

The Customs and Fashions of the Turks: Historiographical Trends and a Possible Hypothesis Based on Historical Context

Samantha Goodrich

Throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire increasingly came into military and diplomatic contact with Western Europe during the reign of Sultan Suleyman I (r. 1520-66). As the Ottomans pushed further into Christian territory in Central Europe and the Mediterranean following the sieges of Belgrade (1521), Rhodes (1522), Mohács (1526) and Vienna (1529), a mounting atmosphere of fear and interest resulted in a proliferation of books, poems, broadsheets, and art regarding the Ottoman Turk. European representations of the Ottomans varied and could vacillate between nuanced and realistic depictions of the Turks and highly exaggerated portrayals of them as the foe of Christendom. While texts and illustrations from men such as Martin Luther, Hans Sachs, and Erhard Schön highlighted the menace and brutality of the Ottomans, artist Pieter Coecke van Aelst provided ethnographic images of the Ottomans and their culture in his *Les Moeurs et Fachons de Faire De Turcs (The Customs and Fashions of the Turks)*. However, despite its rich subject matter, no in-depth analysis of the entire frieze has been conducted to date. Although scholarship has tended to focus on Coecke's trip to Turkey and the provenance of *The Customs and Fashions the Turks*, its subject matter is far more important due to its historical significance and deserves more attention from scholars.

Dutch artist Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502-1550) was a renowned draftsman, painter, and publisher of architectural treatises throughout Renaissance Europe. Not only was Coecke court painter to Mary of Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, but he also designed tapestries for patrons such as Francis I of France, Henry VIII of England, and Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici of Tuscany.¹ Arguably one of Coecke's most impressive works is *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* because of its impressive attention to detail and ethnographic depiction of the Ottoman Empire, its people, and culture. This print is composed of seven scenes separated by male and female columnar figures in Turkish dress that form a frieze accompanied by an architectural entablature and a base which bears French text providing information about the images. Ornately framed title and colophon pages are attached to the beginning

¹ Mary of Hungary was the Queen Consort of Hungary and Bohemia from 1515-26 and the Governor of the Hapsburg Netherlands from 1531-55; Charles V ruled as Holy Roman Emperor from 1519-56; Francis I was King of France from 1515-31; Henry VIII ruled England from 1506-47; and Cosimo I de' Medici was Grand Duke of Florence from 1537-69 and the Grand Duke of Tuscany from 1569-74.

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and the end, and the entire frieze combined is fifteen feet wide and seventeen and a half feet tall.² According to Coecke's biographer, Karel van Mander (1548-1606), the frieze should be read from right to left beginning with the scene depicting Sultan Süleyman riding through the ruins of the Hippodrome so that the Sultan is looking left from the center of the Empire to his various territories. However, there is a discrepancy between Van Mander and the French text that accompanies the frieze as the scenes are numbered from left to right starting with the military camp in Slovenia.³ Based on the numbers accompanying the descriptions, the scenes from left to right are: *A Military Camp in Slovenia, The Passage of a Caravan, Turkish Soldiers at Rest, Festival of the New Moon, A Turkish Funeral, Celebration of a Circumcision, and Procession of Sultan Süleyman through the Hippodrome.*

Although *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* serves as a rich source for historical inquiry for scholars, the circumstances surrounding Coecke's trip to Constantinople and the creation of the frieze tends to dominate the scholarship. According to Van Mander's life of Pieter Coecke from 1604, the artist:

...was urged on by some tradesmen, tapestry-makers from Brussels called Van der Moeyen, to travel to Constantinople in Turkey where they were planning to undertake something special by making beautiful, costly tapestries for the Great Turk, and they got Pieter to paint some things for that purpose to show the Turkish Emperor; but since the Turk, according to his Mohammetan Law, did not want figures of people or animals, it was fruitless and nothing came of it – except that a useless journey and high expenses incurred.⁴

Therefore, due to the ultimate failure of Coecke's trip, the sketches that he produced based on his time in Constantinople never became tapestries and were published posthumously by his widow, Mayken Verhulst, in 1553 as a print series. As a result of Van Mander's explanation for the genesis of this series, scholars such as German art historian and curator, Max J. Friedländer, have taken this account at face value and

² Nadine M. Orenstein, "Customs and Fashions of the Turks," in *Grand Design: Pieter Coecke Van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry*, ed. Elizabeth A. Cleland (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014), 176-78.

³ *Ibid.*, 178. Orenstein does not mention why Van Mander claims that the frieze should be read from right to left, just that there is a discrepancy between Van Mander's account and the French inscriptions.

⁴ Quoted in Annick Born, "Pieter Coecke van Aelst and the Roads Leading to Rome," in *Culture Figurative a Confronto Tra Fiandre e Italia Dal XV Al XVII Secolo*, ed. A De Florianini and Maria Clelia Galassi (Milan, Italy: Silvana Editoriale, 2008), 100.

disseminated this narrative in the modern era. Friedländer relied heavily upon Van Mander's biography of Coecke in his chapter on the artist in the fourteen-volume survey *Early Netherlandish Painting* published between 1924 to 1937. Although Friedländer did not devote much attention to *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks*, he reiterated Van Mander's assertion that Coecke traveled to Constantinople, in vain, in order to persuade Sultan Süleyman (r. 1520-66) to give him tapestry commissions.⁵

Decades later in 1989, Islamic art historian Gülru Necipoğlu discussed Coecke's trip to Turkey in her article, "Süleyman the Magnificent and the Representation of Power in the Context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry," which examines the issues of cross-cultural communication raised by the Ottoman court's patronage of European artistic talent during the early part of Süleyman's reign. While Necipoğlu also notes that Van Mander accredited Coecke's failed tapestries to the Sultan's disgust of human representation in art, she argues that the iconoclastic bent of the grand vizier Ibrahim Pasha's opponents were the reason why the tapestries were never actualized.⁶ When Coecke traveled to the Ottoman Empire in 1533, Ibrahim Pasha (1523-36) actively supported the patronage of European talent and art.⁷ After the grand vizier fell out of favor with Süleyman and was executed in 1536, the favorable atmosphere he had fostered at the time of Coecke's trip quickly disappeared. Therefore, Necipoğlu contends that the main reason why the tapestry endeavor was abandoned was due to the period of conservative reaction after Ibrahim died.⁸

In addition to Coecke traveling to the Ottoman Empire on behalf of the Dermoyen company, historians have also speculated that the artist was part of Cornelis de Schepper's entourage. At the height of the military conflict between the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs, Schepper was the first Hapsburg diplomat sent to Constantinople in order to negotiate an agreement regarding Hungary.⁹ Historian Charlotte Colding Smith's brief discussion of *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* in her book *Images of Islam, 1453-1600: Turks in Germany and Central Europe* makes no reference to Coecke's involvement with the Dermoyen firm. Instead,

⁵ Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*. XII. *Jan van Scorel and Pieter Coeck van Aelst* (Leiden & Brussels, 1975), 33.

⁶ Gülru Necipoğlu, "Süleyman the Magnificent and the Representation of Power in the Context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry," *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 3 (Sep. 1989): 419.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Charlotte Colding Smith, *Images of Islam, 1453-1600: Turks in Germany and Central Europe* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 101.

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Smith asserts that Coecke was “certainly” part of Schepper’s diplomatic entourage. Art historian Annick Born notes in her essay that Coecke’s presence in Schepper’s entourage and Dermoyen’s firm are both speculations since there isn’t any documentary evidence.¹⁰ With the exception of the date of 1533 on the front page of the woodcut series and Van Mander’s statement saying that Coecke ‘was there for about a year,’ little is known about the circumstances of his trip. Therefore, Coecke could have been a companion of Schepper who arrived in the Ottoman capital in May of 1533 or he could have been a representative of the Dermoyen firm.¹¹

Although historians such as Friedländer and Necipoğlu appear to have taken Van Mander’s explanation for Coecke’s trip at face value, Born and Nadine Orenstein, curator in the Department of Drawings and Prints at the Metropolitan Museum, have both questioned the validity of this assertion. In her chapter “Customs and Fashions of the Turks” in *Grand Design*, Orenstein notes that while the accuracy of Van Mander’s account is questionable, archival sources do provide evidence for Coecke’s trip just not the circumstances surrounding it.¹² Born contends that Van Mander’s assertion that the trip to Constantinople was fruitless due to Islamic law can be discredited since human representations are found in contemporary Ottoman miniatures and because sets of tapestries were already sent to Turkey in the late fourteenth century.¹³

Friedländer asserts in his chapter on Coecke that, apart from its topographical and historical value, the Turkish woodcuts represented the most fruitful source for understanding Coecke’s art and were “most effectively composed, in terms of utilizing depth.”¹⁴ In assessing the accuracy of Coecke’s depiction of the Turks, Friedländer notes that any intention of providing an anthropological account was foiled by the ingrained habit of presenting heads and drapery in the ‘classical’ tradition. Despite this, however, Friedländer maintains that Coecke was clearly intent upon giving a reliable account of Turkish costume and

¹⁰ Annick Born, “*The Moeurs et Fachons de Faire de Turcs*: Süleyman and Charles V: Iconographic Discourse, Enhancement of Power and Magnificence, or Two Faces of the Same Coin?” in *The Habsburgs and their Courts in Europe, 1400-1700: Between Cosmopolitanism and Regionalism*, ed. Herbert Karner, Ingrid Ciulisova and Bernardo J. Garcia (Leuven: Palatium, 2014), 289.

¹¹ *Ibid.* According to Born, other than the date of 1533 no accurate information regarding Coecke’s trip is known, neither the dates of his departure from Antwerp and Constantinople, nor his itinerary for the journey there and back. Coecke also could have been both a representative of the Dermoyen firm and part of Schepper’s entourage.

¹² Orenstein, “Customs and Fashions of the Turks,” 176.

¹³ Born, “*The Moeurs et Fachons de Faire de Turcs*,” 289.

¹⁴ Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 33-34.

dress.¹⁵ Ultimately, Friedländer's assessment of *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* is brief which is a disservice considering this series' impressive array of artistic and historical material. Unfortunately, in the decades following Friedländer's *Early Netherlandish Painting* subsequent studies have failed to provide a true analysis of the entire set.

In 2003, Amanda Wunder examined the accounts of educated, elite Europeans who visited Constantinople on diplomatic, scholarly, and commercial enterprises in the sixteenth century in her article "Western Travelers, Eastern Antiquities, and the Image of the Turk in Early Modern Europe." Wunder's analysis focuses on Ogier de Busbecq, Pierre Gilles, Mechior Lorck, Nicholas de Nicolay, and Coecke since they shared a common culture of antiquarianism and their passion for the antiquities of the East shaped their accounts of the Turk and Ottoman Constantinople. Although artists like Lorck and Coecke demonstrated the variety that existed amongst the Turks, the ultimate impact of sixteenth-century antiquarian accounts was to deepen the Western perception of Oriental difference.¹⁶

While Wunder's treatment of Coecke is rather brief, she argues that he combined his skills as a Renaissance artist with his interest in Turkish society and culture in a panoramic view that brought Constantinople to life and transformed the people into the "classically beautiful protagonists of the consummate Renaissance drama known as the *historia*."¹⁷ According to Wunder, each panel of *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* can be read as individual *historia* compositions that display great variety and an abundance of figures and scenery. In addition to this, in the scene featuring Süleyman's procession, Coecke merged the *historia* painting with the tradition of the printed city while simultaneously exhibiting ancient and modern Constantinople.¹⁸ As a result, Coecke "turned the *historia* into an ethnography lesson" and "demonstrated a range and contrast among the Turks that was rarely seen in Western Europe at the time."¹⁹

Like Friedländer and Wunder, Born's discussion of *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* in her essay from 2008, "Pieter Coecke van Aelst and the Roads Leading to Rome," is sparse. Ultimately, Born's main focus

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Amanda Wunder, "Western Travelers, Eastern Antiquities, and the Image of the Turk in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Early Modern History* 7, no. 1 (Jan. 2003): 89.

¹⁷ Ibid., 110. Wunder notes that the *historia* was a complicated composition that captured multiple figures in an idealized moment of time as elaborated by Italian Renaissance master Leon Battista Alberti in his book *On Painting* from 1435.

¹⁸ Ibid., 110-11.

¹⁹ Ibid.,

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is on the discrepancies in statements on Coecke's life and works, especially regarding the artist's travel in Italy.²⁰ Despite Born's attention to the sojourn in Italy, she does note that the description of the customs and life of the Turks, the cityscape of Constantinople, and the representation of the sultan attested to a high sense of observation and a thorough understanding of that society. Therefore, Born's assessment that "everything is depicted with a great respect for foreigners and a non-Christian civilization, and even glorifies it" falls in line with Wunder's and Friedländer's arguments that this series provided an ethnographic depiction of the Ottoman people and culture.²¹

Smith's aforementioned book from 2014, *Images of Islam*, explores printed images of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth-century German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire in order to gauge German attitudes during a time of socio-political-religious upheaval.²² In regard to *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks*, Smith asserts that the "full panorama shows the Ottoman sultan as the supreme stately and military leader of an exotic empire."²³ As a result, Smith primarily concentrates on the two panels featuring Süleyman's procession through the Hippodrome. Along with the sultan, the landscape and architecture dominate the scenes making the viewer completely aware of the combination of the ancient city and its new place in the Ottoman Empire.²⁴ By including ancient monuments, such as the ruins of the Hippodrome and Theodosius's Egyptian obelisk, along with Islamic mosques like the converted Hagia Sophia, Coecke highlighted the change of Constantinople from the last vestige of the Roman Empire to the cultural and political center of Ottoman rule.²⁵

Although the frieze emphasized the city's evolution from the last remnant of the ancient Roman Empire to the capital of the Islamic Ottoman sultan, the depiction of the peaceful landscapes within the Ottoman Empire as viewed by a visitor from the Hapsburg Empire resulted in a "completely different perception from the many prints emphasizing the threat of the Ottoman armies to Christian Europe."²⁶ In

²⁰ According to Van Mander, Coecke's travel to Italy is usually situated around 1525. However, Born acknowledges that while an early stay in Italy cannot be dismissed, it cannot be proven either. Therefore, she argues that his trip likely took place in 1535 to late 1536. Born, "Pieter Coecke van Aelst," 102.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

²² Smith, *Images of Islam*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101-02.

general, sixteenth-century German portrayals of the Ottomans tended to highlight negative qualities and stereotypes of the Turks, whereas Coecke's series presented a more nuanced and accurate representation of the Ottomans and their culture. While janissaries and cavalry are included in Süleyman's procession, they are shown as supporting the sultan in his own city rather than forces directly attacking Christian Europe. Consequently, these particular scenes influenced a number of later equestrian portraits of sultans and other Ottoman riders throughout Europe.²⁷

Orenstein's essay in the exhibition catalogue, *Grand Design*, is one of the few sources that individually discussed each scene of Coecke's frieze. Even though the seven scenes are distinct from one another, a loose narrative does exist.²⁸ Beginning at the left, the first three images of the print provided an example of the route that travelers to Constantinople would have experienced. Throughout these sections, the Europeans are presented as a long procession of travelers winding their way through varied terrain with laden horses. In the first scene, *A Military Camp in Slovenia*, a nighttime encampment is depicted as the travelers in the upper right make their way down a steep and rocky path. In the middle ground, people of all nationalities, distinguished by their attire, build fires, bed down their horses, and fall asleep. More importantly, the man gesturing in the front with a bow in his hand was identified by Van Mander to be Coecke himself.²⁹ According to Orenstein, the pose of Coecke's own figure appears to be based on the nude Mars in the Sala di Psiche in Mantua's Palazzo Te (1526-28).³⁰ *The Passage of a Caravan* illustrated the expedition as it made its way from mountainous terrain to lower ground where peddlers approached to sell drinks, food, and horses. The French inscription identified these locals as '*femmes gregeoises*' while the men wearing pointed hats attending the horses are Bulgarian.³¹

The third panel, *Turkish Soldiers at Rest*, marks a transition in which the European travelers depart, and the Turks dominate the remaining scenes. In the background, the travelers prepared to traverse a river as they moved right, and a Turkish group on horseback traveled opposite of the Europeans in the foreground. From the fourth image on, the frieze transitions completely into the Ottoman world and their customs. The fourth scene depicted a festival of the new moon and

²⁷ Ibid., 102.

²⁸ Orenstein, "Customs and Fashions," 178.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 181.

³¹ Ibid., 180.

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Ramadan fast in Bulgaria as the lunar crescent in the upper right inaugurated the celebrations. The next section demonstrated a Turkish burial in the city of Edirne in which the deceased is carried uphill on a stretcher approaching a cemetery where a man prepared the grave on the left.³² Finally, Coecke concentrated his last two scenes in Constantinople. In the sixth image, the circumcision of a small boy is celebrated as he is carried on the shoulders of a woman in the center. In the foreground a parade is led by musicians as a group of men dancing in the background proclaimed the good news. Important monuments, such as the Church of the Monastery of Christ Pantokrator on the left, the Church of the Holy Apostles in the center, and the Süleymaniye Mosque on the right, make it evident that this celebration took place in the Ottoman capital.³³ While the last scene focused on the Ottoman sovereign and his procession as it made its way from the Hippodrome to the Fatih Mosque on the left.

In addition to Coecke modeling his own figure on that of Mars in the *Sala di Psiche*, Orenstein claims that his composition of the *Festival of the New Moon* also related to Albrecht Dürer's etching *Landscape with Cannon* (1518), which also featured Turks and Hungarians. Furthermore, the figure of Süleyman on horseback was indebted to Dürer's mounted knight in *Knight, Death, and the Devil* from 1513. Although Coecke must have brought home sketches of people and customs "drawn from life" during his trip, Orenstein's argument is that he depicted the scenes through the lens of a sixteenth-century Netherlandish artist steeped in a vocabulary of figures and compositions originating in the Renaissance and earlier sources.³⁴

Born's study "*The Moeurs et fachons de faire de Turcs: Süleyman and Charles V: Iconographic Discourse, Enhancement of Power, and Magnificence, or Two Faces of the Same Coin?*" reviews the documentary value of Coecke's prints as primary sources, the circumstances of his journey to Constantinople, and the artistic and cultural context in which the frieze was created.³⁵ According to Born, even though the exact circumstances regarding Coecke's trip remain uncertain, all written sources situate it within the context of the Antwerp-Brussels tapestry network.³⁶ Therefore, while the commercial purpose of the enterprise of tapestry making in the Ottoman Empire cannot be denied, it was also likely that this trip was a pretext to send spies to the Ottoman Court since Charles V established a diverse network of informants and kept himself

³² Ibid., 180-81.

³³ Ibid., 181.

³⁴ Ibid., 181-82.

³⁵ Born, "*The Moeurs et Fachons de Faire de Turcs*," 283.

³⁶ Ibid., 287.

informed on a daily basis about his Turkish rivals.³⁷ Similar to Smith, Born also highlights Coecke's emphasis on the strong relationship between the Ottoman ruler and his capital. Born notes that the topographic view of the cityscape, which showed contemporary monuments and those from the Byzantine period and antiquity, were used as markers of sovereignty and power, thus delivering a strong political message recognizing Süleyman as the legitimate ruler of the former Eastern Roman Empire.³⁸ Ultimately, Born's argument is that *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* can be considered as an ethnographic reportage or an illustrated travelogue of Coecke's trip to the Ottoman Empire.³⁹

Despite the substantial historical significance of *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks*, scholarly studies regarding this piece are notably lacking. Considering the wide range of material that this frieze provides for historians, the lack of inquiry is surprising. While there have been some studies that attempt to assess certain aspects of this series, more needs to be done especially concerning each individual scene. Although the reasoning and circumstances for Coecke's trip to Constantinople are relatively significant, more vital features exist throughout the scenes which need to be analyzed and discussed in scholarly literature. The scholars and sources discussed above tend to focus on the frieze's subject matter and historical significance in relation to its European provenance and how it reveals European interpretations of the Ottomans without providing historical context and background information on the empire and Turkish customs. Assuming that Coecke went to Turkey as part of Schepper's entourage and on behalf of the Dermoyen company, it is imperative to situate this trip within the historical context of the Hapsburg-Ottoman rivalry and the political circumstances of the Ottoman Empire in the years immediately preceding Coecke's sojourn.

During the sixteenth century, Antwerp was a city of great maritime and commercial significance as it was a center of communication with the eastern and southern Mediterranean. Throughout this time, Antwerp was actively involved in the exploration of Morocco and the Ottoman Empire, resulting in constant trade between the Netherlands and the Levant.⁴⁰ By the mid-sixteenth century, Antwerp's artists and publishers were catering to an audience intrigued and entertained by eye-witness accounts and illustrations of the peoples,

³⁷ Ibid., 288.

³⁸ Ibid., 291-92.

³⁹ Ibid., 294-95.

⁴⁰ Alastair Hamilton, *Arab Culture and Ottoman Magnificence in Antwerp's Golden Age* (London: Arcadian Library, 2001), 1, 5.

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customs, and religions of the Levant. In addition to the interest in Turkish costume and traditions, there was also a more specific fascination with the sultan who was the supreme representative of Ottoman magnificence. Consequently, artists like Coecke sought to satisfy the demand for illustrations of the sultan and culture of the Ottoman Empire.⁴¹

While every scene of the frieze provided the European viewer with much detail on Turkish dress and customs, one of the more intriguing scenes is that of the Turkish funeral (Fig. 1). By comparing historian Metin And's description of a Turkish burial with Coecke's woodcut, not only can we better understand this scene, but it is also possible to find discrepancies within Coecke's interpretation. According to And, when a man or woman died it was custom to wash the corpse in warm water, and afterwards they would wrap the body in a white shroud and place it in a wooden coffin. Only men participated in the funeral processions while the women stayed home. During the procession to the cemetery, which was always outside of the city, the imams walked in front of the coffin with men from other religious orders

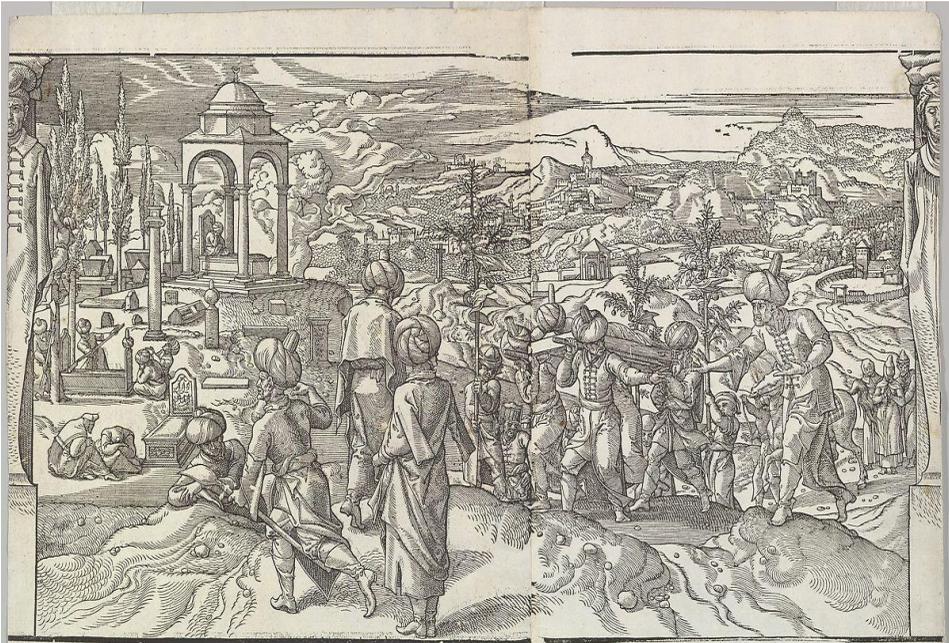


Figure 1. Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *A Turkish Funeral* from the frieze *Ces Moeurs et fachons de faire de Turcz* (*The Customs and Fashions of the Turks*), 1553. Woodcut, Sheet: 13 11/16 x 21 1/4 in (34.7 x 53.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1, 21.

on both sides as the general mourners followed behind.⁴² Based on And's assertion that women were not a part of the cavalcade, Coecke's illustration appears to be incorrect in that he included two women as part of the procession in the far back on the right. Although Hapsburg ambassador Salomon Schweigger's (1551-1622) depiction of a sixteenth-century Muslim funeral in his travel book *Ein neue Reiss Beschreibung auss Teutschland nach Constantinopel und Jerusalem* from 1608 is less detailed than Coecke's, it appears to be more accurate as it depicts a funeral procession featuring only men.⁴³

In general, the women of the household would appear at the grave a few days later where they would utter lamentations and ask the deceased why he had deserted his wife who had loved and served him so well.⁴⁴ Coecke included this aspect on the bottom left where two women sit on the ground with their faces covered and their heads down as they mourn next to a gravestone, behind the women there are two men grieving as a coffin is buried while another man sits on top of a tomb with his head in his hands. Despite the frieze's assertion that everything was "drawn from life," based on the information provided by And, it seems unlikely that women would be mourning in such close proximity to men. Furthermore, the funeral procession along with the burial and various mourners in the background appears to be more of a composite than an actual scene Coecke would have witnessed.

The illustrations of the gravestones and tombs, however, appear to be correct representations of what one would find in an Ottoman cemetery. And notes that each grave would be marked at the head by a single stone that was cylindrical or uncut and about fifty centimeters high. Important persons were sometimes buried in a rectangular marble tomb that had a round marble column topped by a sculpture of the Turkish headgear appropriate to the rank of the deceased. In some cases, the column was finely carved with Arabic inscriptions and quotations from the Quran. Sometimes, instead of a column, the headstone was a marble plaque that was about a handspan in width and as high as a man with carved inscriptions.⁴⁵ Thus, Coecke's depiction of the variety of tombs and gravestones in the background seems to be an accurate portrayal.

⁴² Metin And, "The Social Life of the Ottomans in the Sixteenth Century," in *Ottoman Civilization*, ed. Halil Inalcık and Günsel Renda (Ankara, Turkey: Ministry of Culture, 2004), 425.

⁴³ And included Salomon's image as an example of a Turkish funeral procession. See And, 426.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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The *Celebration of a Circumcision* offers even more detailed examples of Turkish costume and dress for the European viewer (Fig. 2). While And provides a brief description of what a circumcision procession and celebration for a commoner would entail, primary and secondary sources are generally lacking on this aspect of Ottoman culture. Consequently, I will employ a top-down approach by examining royal processions and festivals in order to provide more information on Ottoman circumcisions and the events taking place in Coecke's woodcut. Furthermore, based on the description of Süleyman's sons' circumcisions in 1530 and its historical context, I posit the theory that the illustrations of the circumcision and Süleyman's procession can be read together as an allusion to the festival of 1530 as a means of appealing to the sultan in order to secure the tapestry commission on behalf of the Dermoyen company.

And's discussion of circumcision practices in the Ottoman Empire is barely a paragraph in his essay concerning the social life of the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. He begins by noting that Muslims



Figure 2. Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Celebration of a Circumcision* from the frieze *Ces Moeurs et fachons de faire de Turcz* (*The Customs and Fashions of the Turks*), 1553. Woodcut, Sheet: 14 x 27 1/2 in (35.5 x 69.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/422769> (accessed December 20, 2019).

were circumcised in the same manner as the Jews between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four, and in some cases, it might be done at a younger age for piety or if the child was in danger of dying. On the appointed day, a large procession on foot or horseback would accompany the boy to the mosque where he was catechized by an imam. During the catechism the boy swore to guard the true faith, to be a friend of its friends, and an enemy of its enemies. After the circumcision procedure, the boy's family entertained those in attendance at a banquet which lasted anywhere from one to three days based on their rank and affluence.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this brief explanation is all that And provides, therefore in order to glean more information about circumcision processions and festivities one must turn to the well-documented festivals of the Ottoman princes. Although the celebrations for imperial circumcisions were on a grander scale and much more lavish than what And describes, an assessment of the festivals of 1530 and 1539 not only provides a better understanding of the customs and practices that accompanied circumcisions but also helps to shed light on what is happening in Coecke's depiction of a circumcision procession.

In order to understand the significance of Süleyman's triumphal procession and his sons' circumcisions in 1530, it is important to know the historical context surrounding this event. The 1520s and 1530s constituted the zenith of the Ottoman-Hapsburg rivalry between sovereigns Charles V and Süleyman. One of the main causes of conflict between the sultan and the Hapsburgs during this time was their competing claim to the Hungarian throne. When the Ottomans defeated Hungary in 1526 at the Battle of Mohács, King Louis II died resulting in Archduke Ferdinand I of Austria, who was the brother-in-law of Louis, designating himself king while the Hungarian Estates elected John Szapolyai.⁴⁷ Two years later, Süleyman accepted Szapolyai as king, while Ferdinand retaliated by rejecting Szapolyai's title and occupied Buda. This in turn instigated Süleyman's military campaign of 1529 in which he retook the city and besieged Vienna.⁴⁸ Even though contemporary Europeans, especially Germans, believed that Süleyman's goal was to take Vienna, Turkish art historian Zeynep Yelçe claims that the sultan's main aim was to drive Ferdinand out of Buda and to restore the Hungarian crown to Szapolyai

⁴⁶ Ibid., 425.

⁴⁷ Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650: The Structure of Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 50. King Louis II reigned from 1516-26; Ferdinand was the brother of Charles V and the Archduke of Austria from 1521-64, the King of Hungary from 1526-64, and the Holy Roman Emperor from 1556-64; John Szapolyai was also the King of Hungary from 1526-40.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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in return for an annual tribute. Upon taking Buda and restoring the king, Süleyman followed the Danube to Vienna which appears to be a spontaneous event rather than the original aim of the campaign.⁴⁹ After besieging the city for about two weeks, the sultan decided to retreat back to Constantinople due to bad weather and the loss of some of his men.⁵⁰

After returning to Constantinople, Süleyman celebrated his three eldest sons' circumcisions and the siege of Vienna in 1530. Yelçe notes that nineteenth-century historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall suggested that Süleyman's celebration and its timing was because of the failure of the Vienna campaign. Despite this, in contrast to European accounts, contemporary Ottoman sources did not interpret the siege as a failure since Süleyman was successful in fulfilling his aim of restoring Szapolyai to the throne.⁵¹ Thus, Süleyman was able to utilize the festival of his sons' circumcisions as an occasion to celebrate his victory against the Europeans and a way to demonstrate his sovereign power and authority.

The circumcision festivities of Princes Mustafa, Mehmed, and Selim lasted from 27 June until 25 August. Throughout this time, the Hippodrome served as the center of the celebrations and continued to function as the main venue for subsequent imperial circumcisions into the eighteenth century. On the first day of the festival, Süleyman and his officials made their way through the Hippodrome on horseback accompanied by the imperial band as they were met by the commander of the janissaries, the provincial troop commanders, and the grand vizier who traveled by foot. During the procession, the grand vizier and the highest-ranking military, administrative, and religious officials lined up to kiss the sultan's hand and presented him with various gifts. After this display of power and obeisance, Süleyman and his officials made their way to Ibrahim Pasha Palace where a lodge was erected for the sultan's throne as well as tents and baldachins for prominent guests.⁵² After the sultan's initial procession, there were numerous banquets for officials, members of the religious establishment, Sufis, prominent merchants, and

⁴⁹ Zeynep Yelçe, "Evaluating Three Imperial Festivals: 1524, 1530, 1539," in *Celebration, Entertainment and Theatre in the Ottoman World*, ed. Suraiya Faroqui and Arzu Öztürkmen (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2014), 75.

⁵⁰ In 1530, Ferdinand and his troops besieged Buda again, and although he was unsuccessful in taking the city, he occupied the western part of the Kingdom of Hungary. In response, Süleyman took Güns in 1532 causing the Hapsburgs to seek a truce in 1533. As a result, Cornelis de Schepper was sent as a Hapsburg ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in order to secure a truce between Ferdinand and Süleyman. See Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, 50-51.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 72, 75-76.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 81.

inhabitants of the city. In addition to this, there was dancing and music along with performances and games every day and night. On 20 July, the princes were brought to the Hippodrome and were circumcised in the meeting hall of Ibrahim Pasha Palace.⁵³ According to French historian André Clot, the festivities of 1530 were undoubtedly the most sumptuous of Süleyman's celebrations throughout his lifetime.⁵⁴

The circumcision festival of Princes Bayezid and Cihangir in 1539 followed the same pattern as the previous celebrations for Süleyman's eldest sons. Since the first stately ceremony in any festival was the sultan's arrival at the Hippodrome, Süleyman's procession with his officials and troops inaugurated the festivities. In both cases, the plaza was quiet until the sultan arrived and upon his entrance, the crowd erupted with acclamations and an onset of music which completely transformed the atmosphere.⁵⁵ Yelçe states that in regard to contemporary descriptions of both events, the princes remained almost invisible as the focus was predominantly on Süleyman. Apparently, the only ceremonial experience they enjoyed was their move from the Old Palace to the Ibrahim Pasha residence. As the boys marched to the sultan's lodge in the middle of the plaza, it was a way to put the 'dynastic potential' on display for the crowds.⁵⁶ Consequently, the princes were of significance because they were the offspring of the sovereign who took center stage.⁵⁷

Süleyman's generosity, which was demonstrated through the entertainment and banquets that he provided for his subjects, dominated the festivals and allowed him to present himself as a father figure to all in attendance. The various festivities that took place during the celebrations of 1530 and 1539 reflected the sultan's generosity and showed the splendor and wealth of his realm. The festivals were also an occasion for Süleyman to exhibit his consideration for his subjects and respect towards religious scholars and foreign dignitaries. Thus, Süleyman's celebrations addressed not only his high-ranking officials, but also foreign ambassadors, ordinary performers, and the common folk.⁵⁸ Despite the significance of the common people in Süleyman's ceremonies, Yelçe argues that "we may thus conclude that these festivals focused on

⁵³ Ibid., 81-83.

⁵⁴ André Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent: The Man, His Life, His Epoch* (London: Saqi Books, 1989), 78.

⁵⁵ Yelçe, "Evaluating Three Imperial Festivals," 92.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 93-94.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

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impressing the closer circle of the sultan and foreign rulers via their ambassadors' reports rather than the folk on the streets of Istanbul."⁵⁹

The designation of the Hippodrome as the main locale for these ceremonies played a vital role in emphasizing the sultan's sovereignty. For the Ottomans, much like the Europeans, the Hippodrome contained strong references to imperial tradition. During the time of the Byzantines, the Hippodrome had served as a place of assembly where the emperor demonstrated his power and magnificence. After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman sovereigns appropriated this Byzantine ceremonial space by incorporating it into their imperial displays of power and authority. In 1490, Süleyman's grandfather, Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512), also utilized the Hippodrome as the site for the circumcisions of his sons and the weddings of his daughters.⁶⁰ Moreover, the use of the Hippodrome as the center of imperial circumcisions was continued by Sultan Murad III (r. 1574-95) for the circumcision of his son in 1582 and Sultan Ahmed III's (r. 1703-30) sons' circumcisions in 1720.⁶¹ Thus, this venue featured prominently in Ottoman processions and ceremonies from the fifteenth century into the modern era.

Based on the above discussion, it is possible that Coecke's *Procession of Sultan Süleyman through the Hippodrome* (Fig. 3) and *Celebration of a Circumcision* reference the triumphal procession and festival of 1530. Due to the fact that European diplomats attended the Ottoman celebration and because Coecke was a member of the Hapsburg entourage led by Schepper, it is more than likely that he knew about Süleyman's sons' circumcisions. Moreover, since Charles V kept himself abreast of what was happening with the Ottoman sultan, it would make sense that his ambassadors also knew what was going on in the Empire. As a representative of the Dermoyen firm seeking to secure tapestry commissions, Coecke's subject matter would need to appeal to the sultan

⁵⁹ Ibid., 89. For the circumcisions of 1530, Süleyman invited the doge of Venice, Andrea Gritti, but he excused himself due to old age sending Luigi Mocenigo and Pietro Zeno in his place. See Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, 77. For the festivities of 1539, French and Austrian ambassadors were in attendance along with the Venetian *bailo*. See Yelçe, "Evaluating Three Imperial Festivals," 84.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁶¹ For more information on the circumcision festivals of 1582 and 1720 see Derin Terzioğlu, "The Imperial Circumcision Festival of 1582: An Interpretation" *Muqarnas* 12 (1995) and Esin Atil, "The Story of an Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Festival" *Muqarnas* 10 (1993).



Figure 3. Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Procession of Sultan Süleyman through the Hippodrome* from the frieze *Ces Moeurs et fachons de faire de Turcz (The Customs and Fashions of the Turks)*, 1553. Woodcut, Sheet: 13 7/8 x 34 3/8 in (35.2 x 87.3 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/375772> (accessed December 20, 2019).

in order for his mission to be successful. By alluding to Süleyman's procession through the Hippodrome at the beginning of the festival not only was Coecke commemorating this joyous occasion but he was also emphasizing the sultan's position as the supreme political and military leader of the Ottoman Empire. While Coecke's procession and circumcision scenes may not be direct representations of the 1530 festival, I suggest that they can ultimately be interpreted as combined scenes that depict the princes' celebratory entourage as they make their way to meet the sultan and his officials in the Hippodrome.

It is also plausible that this frieze was meant to serve the dual purpose of becoming a tapestry for the sultan and acquainting a European audience with the customs and fashions of the Turks. Therefore, Coecke's circumcision scene also portrays Muslim preparations for a tradition that was essentially foreign to a Christian viewer. Although the imperial festivals of 1530 and 1539 were extreme examples of circumcision celebrations, the information on the rituals that took place can help us to better understand what is going on in Coecke's woodcut. As the family of the boy make their way to their destination, they are accompanied by a band playing various instruments while a group of men dance in a circle in the background on the left. The importance of music and dancing during a circumcision procession can

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be attested to not only in the commemorations of the sultan's sons' circumcisions but also by And's brief discussion in his essay on social customs of the Ottomans. In addition, there are two European women in the foreground and two European men in the background observing the procession as they make their way to the center of Constantinople which further accentuates the West's interest in the exotic practices of the Ottoman Turks.

Despite the wealth of subject matter provided by Coecke's series, more work needs to be done on the various aspects of each scene. By examining sources on the Ottoman Empire and its traditions the modern viewer can better understand what is being depicted in the frieze, especially in regard to the funeral and circumcision scenes. Furthermore, historical context is key to understanding the atmosphere in which Coecke's original sketches were created. Situating *The Customs and Fashions of the Turks* within the historical framework of the Ottoman Empire in the late-1520s and early-1530s allows for a more thorough understanding of the circumstances surrounding Coecke's trip in 1533 since Schepper's entourage traveled to Turkey due to the conflict between Süleyman and the Hapsburgs. While it is more than likely that Coecke did witness the events portrayed throughout the frieze during his sojourn, certain aspects of his renderings are not entirely factual as evidenced by his inclusion of ancient monuments in the Hippodrome and the women in the funeral procession. As a result, Coecke's frieze appears to be a composite of what he saw and references to the past. Therefore, it is possible that the *Procession of Sultan Süleyman through the Hippodrome* and *Celebration of a Circumcision* can be viewed together as a reference to the imperial festival of 1530 which highlighted the sultan's status as the supreme sovereign of the Ottoman Empire. In essence, it is probable that the purpose of this series was to gain a tapestry commission from the sultan for the Dermoyen company and to acquaint a European audience with the customs, fashions, lands, and ruler of the Ottoman Empire.

Samantha Goodrich is from Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she acquired her B.A. and M.A. in history at the University of New Mexico. She is currently part of the History Department at the University of Arizona and is working on her Ph.D. in early modern Middle Eastern and European history. Currently, she specializes in the comparative study of the Holy Roman and Ottoman Empires. More specifically, she focuses on the similarities and differences between Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Ottoman Sultan Süleyman I in the realms of sovereignty, religion, and politics. In addition to this, her research interests include the examination of early modern heresy and cross-cultural contact in the borderlands of Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

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