

## Coffee and Orientalism

HI3T5 Value in the Age of Reason

2025-6, term 1, week 7

Dr. Michael Bycroft

### Coffee as a global commodity

- Similar pattern to sugar
- Fruit of the coffee plant (*coffea arabica*) consumed in East Africa and Arabian Peninsula for centuries before 1400
- The modern beverage (roasting, grinding, and infusing coffee beans) usually traced to Yemen in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD
- Ottomans occupy Yemen from 1538 and the beverage spreads to other parts of the Ottoman empire and is exported from Mocha and Alexandria
- Adopted in Western Europe from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century
  - First coffee houses in England (1650), France (by 1672), Vienna (1683), Boston (1689)
  - Dutch bring trees to Ceylon (1658) and Java (1699)
  - French bring trees to Martinique (1723) and St Domingue (1734)
  - Portuguese bring tree to Brazil (1727)
  - “by 1788 St Domingue supplied half of the world’s coffee” (Pendergrast)
  - “During the 1700s, Java and Mocha became the most famous and sought after coffees” (Pendergrast)
- “the second most valuable exported legal commodity on earth (after oil)” (Pendergrast, 2001)

### The social history of coffee

- Ideal for Sufis in Yemen, who use it to stay awake during nocturnal chants and prayers, and to make money
- Attempt to ban coffee in Mecca in 1511, since encourages “clandestine nocturnal gatherings” (Hattox) around mosques
- Ottoman coffee shops a cultural institution by the sixteenth century
- English coffee shops were versatile social spaces, serving as banks, auction houses, debating chambers, and laboratories (Cowan, Ellis)
- But there was more to coffee shops than coffee, and more to coffee than coffee shops (Withington, Intoxicating Spaces website)
- Women drank little coffee in coffee shops, but drank much coffee elsewhere

## Coffee and Orientalism

- Orientalism = a set of colonial and condescending stereotypes about a vaguely defined 'East'
- Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978)
- Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Syria in 1798-1801
- Earlier European views of the Orient were significantly different from this
- Yes, Islamic empires were treated as religious and geopolitical rivals – the Ottomans reach the walls of Vienna in 1683
- But there was much genuine scholarly interest in Islamic culture
  - Edward Pococke (1604-1691), first Professor of Arabic at Oxford University
  - New Latin translation of the Qur'an by Ludovico Marracci, 1698 - "the first philologically sound treatment of the Qur'an in the West" (Bevilacqua)
  - Antoine Galland, *One Thousand and One Nights* (1704-1717), first European translation of these Middle Eastern folk tales
- There were alliances of convenience, especially between France and the Ottomans against their common enemy the Austrian Habsburgs
- Ottoman decline has been greatly exaggerated (Darwin)...
- ...but things were changing around 1700, with French merchants increasingly looking to the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean at the expense of the Ottomans
- Coffee was "a microcosm of European relations with the rest of the world during a key historical period" (Spary)

## The evaluation of coffee

- An embarrassment of riches
- A range of sensations: aroma, flavour, heat, mental stimulation, 'acidity'
- Multiple uses: medical, recreational, culinary
- Various kinds of expertise: medical theory, medical cases, theories of taste and digestion, botany, chemistry, scholarship
- Proliferating varieties: Yemen, Indian Ocean, Caribbean (for the French c. 1700)
- A playground for historians of material evaluation – exciting but easy to get lost!