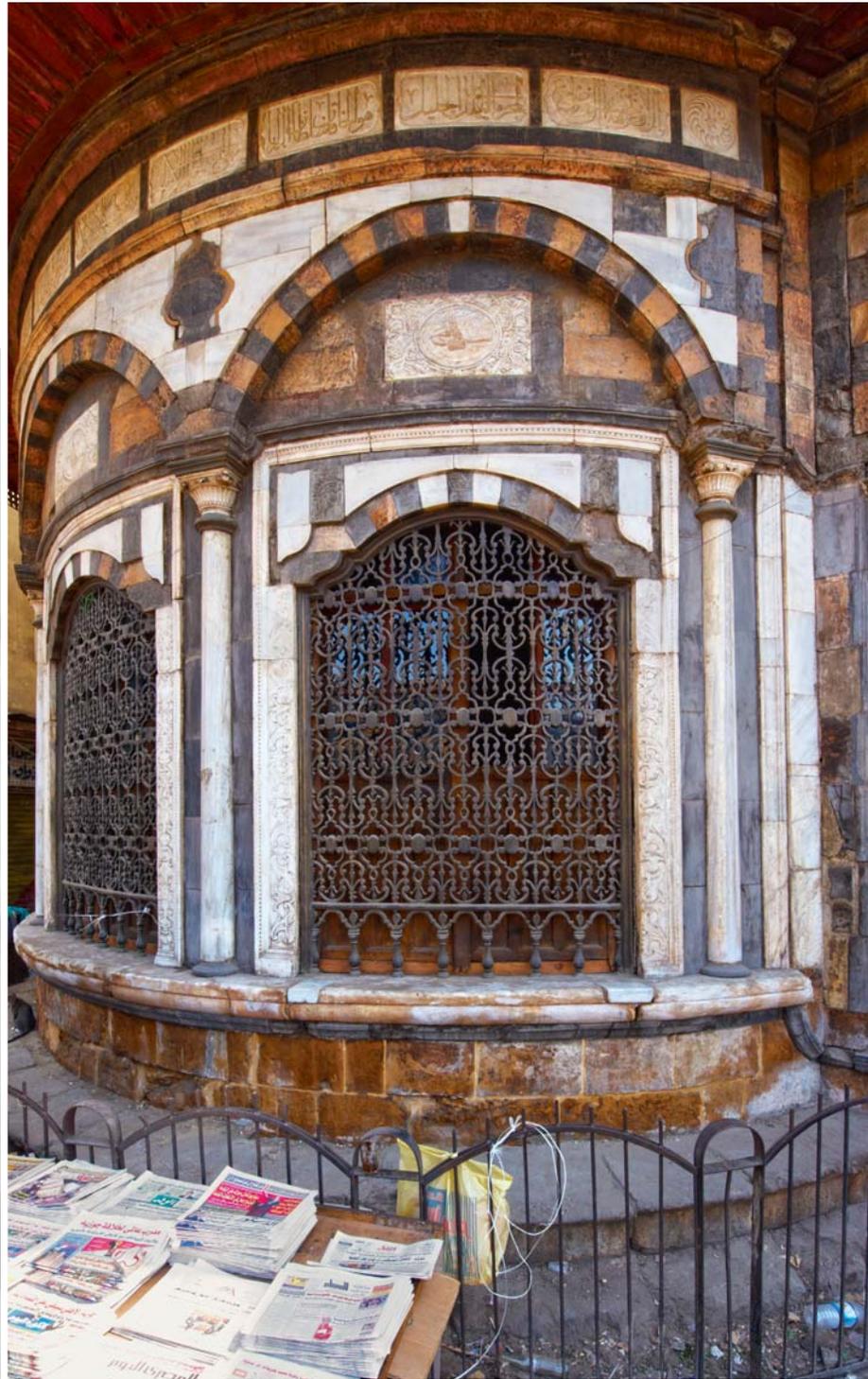
ruled 16th- and 17th-century Cairo, they were practically indistinguishable from their Mamluk-period predecessors. Not only the overall arrangement and decorative motifs remained unchanged, but also building techniques were the same, down to the standard size of masonry blocks of the local limestone. By the middle of the 18th century, however, strong Turkish influence started to shape buildings erected in the Egyptian capital, such as the 1744 *sabil-kuttab* of Abd al-Rahman Katkhuda, which remains a famous landmark in its prominent location where the medieval city's main street forks.

Such buildings displayed a style that blended local tradition with ideas borrowed from Istanbul, and the *sabil-kuttab* of Sultan Mustafa III is a product of this time. Its façade is curved, like in many contemporary *sabils* of the imperial capital, where “Ottoman baroque” was the order of the day. Also following Istanbul, and unlike Mamluk-style buildings where decoration was carved in the structural limestone masonry, the façade is covered in marble

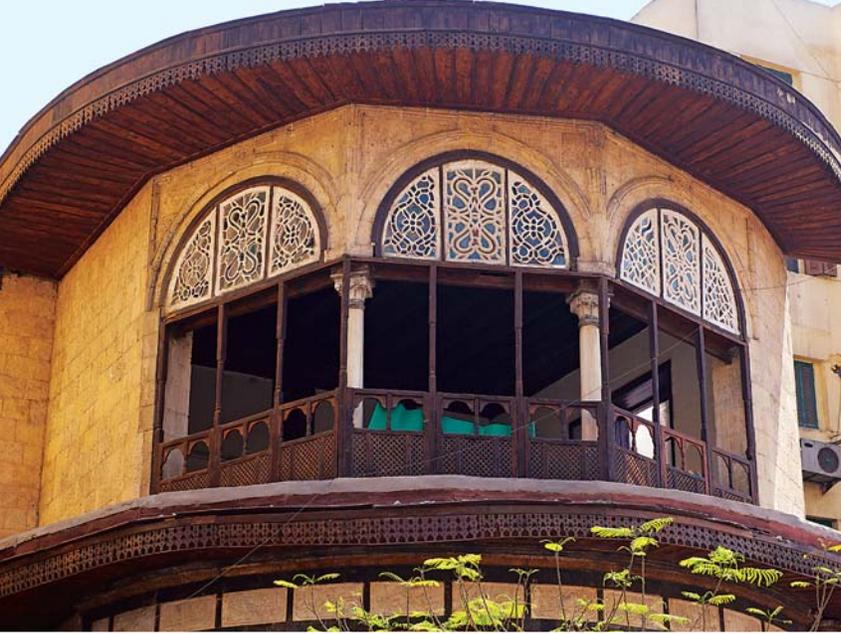
and decorated with typically Ottoman motifs, including the *tuğra*, the calligraphic emblem of the Sultan's name.

However, it is still functionally a *sabil-kuttab*, a type of building unique to Cairo. In the interior, geometric mosaics of multicolor marble that could just as well decorate a Mamluk-period building appear alongside Ottoman-style painted ceilings and friezes. But the most surprising feature of the *sabil* room are the arrays of blue-and-white, painted, square Dutch tiles that cover the upper parts of the walls. Some are

LOWER: ALAMY / RIGHT: AGNIESZKA DOBROWOLSKA



Left: Signaling his sultan's interest in the science of the late 18th century, artist Konstantin Kapıdağlı set a globe, books and a telescope below his portrait of Ottoman Sultan Mustafa III. *Right:* Marble veneer carved with arabesque and lintels of stone in alternating colors frame the three large, gridded windows of the *sabil*, or public fountain, of Mustafa III. His *tuğra*, or official calligraphic seal, is set above each window. Of the more than 300 *sabil-kuttabs* that once existed in Cairo, today about 70 remain.



From top: The windows of the *kuttab*, or school, on the floor above the *sabil*, were partially shaded. The Dutch tiles inside the *sabil* covered the upper walls and arches. Over time, some tiles fell off, and the remainder have been restored. To offer water to passersby, attendants dipped mugs into the basins below each window and handed them through the window grilles. The *sabil*'s water source was its cistern, which was filled annually when the Nile flood flowed into the canal that formerly ran alongside the building.



decorated with hyacinths or roses, and others show landscape scenes that offer cameos of Dutch daily life. Cities, villages, bell towers, gates, castles, bridges, houses and windmills sit in landscapes filled with trees, lakes, ponds and canals, fields and meadows; distant ships sail the sea and birds fly among the clouds while people go about their business. Tiny figures of men and women work in the fields, ride on horses, hunt with dogs, fish,

row boats, travel in carts and coaches, milk or herd their farm animals, exchange greetings, engage in conversations and even subtly flirt; they eat and drink, or just rest in the shade. This display of figurative painting is particularly surprising in a building erected to house an Islamic religious charity; however, people who received water from the *sabil* would not normally enter the room. They would have been outside, looking in only through bronze window grilles as they received their brass mugs full of water, from which they would drink and hand the mug back inside. They would not see the details of the paintings, but likely they could



make out a pattern of blue and white panels. Because the floral tiles look predominantly white, and the landscape ones are heavily blue, Sultan Mustafa's builders used them to form decorative bands and panels: They were apparently more interested in the overall color scheme than in the individual pictures.

How did 2,500 painted tiles produced in Amsterdam end up Cairo? The Dutch scholar Hans Theunissen pieced together evidence that he published in 2006.

In October 1756, a year before the accession of Mustafa III to the throne and three years before the completion of his *sabil-kuttab* in Cairo, his predecessor, Sultan



Not far from the site of the sabil-kuttab of Mustafa III, a lithograph published in 1821 in *Egypte Moderne* by A.F. Lemaître shows a few of the villas along the Khalig al-Misri canal. *Right*: Highly fashionable in the 17th century, this hand-painted “Delft blue” tile from the sabil-kuttab shows a scene along a Dutch canal.



Osman III, ordered Ottoman authorities in Belgrade to send to Istanbul 12 crates of ceramic tiles that had been bought in Vienna for decoration of imperial buildings. The intermediary in this purchase was an English merchant in Istanbul. The tiles were almost certainly Dutch, because Vienna was a center for trade in Dutch tiles both for local use and onward to Poland and Russia. The Netherlands was the uncontested leader in production of wall tiles at the time.

Theunissen asserted that these were the tiles that eventually ended up in Cairo. During Osman III’s reign, Dutch tiles identical with the handful of rose-flower ones that can be seen on the walls in the sabil of Mustafa III were used in the Topkapı palace

in Istanbul. This would account for how few tiles showing this motif reached Cairo—because many had been removed from the lot and used in Istanbul. Sultan Osman III was near the end of both his reign and his life, and it is likely that Mustafa III inherited from his predecessor the set of “Delft blue” wall tiles.

This was a prestigious commodity. By the 18th century, İznik had lost its supremacy as the leading production center to Kütahya, and both output and quality had declined in the western Anatolian pottery workshops. While walls flowering with magnificent İznik tiles were the pride of Turkish mosques and palaces in the 17th century, by Mustafa III’s time they are absent even from imperial foundations. The “Delft blue” was the best-quality product available, and the Sultan had good reasons to wish to impress his subjects in Cairo.



- 1 Site of the sabil-kuttab of Mustafa III
- 2 Mosque of Sayida Zeinab
- 3 Khalig al-Misri canal
- 4 Nile River
- 5 Roda Island

[View on Google Maps:](#)



In Ottoman Egypt, resurgent power of the Mamluks advanced steadily and at the expense of the authority of the sultan’s governor. Though no longer officially ruling the realm, Mamluks held onto key positions in the administration, and their private troops allied with different sections of the Ottoman garrison: By the 18th century, the only way for the governor to exercise power was to align with one Mamluk faction against another.

These rivalries were expressed also in architecture. For example, the buildings funded in the 1740s by ‘Abd al-Rahman Katkhuda, commander of the Ottoman janissaries (elite soldiers) in

Left: This detail from Sebastian Münster’s 17th-century map of Cairo is based on an original drawn in 1549, 210 years before the sabil-kuttab of Mustafa III was built. Nevertheless, the landmark’s future location can be determined clearly.



Two types of square tiles were used among the 2,500 in the sabil-kuttab: Vividly varied, often complex scenes of Dutch life set in a circle with a floral motif in each corner, and tiles with a single hyacinth motif that varied only slightly from hand-painted tile to tile. Their placement, *lower*, created decorative bands and panels.

Cairo, were ostentatious in their opulence. In 1750 Sultan Mahmud parried by ordering his official in Cairo to build in his name a sabil-kuttab on the bank of the canal, the first in the city with a fashionable, rounded façade, and to decorate it in marble and even a few Dutch tiles. In 1753 local dignitary Ibrahim Katkhuda Mustahfizan bested him with an ever bigger and no less splendid one nearby. (It stands today, dilapidated.)

Little wonder, then, that in 1759, when Mustafa III sought to impress his Egyptian subjects with a reminder that he was their imperial sovereign, he chose to erect a sabil-kuttab of the highest design and craftsmanship. At the time, Dutch tiles were precisely such an impressive



commodity; moreover, by choosing a location just across the canal from one of the city's most famous mosques, in clear sight of countless people, he added that he was not only the temporal ruler as sultan, but also the religious leader as caliph.

Approaching Sultan Mustafa III's sabil-kuttab as the conservation work progressed, we would walk along Port Sa'id Street packed with Korean cars and past shops and stalls selling Chinese toys, Bangladeshi-made clothing, Italian jewelry, Danish cheeses, canned fish from Thailand and apples from Washington state. Entering the building, we would often ask ourselves, how

A Gift of Water, a Gift of Knowledge

To this day, the approximately 70 sabil-kuttabs still standing define much of the character of historic Cairo. They began as a constant feature in the mosque-madrassa complexes built in the city by Mamluk rulers and princes from the 14th century on, maintained by money from *awqaf*, or religious endowments. A sabil room was

always located in a corner of the building for accessibility and ventilation. Through openings in grilles set in huge windows, people received from attendants mugs of water drawn from an underground cistern filled annually during the Nile flood. Above the sabil room, children learned to read and write in a spacious loggia of arches supported on marble columns and shaded by large, decorative awnings.

Later sabil-kuttabs were built

as stand-alone structures. By Ottoman times they had become a favorite way for wealthy patrons—including women—to publicly express pious benevolence. They fell out of use in the 19th century with the arrival of public schools and residential piped water. Nowadays, although nobody erects sabil-kuttabs anymore, on the streets of Cairo one can still obtain a free drink of fresh water from any of the numerous water-coolers provided to the public as charity.

From Baghdad to Amsterdam

Around year 800, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid received a large gift of luxurious Chinese pottery that included early examples of porcelain. Seeking to imitate such vessels in the palaces of the Abbasid rulers, Iraqi potters of the ninth century re-invented the art of tin glazing that had flourished in the same lands in ancient Mesopotamia.

In this technique, fired pottery is covered with a liquid tin glaze suspension that forms a hard, opaque, glossy white coat when it is fired once more. If it is painted with suitable pigments before being returned to the kiln, the colors melt into the glaze and are fixed in all their brilliance. (This is a different technique from that used later by the Ottoman potters of İznik, where equally brilliant colors painted on a white pottery body were covered with a transparent lead glaze, as is also the case with porcelain.)

Tin-glazed pottery quickly spread from Iraq to Iran and Egypt, and from there across North Africa

and into Islamic Spain. (Lusterware, with its shining, golden-hued patterns, developed as a spectacular variant.) Tin-glazed pottery became known in medieval Italy, where, under the name *maiolica*, it became an important medium for Renaissance art. Italian craftsmen established the craft in Antwerp, but after the Spanish sacked the city in 1576, many of them moved to Holland. There, business grew as the Dutch East India Company imported blue-on-white Ming porcelain from China that, though popular among the wealthy, remained a luxury out of reach for many in the growing mercantile class.

Europe did not perfect this process until the 1710s. In the meantime, there was great demand for cheaper, locally made, tin-glazed products that resembled the blue-patterned Chinese wares. Often generically called “Delft porcelain,” these wares were neither true porcelain, which is underglaze-decorated, nor were they made only in Delft: There were many centers, and Delft was just the most famous.

The output of the workshops

was prodigious, and wall tiles accounted for a major share of it. These were exported far and wide, even to India, Southeast Asia and the North American colonies. Each of the millions of wall tiles produced over 200 years was hand-painted. This required much skill and a sure hand, because the pigments were applied on a wet surface of tin glaze. No erasures were possible. For speed and efficiency, the outlines were transferred onto the tile using a stencil made from a sheet of paper with a drawing whose contours were pierced with lines of pinholes. When a sponge or a pouch with powdered charcoal was gently pressed against it, charcoal marks were left on the tile, and decorators could use these lines as guides for their fine brushes.

Thus while many pictures were produced from a single stencil, each one differs in details within the same overall composition. Such small differences bear witness to how the decorators brought imagination and creativity to early mass production—results that remain visible today on the walls of Sultan Mustafa III’s *sabil-kuttab*.

much things have really changed in this ever-cosmopolitan city if 250 years ago an Ottoman ruler in Istanbul decided to decorate a building in Cairo not only with Turkish motifs carved in marble from Marmara, but also with wall tiles bought in Austria and produced in the Netherlands using a technique that originated in Iraq? 🌐



Conservation architects **Agnieszka Dobrowolska** and **Jarosław Dobrowolski** are partners in the Cairo-based practice ARCHINOS Architecture (www.archinos.com). In 2008-9 Agnieszka directed conservation of the *sabil-kuttab* of Mustafa III with funding from the Dutch Embassy and the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (nvic). She is also co-author of *Muhammad Ali Pasha and His Sabil* (2004, AUC Press) and author of *The Building Crafts of Cairo* (2005, AUC Press); Jarosław is author of *The Living Stones of Cairo* (2001, AUC Press) and they jointly authored *Heliopolis: Rebirth of the City of the Sun* (2006, AUC Press). Working from Cairo, photographer **Matjaž Kačičnik** documents cultural preservation using traditional and 360-degree panoramic images. His photos appear courtesy of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (nvic).



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Nile-Red Sea canal: M/A 12

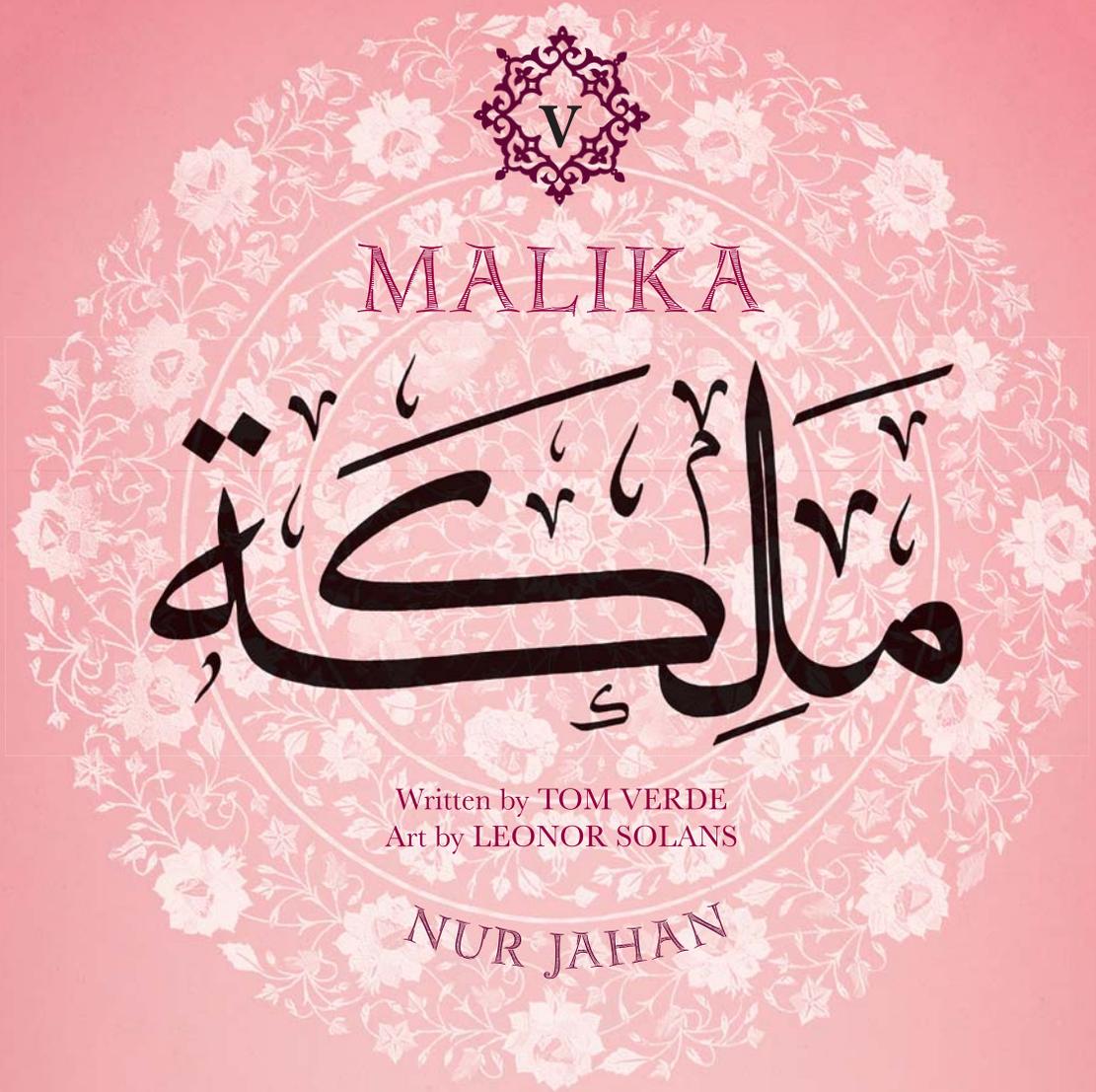
Last Nile flood: M/J 06



For Further Reading:

The Sultan’s Fountain: An Imperial Story of Cairo, Istanbul, and Amsterdam. Agnieszka Dobrowolska and Jarosław Dobrowolski. 2011, AUC Press, 978 977 416 523 8, \$27.95 pb.

From 2007 to 2009, some 100 conservation and restoration professionals gave new life to the *sabil-kuttab*, each one bringing his or her skill to marble, wood, tile, plaster and structure.



From Bangladesh to Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan to Indonesia, Senegal to Turkey, it is not particularly rare in our own times for women in Muslim-majority countries to be appointed and elected to high offices—including heads of state. Nor has it ever been.

During a period stretching back more than 14 centuries to the advent of Islam, women have held positions among many ruling elites, from *malikas*, or queens, to powerful advisors. Some ascended to rule in their own right; others rose as regents for incapacitated husbands or male successors yet too young for a throne. Some proved insightful administrators, courageous military commanders, or both; others differed little from equally flawed, power-seeking male potentates, and they sowed the seeds of their own downfalls.

This series presents some of the most notable historical female leaders of Muslim dynasties, empires and caliphates.

Our fifth story takes place during the early 17th century in the Mughal Empire's royal cities of Agra and Lahore.



It's hard to be all things to all people, but Nur Jahan came very close.

A devoted wife and mother, she was also a politician, a businesswoman, a fashion designer and trendsetter, a developer and garden planner, a philanthropist devoted to women, a battlefield commander and even a tiger-hunting sharpshooter.

The empire she ruled with her husband, Jahangir, stretched at its height across much of India and southern Afghanistan. It had been founded in the first half of the 16th century by Turco-Mongols (hence "Mughal") who claimed descent from Genghis Khan and Amir Timur through its founder, Babur. From then until the mid-19th century, the Mughal state was renowned for its organization, learning, tolerance, culture and prosperity.

The future Nur Jahan—the name is her later, royal title—was born Mihrunissa (Sun Among Women) in 1577 in Kandahar in what is now Afghanistan, the fourth child to her mother, Asmat Begam, and her father, Mirza Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad. Aristocrats of Persian descent, they found favor in the court of Mughal Emperor Akbar. Taking the Turkic title *beg* (pr. *bay*), Mirza Ghiyas received also the honorific *Itimad-ud-Daula* (Pillar of the State) while young Mihrunissa received a royal education where she excelled in art, music, literature and dance.

At 17, according to Heinrich Blochmann, an 18th-century translator of Akbar's official chronicle *Akbar Nama*, she was wed to another transplanted courtier who had previously served in Persia, Ali Quli Beg Istajlu, upon whom Akbar's son Shah Salim conferred the title *Sher Afkan* (Lion Slayer) because of his courage in battle. The union produced Mihrunissa's only child, her daughter, Ladli Begam. When Salim ascended to the throne in 1605, he adopted the imperial name Nur-ud-din Muhammad Jahangir Badshah Ghazi, or, more concisely, Jahangir (World Conqueror). Two years later, Mihrunissa's husband was killed in an altercation with the governor of Bengal and his officers.

Royal diarist Mu'tamid Khan, in his *Iqbal Nama*, recalled that some four years after the Lion Slayer's death, during the spring new year celebrations of 1611, Mihrunissa "caught the King's far-seeing eye, and so captivated him that he included her amongst the intimates of his select harem." They were married less than two months later, on May 25. She was just shy of 35; he was 41. Among the last of many wives, Mihrunissa became Jahangir's favorite and chief consort.

"Day by day her influence and dignity increased," Khan observed. Distinguished from other ladies of the court,

she enjoyed lofty titles including *Nur Mahal* (Light of the Palace), *Nur Jahan Begam* (Lady Light of the World) and *Padshah Begam* (Imperial Lady), until *Nur Jahan* (Light of the World) became her ultimate title.

Part of her growing power came from the custom of appointing family members to high court positions: Her father became chief minister; her mother became chief matron of the harem; her brother Asaf Khan became head of the royal household and his daughter Arjumand (Nur Jahan's niece) married Jahangir's son Shah Khurram. Her influence was such that Dutch merchant Francisco Pelsaert took note of where real power rested. "[Jahangir] is King in name only, while [Nur Jahan] and her brother Asaf Khan hold the kingdom firmly in their hands," Pelsaert remarked. "If anyone with a request to make at Court obtains an audience or is allowed to speak, the King hears him indeed, but will give no definite answer of Yes or No, referring him promptly to Asaf Khan, who in the same way will dispose of no important matter without communicating with his sister, the Queen."

Another of Jahangir's diarists, Muhammad Hadi, surmised that nothing "was wanting to make her an absolute monarch," but the symbolic "reading of the *khutba* [Friday sermon] in her name." Not only did she conduct administrative business with the public, but nobles came to "receive her commands. Coins were struck in her name, and the royal seal ... bore her signature."

A character sketch by Venetian Niccolao Manucci, in his history of the Mughal court, qualified Nur Jahan as "a woman of great judgement, and of verity, worthy to be a queen."

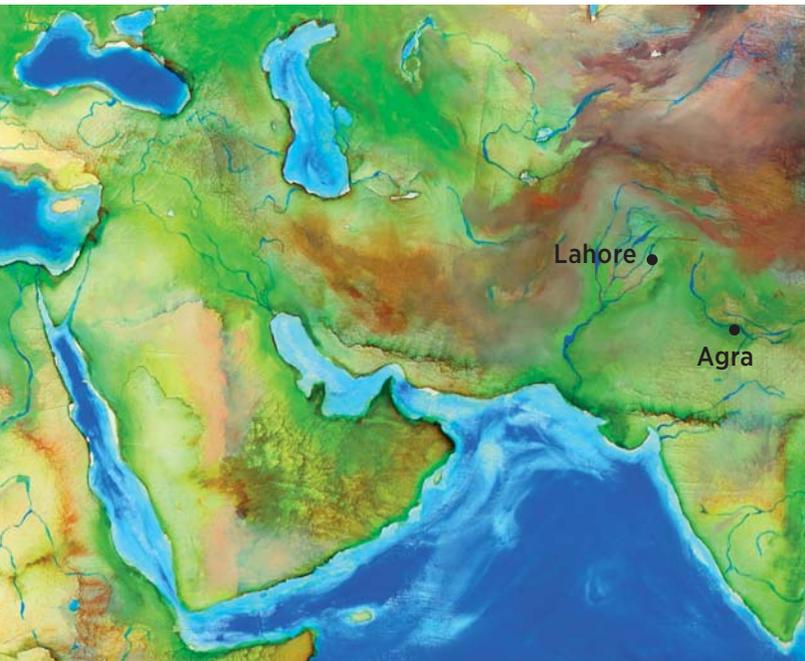
In part, her power was compensatory. The emperor was a self-confessed alcoholic and opium addict. Hadi reported that Jahangir "used to say that Nur Jahan Begam has been selected and is wise enough to conduct the matters of State" while all he desired was "a bottle of wine and piece of meat to keep himself merry."

As Jahangir's health declined, he continued to praise Nur Jahan's "skill and experience" as "greater than those of the physicians," and he poignantly credited her "affection and sympathy" for diminishing "the number of my cups [and keeping] me from things that did not suit me."

It is in this context that historians most remember Nur Jahan. She juggled the care of her chronically ill husband with the demands of the empire, and she did so famously. "It is impossible to describe the beauty and wisdom of the Queen. In any matter that was presented to her, if a difficulty arose, she immediately solved it," wrote Khan.

The range of her accomplishments bears out their praise. In commerce, she turned land grants (*jagirs*) given to her by

*In his memoirs,
Jahangir recorded how
during a hunt, Nur
Jahan, mounted on
an elephant, shot four
tigers with six bullets.*



Jahangir into profit centers. She collected shrewdly calculated duties on imports, Pelsaert noted, “of innumerable kinds of grain, butter, and other provisions.” She owned her own ships that sailed to and from Arabia, Persia and Africa, trading spices, ginger and dyes for perfumes, ceramics, ivory, amber and pearls. She managed rivalries by playing the English off the Dutch and the Portuguese off them both, granting trade concessions (primarily for indigo and embroidered cloth) for sizeable fees.

She used wealth and influence to support painters, poets and musicians. Especially keen was her interest in designs for building that impacted Mughal architecture: Her fondness for the domestic art of embroidery, for example, is reflected in ornamental reliefs in the tomb of her father in Agra.

Her refined tastes were also evident in the “very expensive buildings” she erected “in all directions—*sarais*, or halting-places for travelers and merchants, and pleasure-gardens and palaces such as no one has ever made before,” Pelsaert wrote. She designed, among others, the famed Achabal Gardens in Kashmir state, with its lavish array of fruit trees, fountains and a man-made waterfall illuminated at night from behind by “innumerable lamps,” wrote the gobsmacked French physician Francois Bernier, who traveled almost a century later.

Yet Nur Jahan could also be as thrifty as a village housewife. On one occasion recounted by 18th-century Delhi historian Khafi Khan, Jahangir, upon questioning the expense of finely embroidered caparisons for the royal elephants, was pleased to learn that Nur Jahan spent “practically nothing on them,” having them instead made by palace tailors from used mail bags.

When it came to her own couture, she pioneered what would be regarded today as a line of designer clothing. She set fashion trends at court with her designs of silver-threaded brocades (*badla*) and lace (*kinari*), light-

weight, floral-patterned cotton and muslin textiles (*panch-toliya* and *dudami*) for veils and gowns, and her own signature scent made from rose oil, *Atri Jahangiri*. For cost-conscious brides (and grooms), she is also credited with creating the (now traditional) *nurmahali*, an inexpensive set of wedding clothes. More than a gesture, her concern for the poor—especially poverty-stricken young women—was genuine. “She was an asylum for all sufferers,” Hadi recorded. “She must have apportioned about 500 girls in her lifetime, and thousands were grateful for her generosity.”

Yet when the need arose, she swapped flowery gowns for battle gear. Ambushed by rebel forces on her way to Kabul with Jahangir in 1626, Nur Jahan directed the imperial army’s defense from atop a war elephant. When a female servant beside her was shot with an arrow in her arm, the queen “herself pulled it out, staining her garments with blood,” Hadi reported.

Nur Jahan was praised also by her husband for her skill with a hunting gun from the teetering perch of an elephant litter. In his memoirs, he recorded how she shot four tigers with six bullets, acknowledging that “an elephant is not at ease when it smells a tiger and is continually in movement, and to hit with a gun from a litter (*imari*) is a very difficult matter.”

An unnamed poet present during the hunt was moved to compose the following verse:

Though Nur Jahan be in the form of a woman,
In the ranks of men, she’s a tiger-slayer.

That rebellion of 1626 stemmed from earlier unrest stirred up by Shah Khurram, who envied Nur Jahan’s influence over his father. When Jahangir died in 1627, a war of succession followed. Nur Jahan attempted to enthrone Shahryar, the youngest of Jahangir’s sons, who had married Nur Jahan’s daughter, Ladli Begam. But Shahryar was slain, and Shah Khurram ascended the throne as Shah Jahan. The “Light of the World” did not interfere further, and she lived for 19 more years in quiet retirement in Lahore with her widowed daughter.

Putting aside finery, she is said to have worn simple white clothing and abstained from parties and social functions. Her life drew to a close on December 17, 1645, at the age of 68. She is buried in Lahore, in a mausoleum of her own design, upon which this epitaph to her grace and modesty is etched:

On the grave of this poor stranger, let there be
neither lamp nor rose. Let neither butterfly’s wing
burn nor nightingale sing. ☾

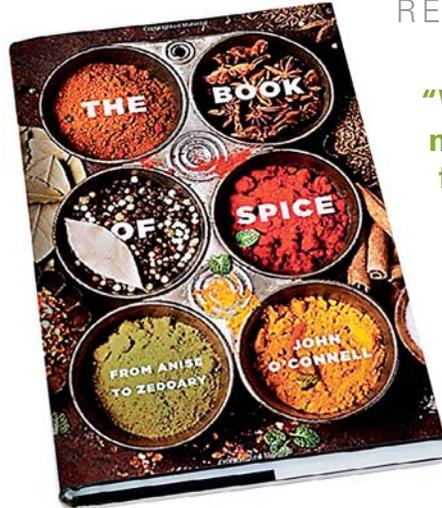
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REVIEWS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Without endorsing the views of any of the authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.

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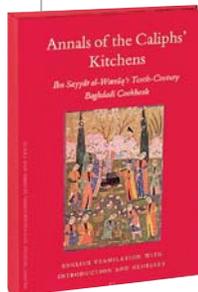
REVIEWS BY TOM VERDE

“We take them for granted today, now that they are everywhere and, for the most part, dirt cheap, but spices might just be the most important commodities ever—more important even than gold or oil. For most of human history they have been held in sacred regard, despite the fact that in dietary terms they are utterly inessential.”

The Book of Spice: From Anise to Zedoary

John O'Connell. 2016, Pegasus Books, 978-1-68177-152-6, \$26.95 hb.

It is hard to reach for a spice that has not been touched by Arab-Muslim culture. From anise, a licorice-flavored Egyptian seed, to zedoary, a bitter root in the ginger family (from the Arabic, *zadwar*), Middle Eastern middlemen have engaged in the spice trade for millennia. Saffron dates to ancient Persia, “home of pilau—the dish of scented, colored rice that subsequently travelled across the Muslim world to become pilav in Turkey, paella in Spain and risotto in Italy.” European caraway figures in “some formulations” of the North African chili-paste *harisa* while lending unique flavor to Middle Eastern puddings like *moghli* that are “traditionally prepared to celebrate the birth of a son.” Peppery Senegalese “Grains of Selim,” adding oomph to coffee, were named after one or another Ottoman sultan, while Arabs use 60 percent of the world’s cardamom in “Bedouin coffee” (*gahwa*). This entertaining and informative book can be read cover to cover, but is entirely accessible by randomly flipping to any entry and diving in.



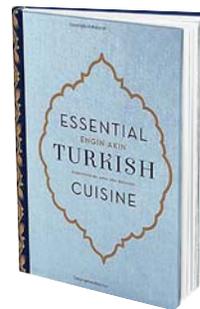
Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchen: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook

Nawal Nasrallah, trans. 2010, Brill, 978-9-00418-811-2, \$65, pb. Colorful and deeply informative, medieval Arab cookbooks provide insight into

to the cuisine of the day and the wider culture, from the courts of kings to the tents of soldiers to the food stalls of the marketplace. Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's 10th-century *Kitab al-Tabikh* (*Book of Dishes*) is the earliest known such title—a monumental work, not only of its day, but, in translation, as an addition to modern scholarship. Here are recipes for “*zalabia furniyya* (sponge cake)” moistened with “unadulterated fresh milk” and a sprinkling of “*tabarzad*

sugar” (white cane sugar), familiar enough to any modern baker, along with *tabahija* (essentially fried chicken) seasoned with coriander and black pepper. Less familiar, and perhaps more intriguing, is the formula for “a royal toasted coffee compound” consisting of “yellow Iraqi *bunk*” (ground coffee beans and husks) brewed with sandalwood and the rinds of “30 Lebanese apples” and “3 yellow citrons.” Nasrallah's ambitious, exhaustively researched translation includes sections on the history of the manuscript, its sources and its legacy, plus an Arabic/English glossary of the ingredients and dishes, together with an appendix of major historical figures and localities. This hefty volume (just over 860 pages) is

an important contribution to the cultural and historical record of the Abbasid period.



Essential Turkish Cuisine

Engin Akin. 2015, Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 978-1-61769-172-0, \$40 hb.

The earthy diet of the Central Asian nomadic tribes from whence the Turks sprung focused on meat, milk and yogurt, and it developed along with the reach of those tribes over the centuries. Spices from the Mediterranean and Persia, such as “[c]umin, coriander, and herbs such as mint, dill, tarragon, purple basil, and green fenugreek infused traditional dishes with new flavors and aromas.” By Ottoman times, peppers, tomatoes and other imports from the New World



“gave a new face and taste to Turkish dishes,” while the “broad-breasted poultry” favored by Turkish cooks lent a name to the large birds discovered in North America: turkeys. Brimming with historical detail and beautifully produced, this cookbook features some 200 of the best-known Turkish standards (lentil soup, various shish kebabs and *imam bayildi*, i.e., “the imam fainted,” over the prodigious amounts of olive oil in this roasted eggplant classic, legend has it), together with many probably unknown to those not reared in a Turkish grandmother’s kitchen.



The Hot Bread Kitchen: Artisanal Baking from Around the World

Jessamyn Waldman Rodriguez and Julie Turshen. 2015, Clarkson Potter, 978-0-80418-617-9, \$35 hb. Bangladeshi-born Lutfunnessa

Islam’s name and her job title—Product Coordinator for Lavash and Granola—says it all about the bakery that inspired this diverse cookbook. She bakes chapattis, lavash bread and other delights at Hot Bread Kitchen in East Harlem, New York. This unique bakery, a “social enterprise that provides a life-changing education and opens doors for low-income minority women,” serves up all manner of international sweet and savory baked goods, including a fair share from the wider Muslim-majority world—Persian, snowshoe-shaped *nan-e-barbari* and buttery *nan-e qandi*, sumac-spiced spinach pies inspired by a Palestinian baker, as well as a wholesome, whole-wheat, go-to pita—all prepared by a staff of women from all corners of the globe. This is the sort of book that feels right just acquiring (profits support the bakery’s social mission), let alone trying its authentic, eclectic recipes.

Mediterranean Sea was every bit an “Arab” or “Muslim Lake,” as this beautifully illustrated cookbook demonstrates. Rooted in the author’s Greek heritage, most of the recipes reflect the wider Mediterranean world, where Arab cuisine greatly influenced, and was influenced by, local flavors. Okra and Zucchini in Harissa-Tomato Sauce is a braised marriage of Italy’s signature sauce and North Africa’s famous, fiery spice paste; oranges (introduced by the Arabs via Sicily) add sweetness to Orange and Olive Oil Carrots, which provides the foundation for Sautéed Olives and Carrots with Preserved Lemon (a Moroccan specialty) and Thyme. In addition to informal yet informative recipe headnotes, Kremezi provides seasonal menu suggestions, tips on techniques and sidebars that delve into the cultural background of many traditional dishes. “Balkan polenta is ‘finer’ than the Italian version, while *kishk*, a fermented mash-up of grains and yogurt,” can be traced back to Persia and “spread to the West” courtesy of the Ottomans. This title will appeal to any Mediterranean-diet enthusiast, omnivore or otherwise.

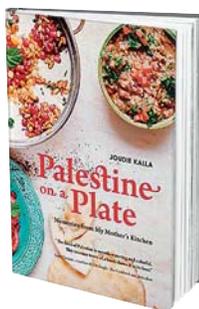


New Feast: Modern Middle Eastern Vegetarian

Greg and Lucy Malouf. 2014, Hardie Grant, 978-1-74270-842-3, \$45 hb. A vegetarian Middle Eastern cookbook is almost a tautology as so much of the region’s classic fare is vegetarian

(think *hummus*, *falafil*, etc.). Few but the Maloufs, however, could add modern twists to traditional cuisine with such flair. Diced into somewhat finer sections than most cookbooks (“Butters and Preserves,” “Fritters” and “Ices,” for instance), this upscale tour through the humble Middle Eastern diet takes the pursuit to new levels with such offerings as preserved lemon guacamole, *za’tar* biscuits and chocolate *muhallabeya* (boiled milk thickened with corn starch, traditionally made without chocolate) with Turkish coffee granita. There is even an eggplant version

of *bisteeya*, a North African savory pie usually made with chicken. While this is not a book for novice cooks, it still features a good number of recipes—flavored butters, dips and various soups—for the uninitiated to try before they dare attempt bouquets of fruity, flower-shaped meringues or tightly rolled baklava cigars in orange syrup.

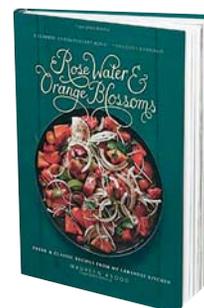


Palestine on a Plate: Memories from My Mother's Kitchen

Joudie Kalla. 2017, Interlink, 978-1-56656-069-6, \$35 hb.

Though it lingered deeply within her biological, and cultural, DNA, Jodie Kalla’s Palestinian heritage didn’t bubble to the surface until

she was in her 20s and living in Paris, where she first experienced a “yearning for home” that drove her directly back to the Arab cuisine of her youth. “I called my mother every day to ask her how to make different dishes,” she recalls in this ode to Palestinian home cooking. Among those requested recipes were *warak inab* (stuffed vine leaves), *makloubeh* (an upside-down rice dish with eggplant and lamb), *molokhia* (jute mallow leaves turned into a soup with chicken) and more, which feature in this fond food memoir/cookbook. The book features a comprehensive review of traditional ingredients from basic *baharat* spice mix to exotic rose water, as well as colorful illustrations and informative headnotes that blend Kalla’s personal memories with her tactical knowledge of the outcomes of each dish. In addition, the publisher is donating 50 percent of the title’s sale proceeds to the Palestinian House of Friendship, a Nablus-based nonprofit organization that offers support to at-risk Palestinian youth, with an emphasis on culture and the arts.

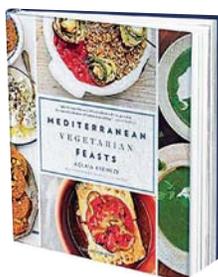


Rose Water & Orange Blossoms: Fresh & Classic Recipes from My Lebanese Kitchen

Maureen Abood. 2015, Running Press, 978-0-76245-486-0, \$30 hb.

Za’tar is one of those ubiquitous, Middle Eastern spice mixtures (typically a combination of dried thyme, sesame

seeds and citrusy sumac) that many cultures in the region claim as their own. This is especially true in Lebanon, where no home cook would be without the heady mixture any more than an American table would be bereft of salt and pepper. Smearred with olive oil across the warm, dimpled surface of a piece of flatbread, it is the defining ingredient of *mana’esh*, the country’s “quintessential breakfast food,” as Abood lovingly declares. With such humble dishes as her launching point, she explores the deliciously dizzying heights to which Lebanese-based cuisine has aspired as a geographic crossroads of borrowed ingredients such as rose water or pomegranates (from Ottoman Persia) or oranges and nougat (from the western Mediterranean). Hence the title of this proud paean to Abood’s culinary heritage.



Mediterranean Vegetarian Feasts

Aglaiia Kremezi. 2014, Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 978-1-61769-073-0, \$35 hb.

Once a “Roman Lake,” by the Middle Ages the



Pomegranates and Saffron: A Culinary Journey to Azerbaijan

Feride Buyuran. 2014-2015, AZ Cookbook, 978-0-99617-312-4, \$42 hb.

Azerbaijani cuisine is “the product of centuries of



EVENTS & EXHIBITIONS

Highlights from our searchable listings at aramcoworld.com



CURRENT / NOVEMBER

Our Enemies: *Lively Scenes of Love & Combat.* Struggling writer Gamal despises the way his fellow Arab Americans represent their culture in American media. It's easy enough to take out his frustration on literature superstar Mohsen and local mosque leader Shaikh Alfani. But when his own girlfriend (and novelist) Noor gets an offer from a major publisher backed with a national media campaign, how will Gamal manage his frustration? Award-winning Egyptian-American playwright Yussef El Guindi holds the honor of being the most-produced writer at Golden Thread, winning the Steinberg/American Theater Critics Association's New Play Award in 2012 and receiving the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. Golden Thread Middle East Center

Stage, **San Francisco**, through November 20.

CURRENT / DECEMBER

What Language Do you Speak?

This solo exhibition by French-Algerian artist Katia Kameli draws together new and recent works, taking audiences on a journey through the power of storytelling and, in the process, having them question ideas of historical authenticity and national identity. Featuring films and an installation, the exhibition presents some of the artist's central concerns: issues of dual identities, multiplicity and the potential of residing in this "in-between" space. The Mosaic Rooms, **London**, through December 3.

Ostarrichislam: Islam in Austria.

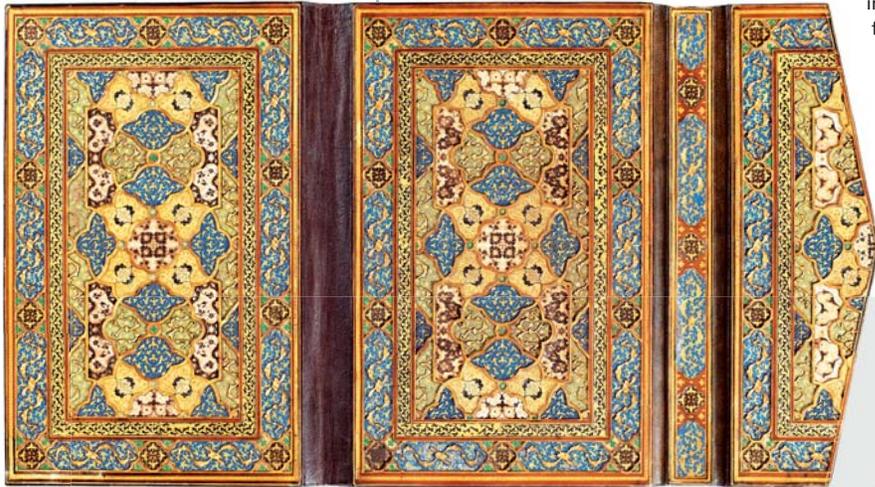
Starting in 996 with the arrival of the Pechenegs who dwelled in the Hungarian Plain, followed by the Ottoman-Hapsburg Wars, to the 1878 ruling that ceded Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Hapsburgs and finally the immigration of Muslims from other countries—especially from the Balkans—

Islam has flourished in Austria. With the introduction of *Islamgesetz* (Islamic Law) in 1912 by Emperor Franz Joseph, Islam became an official religion until 2015. The harmony achieved after clashes between the Ottomans and Austria infused Islamic tradition into Austrian culture, notably in the influence of Islamic art. This can be seen in the architecture of buildings with domes and geometric designs represented in the exhibit. Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, **Kuala Lumpur**, through December 31.

CURRENT / JANUARY

Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Works of Africa

features five African artists exploring how time is experienced and produced by the body. In their works, bodies climb, dance and dissolve, and characters repeat, resist or reverse the expectation that time must move relentlessly forward. *Senses of Time* invites viewers to contemplate tensions between ritual and technological time, between personal and political time, through pacing, sequencing, looping, layering and mirroring. **Los Angeles County Museum of Art**, through January 2.



THE ART OF THE QUR'AN: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts

Qur'an binding. Probably Afghanistan, Herat, Safavid period, ca. 1580. Paperboard and leather, 31 x 56 cm.

Celebrated for their superb calligraphy and lavish illumination, the manuscripts in this landmark exhibition span almost 1,000 years—from eighth-century

Damascus to 17th-century Istanbul. Many of the works, on view outside of Turkey for the first time, are critical to the history and appreciation of the Arts of the Book. The exhibition tells the stories of some of these extraordinary manuscripts, their makers and their owners. Visitors learn how the Qur'an was transformed from an orally transmitted message to a written, illuminated and bound text produced by highly accomplished artists. Many of the Qur'ans on display were originally created for some of the most powerful rulers of the Islamic world. As the finest examples of their kind, long after their completion the manuscripts were sought out and cherished as prized possessions by the Ottoman ruling elite, whose power once extended from southeast Europe to Northern Africa and the Middle East. They were offered as gifts to cement political and military relationships or to recognize special arts, and they were also given to public and religious institutions to express personal piety, political power and prestige. Donations of Qur'ans to libraries and public institutions by royal women, too, expressed commitment to contemporary religious and social life. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, **Washington D.C.**, through February 20.



Álvaro Siza: Gateway to the Alhambra explores through models and sketches, renderings, large-scale photographs and video how Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza developed his design for an innovative structure that includes a courtyard, auditorium and restaurant. Enjoy architectural objects from the Alhambra's own collection and understand why the Alhambra has inspired countless artists and architects since the 14th century. Exclusive to the Toronto installation of this exhibition are a selection of ceramic tiles, marble capitals, intricately carved doors and other original architectural elements from the Alhambra that conjure the magnificent detailing of this World Heritage Site. Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through January 8.

Fair Skies: Mahmoud Obaidi at Project Space. Iraqi-Canadian contemporary artist Mahmoud Obaidi's installation engages in a debate around racial profiling inspired by the artist's own experiences with airport security procedures. The exhibit can be read as a social, political and cultural critique of stereotypes and assumptions. Arab Museum of Modern Art, **Doha, Qatar**, through January 8.

Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven illuminates the key role Jerusalem played in shaping art from 1000 to 1400 CE. While the city is often described as one of three faiths, that formulation actually understates its fascinating

complexity. In fact, Jerusalem was home to multiple cultures, faiths and languages. History records harmonious and dissonant voices of people from many lands, passing in the narrow streets of a city not much larger than midtown Manhattan. This is the first exhibition to unravel the various cultural traditions of esthetic strands that enriched and enlivened the medieval city. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, **New York**, through January 8.

Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural comprises objects of breathtaking quality and astonishing scale dating from the 12th to 20th centuries. The exhibit showcases astrological charts, dream books, talismanic clothing and jewel-encrusted amulets, some of which were used privately, others in conjunction with historic events such as battles and royal births. Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, **University of Oxford, UK**, through January 15.

CURRENT / FEBRUARY

Power and Piety: Islamic Talismans on the Battlefield. Inscriptions and images on Islamic armor were at times believed to provide their wearers with divine safety and success in combat. This exhibition, featuring some 30 works from the Met's collection, examines the role of text and image in the construction and function of arms and armor in the Islamic world. Verses

from the Qur'an; prayers that invoked God; the *Asma al-Husna* (99 Beautiful Names of God); as well as mystical symbols and more were all used to imbue military apparel, weapons and paraphernalia with protective powers. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, **New York**, through February 13.

CURRENT / MARCH

Phantom Punch: Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia in Lewiston, Maine, features artists who explore topics including narratives and aesthetics of Islamic culture in an era of globalization as well as consumerism and the position of women in Saudi culture. They explore contemporary Saudi life through the emerging subcultures of humor, video, YouTube, fashion, animation and calligraphy, while blending international pop culture

and traditional Saudi themes. Bates College Museum of Art, **Lewiston, Maine**, through March 18.

CURRENT / MAY

Gold and the Golds: Jewels of Ancient Nubia draws on the museum's world-class collection of jewelry from ancient Nubia (located in what is now Sudan), which now constitutes the most comprehensive collection outside Khartoum. Museum of Fine Arts, **Boston**, through May 14.

Most listings have further information available online and at aramcoworld.com. Readers are welcome to submit information for possible inclusion to proposals@aramcoservices.com, subject line "E&E".

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