

The History of Coffee

Written by Miriam Staples (Miriam bat Shimeon) 2011.

There are many legends surrounding coffee. One had a simple goad-herder named Kaldi discovering his goats dancing after eating berries from a bush. Another is the Archangel Gabriel telling the Prophet Mohammed how to make coffee.

However, it is thought that the first reference to coffee was in Avicenna's work "The Canon of Medicine" (or *Al-Ganum fit-Tebb* in Arabic) written around the year 1000 CE. The fifth book is a work on pharmacology, covering 760 medicines including a drug called *buncham* which was considered "hot and dry and good for digestion and the stomach". The drink was described as coming from Yemen.

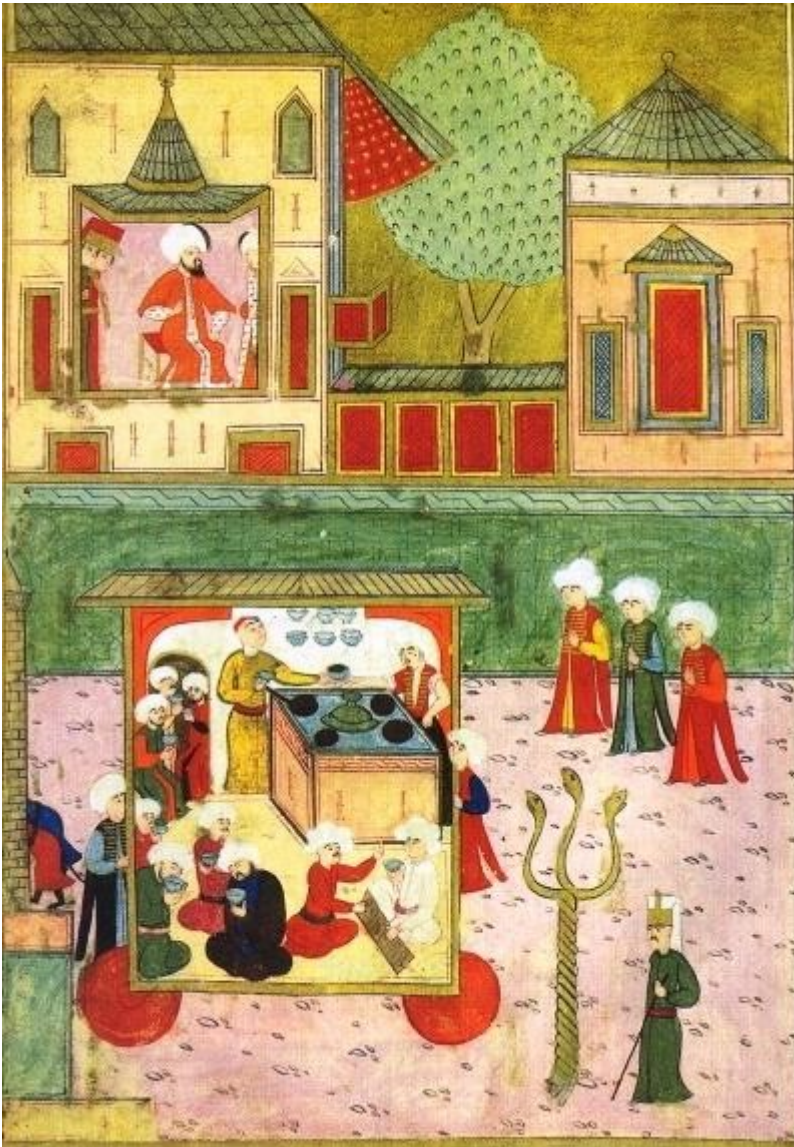
However, it does not seem to have been in common usage except as medicine until taken up by the mystical Sufi order run by Shaikh Abul Hasan ash-Shadhili in the 12th century. The Order would brew roasted beans in order to stay awake during all night prayers. The effect of the coffee on the body was even given a name- *marqaha*.

It is confirmed that coffee was being spread by a mufti in mid-15th century Yemen, with the major sales done through the post of Moccha. By 1500 CE, the first coffee houses were opened in Mecca and Cairo. 1517- Constantinople. By 1532, coffee houses were open in Aleppo and Damascus. Various political and religious authorities shut down the coffee houses over the next hundred years. It was thought that coffee took people away from the mosques and drove them to coffee houses, staying awake all night with arguments. However much they were closed down, by the close of the 16th century, over 300 coffee shops were open in Constantinople alone.

There were three different of places of consumption- the home (where coffee was also roasted in silver concave plates over brass or copper braziers), stalls (much like take away coffee places today) which were usually located in the business district and the coffeehouse. The picture below is of a 16th century Constantinople coffeehouse with a boy dancer or *Köçek* entertaining the crowds. Games such as backgammon, chess and draughts (some of which can be seen in the picture) were also played in coffeehouses. While women were not allowed in coffeehouses (or at least only the disreputable dancers were allowed) women drank their coffee at home. A woman was also allowed to divorce her husband if he did not provide enough coffee for her.

Coffee stalls were common at celebrations which involved entire cities, such as the circumcision ceremonies of the sons of the Sultan.





This picture is taken from the *Surname-i Hümayun* or the Book of the Imperial Circumcision Festival. It was done in 1582 with celebrations covering 52 days and nights. This illumination shows a stall serving coffee on a closed wheeled wagon.

The first European mention of coffee is in a work called *Dr. Leonhart Rauwolf's Travels into the Eastern Countries* written by Dr. Leonhart Rauwolf in 1582. In his travels to Aleppo and then Syria, Rauwolf says that everyone in the city drinks -“a very good drink they call Chaube that is almost as black as ink and very good in illness, especially of the stomach. This they drink in the morning early in the open places before everybody, without any fear or regard, out of clay or China cups, as hot as they can, sipping it a little at a time”.

Prospero Alpini (Italian botanist and physician) first wrote about the coffee plant in his work *De Plantis Aegypti liber* (1593) since very little was known about the

plant at all. Coffee beans only went on sale from Yemen after they had been par-boiled so could not be sown. Coffee was first introduced into Venice in 1615, while London, Oxford and Cambridge first got coffeehouses in the 1650s.

How to make a cup of coffee in the style of the Turks

The coffee should be 100% arabica beans, freshly ground to a fine powder. Sugar is optional, so add to taste. Cardamom and/or nutmeg were also added in the pot for digestive reasons. I recommend an ibrik but a small saucepan could do it.

1 cup cold water

1 tablespoon coffee

1/8 teaspoon cardamom/nutmeg (optional)

sugar to taste (optional)

Bring water and coffee to the boil (and optional ingredients), stirring constantly as it can scorch easily. Once brought to the boil, remove from heat and sit for 30 seconds. Repeat twice more. Serve and enjoy.

Bibliography

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