

FEEDING PEOPLE, FEEDING POWER

Imarets in the Ottoman Empire



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The Ottoman Imperial Kitchens as Imarets

Zeynep Tarım Ertuğ

The imperial kitchen (*matbah-ı âmire*) of the Ottoman palace existed not merely to attend to the culinary needs of the sultan and the resident imperial family; it was a large and well-organized institution serving the entire staff of the palace. The kitchen was responsible for preparing food for visitors and guests, and for soldiers when they came to the palace to collect their salaries. The imperial kitchen also delivered generous amounts of foodstuffs and prepared foods to the poor and needy. Unlike the charity-supported imarets, the imperial kitchen was fully funded from the state budgets; however, by serving the poor and needy of the city, it also functioned as a large and well-endowed imaret would have done. Because of these characteristics, the imperial kitchen is worth studying in detail as part of the general discussion of imarets.

Both the imperial palace in Edirne and the Old Palace in Istanbul had a *matbah-ı âmire*, but the imperial kitchen reached its most complex and largest form in the Topkapı Palace. In the nineteenth century, other palaces were established in Istanbul: the Yıldız Palace, the Dolmabahçe Palace and the Çırağan Palace. Their kitchens were all modeled on that of the Topkapı Palace, and therefore it serves as the basis for the present study.

Kitchen Units under the Administration of the *matbah-ı amire*

The kitchen was located in the second courtyard of the Topkapı Palace.¹ It regularly prepared food for more than 3,000 people a day; on special occasions this number could swell to 10,000. The chief administrator of the kitchen was called the *matbah-ı âmire emini*. The imperial kitchen was divided into nine or more units, each unit with its own cooking teams. Each cooking team had a leader (*ocakçıbaşı*) and a chief cook (*aşçıbaşı*), as well as teams of cooks (*aşçılar*), dough makers (*hamurcular*), dessert makers (*tatlıcılar*), rice makers (*pilavcılar*), kebab makers (*kebapçılar*), coffee makers (*kahveciler*), compote makers (*hoşafçılar*) and

¹ For architectural detail, see: Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 69-72.

assistants who helped them. At the end of the sixteenth century, the imperial kitchen employed 60 cooks and 200 helpers, while altogether the number of staff in its nine kitchen units totaled some 2,000 to 2,200 workers.² The number of workers changed over time, but it never dropped below 1,000. While a document dated 1693 puts the total number of staff at 1,250, Koçi Bey writes that this number reached 4,246 in the first half of the seventeenth century.³

NecipoĖlu argues that the architectural structure of the palace kitchens indicates a division according to specialized organization and that the kitchen building's eight domes mark individual units catering to different groups.⁴ Historians and travelers also mention that the *matbah-ı âmile* was divided into units, but their accounts show inconsistencies in the number of units. Four units of the kitchen, the *küshane* (separated from the building of the *matbah-ı âmile*), the *harem mutfacı*, the *valide sultan mutfacı*, and the *enderun mutfacı*, prepared food exclusively for the residents of the palace. The *küshane*, the smallest unit of the kitchen, was responsible for cooking for the sultan only. It employed thirteen workers (one *serçinî* and twelve cooks) and, if necessary, travelled with the sultan. In the eighteenth century, its employees were paid 2 to 6 *akçe* per day.⁵ The *harem* kitchen prepared food for the women who lived in the palace. According to a document which is undated, but probably from the eighteenth century, this unit was staffed by 107 people who included an *aşçıbaşı*, and *aşçılar*, *hamurcular*, *tatlıcılar*, *kebabçılar*, *hoşafçılar* and their assistants.⁶ The *valide sultan* kitchen prepared food for the consorts, daughters, nieces and other female relatives of the sultan. The *enderun* kitchen was for the boys living in the palace, who were being trained to become palace employees.

Five other kitchen units prepared food for staff members who did not live in the palace (*birün halkı*) and for those visiting the palace on business. The kitchen of the chief white eunuch (*babüssaade ağası*) served food to the *kapı ağaları* (guards) and their staff members, and to visitors to the *divan* (council hall).⁷ The chief black eunuch (*darüsaade ağası*) kitchen which was separate from the *harem*

² İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devleti'nin Saray Teşkilâtı*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1988), 380.

³ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), İbnülemin Saray 1939; Koçi Bey, *Koçi Bey Risalesi*, ed. Ali Kemal Aksüt (İstanbul: Vakıf Kütüphanesi, 1939), 41.

⁴ NecipoĖlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 71.

⁵ BOA, İbnülemin Saray 2544 (AH 1118 [1706]), 2986 (AH 1126 [1714]); Cevdet Saray 7422 (AH 1164 [1750]), 7074 (AH 1165 [1752]), 5447 (AH 1172 [1759]), 8012 (AH 1191 [1777]), 7433 (AH 1165 [1751]).

⁶ BOA, Cevdet Saray 1852 (undated).

⁷ In a document showing daily, weekly and monthly expenses, this unit is a separate section. Topkapı Sarayı Arşivi (TSA), D. 8510 (sixteenth century). According to a document (probably from the seventeenth century), there was also a unit with 167 employees, called *paşa matbahı*. It is reasonable to think that it could be related to the *babüssaade ağası* kitchen because this unit worked for a high-ranking official. BOA, Cevdet Saray 1852.

matbahı prepared food for the staff employed in the women's quarters. In addition, it was responsible for cooking and preparing the feast of the *surre alayi* (the procession accompanying the gifts sent annually to Mecca by the sultan).⁸ In the *hazinedarbaşı*'s kitchen, food for the head of the treasury office and his staff was prepared. The *kılârcıbaşı* kitchen prepared food for the kitchen staff who cooked and served. The *misafir* kitchen served food to the general public visiting the palace. A document, probably from the seventeenth century, states that there were a total of 63 employees in this kitchen: two *ocakçıbaşı* (cooks) and their 27 assistants, one dough maker and his thirteen assistants, one dessert maker and his nine assistants, and one *kebabçı* and his nine assistants.⁹ The *helvahane* (confectionary), which stood under the administration of the *matbah-ı âmire*, consisted of smaller groups, each responsible for preparing pickles, *helva*, preserves, fruit juices, medicinal preparations, and various kinds of soaps.¹⁰ The number of employees in this unit varied between 100 and 400 workers at different dates.¹¹ Finally, the *kılâr-ı âmire* (imperial pantry) was responsible for the administration of the food supplies needed for the different kitchens.¹² Foodstuffs purchased for the palace were kept in the *kılâr*. These foodstuffs were checked by the *matbah-ı âmire emini*.¹³ The *kılâr* also included several units comparable to the *matbah-ı âmire*,¹⁴ and its workers were sent to serve in the *matbah-ı âmire* during those days when large numbers of people were being served, for example, on the days when the *divan* met.¹⁵ In addition to these cooking units, there were also brick ovens where three kinds of bread and other types of baked goods were prepared daily, a building for the yogurt-makers,¹⁶ and a place for raising chickens.

Detailed and chronological account registers show revenues and expenses of the palace kitchen, and although the internal structures of the smaller units and the

⁸ BOA, Cevdet Saray 1280 (11 Receb 1216 [1801]).

⁹ BOA, Cevdet Saray 1852.

¹⁰ For the *matbah-ı âmire*, see: BOA, İbnülemin Saray 2879 (AH 1121 [1709]). For one sample register of the *helvahane*, see: Arslan Terzioğlu, *Helvahane Defteri ve Topkapı Sarayı'nda Eczacılık: Eine bisher unbekannte Handschrift über die Herstellung der Arzneien im Topkapı Schloss in Istanbul und ihre Bedeutung für die Geschichte der Pharmazie* (Istanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, 1992).

¹¹ Although Eremya Çelebi said that the number of workers was 400, Uzunçarşılı found there were six masters and 100 apprentices. Eremya Çelebi Kömürcüyan, *İstanbul Tarihi: XVII. Asırda İstanbul*, transl. Hrand D. Andreasyan (Istanbul: Kutulmuş Basımevi, 1952), 12; Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devleti'nin Saray Teşkilâtı*, 459. For another example of workers in the eighteenth century, see: BOA, İbnülemin Saray 2876; Cevdet Saray 339 (27 M 1187 [1773]).

¹² BOA, Cevdet Saray 5766 (27 C 1174 [1761]).

¹³ BOA, İbnülemin Saray 2770 (AH 1118 [1706]), 3238. There are many documents concerning this issue.

¹⁴ BOA, Cevdet Saray 743 (AH 1268 [1851]).

¹⁵ For a council meeting dated 1820, it was determined to send fifteen people to be paid four *guruş* each. BOA, Cevdet Saray 139.

¹⁶ In 1773 it had 22 staff members. See: BOA, Cevdet Saray 339.

number of employees changed from time to time, records of the salary payments were always kept. The following example of such records reveals the meal production activities in the *harem mutfağı*.¹⁷ This record indicates that there were nine *ocaks* in this sections, and each *ocak* gave tables to the harem, seating eleven people each, as Albertus Bobovius states in his seventeenth-century memoirs.¹⁸

Table 1: Ocaks of the Harem Kitchen

Units (<i>ocak</i>)	Dishes ¹⁹ (<i>sahan</i>)	Tables (<i>sofra</i>)	Cooks	Average # of dishes per table
Efendi Ocağı	200 sahan	18 tables	11	11
Başkadin Ocağı	130 sahan	14 tables	7	9
Kadın Efendiler Ocağı	120 sahan	11 tables	8	10
Hazinedar Usta Ocağı	120 sahan	10 tables	9	12
Kethüda Kadın Ocağı	111 sahan	12 tables	8	9
Büyük Ağa Ocağı	126 sahan	11 tables	9	11
Hamurcular Ocağı	for all		7	
Tatlıcı Ocağı	for all		5	
Perakende Ocağı (for boatmen, stablemen)	45 sefertası (dinner pail) 92 karavana (a type of large kettle)		11	
Total	807 sahan 45 sefertası 92 karavana	86 tables	77	

¹⁷ BOA, Cevdet Saray 1917 (undated).

¹⁸ Ali Ufki, *Albertus Bobovius ya da Santuri Ali Ufki Bey'in Anıları: Topkapı Sarayı'nda Yaşam*, transl. Ali Berktaş (İstanbul: Kitap Basımevi, 2002), 42.

¹⁹ For examples of dishes, see: Julian Raby and Nurhan Atasoy, *Iznik: The Pottery of Ottoman Turkey* (London: Alexandria Press, 1989), 38.

The Palace Kitchen as a Charitable Organization

In addition to preparing food and serving meals to palace residents, to civilian employees, guards and soldiers, and several types of visitors, the palace kitchen sent out prepared meals to the homes of high-ranking state officials and distributed free food to the poor. In his *Seyahatname*, Evliya Çelebi tells us that the palace kitchen provided meals for the poor every day.²⁰ Another charitable undertaking by the palace was to provide meals for the soldiers in the month of Ramadan and on religious holidays. The most important gifts were given on the fourteenth or fifteenth day of Ramadan, when soldiers were offered hundreds of trays of baklava.²¹ This event required intense preparations, including borrowing trays from the local merchants and delivering trays of baklava to the barracks. At one point, the janissaries decided to keep the trays, and the palace administration started purchasing trays instead of borrowing them. Until the eighteenth century, baklava prepared for the soldiers was made with honey, while the baklava for the officers contained sugar syrup.²²

All kitchens were run by the *matbah-ı âmire*, and all kitchens had allocations for the services rendered to the poor and needy in their budgets. There were three types of food aid given out by the kitchens. First, the palace kitchens distributed cash to be used for purchasing foodstuffs. After the reign of Mehmed II, account books of the *matbah-ı âmire* include an entry in the expenses section (*vüzi'a min zalik*) related to aid given to the poor. (This entry, however, did not include the private donations of the sultan.) Palace account books show that the biggest expense of this kind was the monthly payment of 2,000 and yearly 24,000 *akçe* in the period between 2 February 1489 and 22 January 1490, given out to the poor who came to the imperial gate (*bab-ı hümayun*).²³ An account book dated 1469 indicates that the *kilâr emini* himself took part in distributing money to the poor every Monday, Thursday, and Friday. On Mondays and Thursdays, 250 *akçe*, and on Fridays 1,000 *akçe* were given as charity.²⁴ In addition to the cash distribution, the kitchens allocated money in their budgets for foodstuffs like meat, rice, and bread, and the expenses for firewood for the ovens. For example, for the month of

²⁰ Evliya calls it the *imaret-i saray-ı cedid*. Evliya Çelebi, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi, 1. Kitap*, ed. by Orhan Şaik Gökyay (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1996), 132.

²¹ BOA, İbnülemin Saray 3090 (19 Ramazan 1123 [1711]). There are many documents related to the distribution of baklava. For example, there were 100 trays in the kitchen expenses of the year AH 981. See: Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "İstanbul Saraylarına ait Muhasebe Defterleri," *Belgeler* 9 (1979): 116.

²² BOA, DTŞF 16/ 50.

²³ Barkan, "Muhasebe Defterleri," 90-93. Kitchen expenses in this year were registered in the amount of 1,536,896 *akçe*. See for the same register: Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "Saray Mutfakının 894-895 (1489-1490) Yılına âit Muhasebe Bilânçosu," *İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, 23, 1-2 (1962-63), 387.

²⁴ Barkan, "Muhasebe Defterleri," 187-208.

Zilhicce the total expenses amounted to 63,595 *akçe*, covering foodstuffs, transport, utensils, and incidental expenses, and allocating 6,000 *akçe* to charity contributions.²⁵

The second type of food aid distributed by the kitchens was uncooked foodstuffs constituting of basic ingredients for meals: meat, rice, bread and firewood. The amount of the foodstuffs needed was determined by the *matbah-ı amire emini* and delivered either daily or monthly. Also, on any given day the kitchen gave away foodstuffs to additional needy people who happened to be at the palace. Records show that in 1574 the kitchen distributed 166 sheep and 155 *kile* of rice to such people.²⁶ Encouraged by the generosity of the *matbah-ı amire*, people submitted applications to receive help. For example, in the year 1799, a woman named Demihoş applied to the palace administration to receive charity.²⁷ Demihoş had been a resident of the palace, but had married and now lived outside the precinct. In her application she stated that her husband had passed away, and that she was in dire straits. She requested a daily allowance of four *vukiyye* of fat, three *vukiyye* of rice, four *vukiyye* of mutton and three *çeki* of firewood for her large family. Her application was granted. Another application by a woman named Tahire Kadın was also approved.²⁸

As a third form of food aid, the palace kitchen distributed prepared meals. For example, some of the food prepared for the janissaries of the *dergâh-ı âli*, the *piyadegân* (foot soldiers), and the *solaks* (guardsmen attending to the sultan in processions) was sent to the poor. A record from the year 1574 shows that the expenses for such charitable donations figured in the budget of the *matbah-ı amire* responsible for cooking for these groups.²⁹ A sixteenth-century *matbah-ı amire* document lists the quantity of meals prepared by the kitchen for the members of the *divan-ı hümayun*, and its staff and guests.³⁰ According to this document, in addition, the janissaries received 300 bowls of rice soup and 300 pieces of cooked meat, as did the *yayabaşı* (head of the provincial infantry) and the *solaks* (infantrymen-bodyguards); the *gayri*³¹ received 100 dishes, 100 pieces of meat and 100 pieces of bread. The kitchen used 4.5 *kile* of rice and fourteen sheep for the food prepared for the janissaries, *yayabaşı*, and *solaks*. The food given away to the poor consisted of one *kile* of rice, one sheep and 30 pairs of *harci fodla* (a type of bread).

²⁵ Barkan, "Muhasebe Defterleri," 210.

²⁶ In comparison, on the same date, the kitchen also distributed 2,174 sheep and 759 *kile* of rice to janissaries and *solaks*. Barkan, "Muhasebe Defterleri," 145, 148.

²⁷ BOA, Cevdet Saray 4405/ 1 (24 Recep 1214 [1799]).

²⁸ BOA, Cevdet Saray 4405/ 2 (1214 [1799]).

²⁹ 19,650 *çift hassa* and 65,056 *harci ekmek* were distributed. Barkan, "Muhasebe Defterleri," 144.

³⁰ TSA, D. 4628.

³¹ In this document, meals or cash distributed to the poor is listed as *gayriya*.

Other than these three types of food for charity, the imperial kitchen sent food in *sefertas* (dinner pail) and *karavanas* (a type of large kettle) and on large trays covered with cloth to the people living in the neighborhood of the palace.³² During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, aid was given mostly in the form of foodstuffs, and sometimes as meals. For example in the beginning of the seventeenth century, during the reign of Mehmed IV, between 400 and 500 people were fed soup and bread from the kitchen. Some of them were visitors on official business, and others came just to receive their meals.³³ In the nineteenth century the palace mostly began to send cooked meals to its neighbors.

Two documents from the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries give us an idea about how extensive this food program was. In the sixteenth century, the *divan* held sessions four times a week, excluding the month of Ramadan and religious holidays. The number of sheep needed to serve meals to visitors of the *divan* reached 166 in the year 1574; in the same year, 122 sheep were used for meals to be served to visiting ambassadors, and 1,534 sheep were used by the kitchen of the *dariüssade ağası*.³⁴

Table 2: Consumption of meat and rice

	meat	rice
visitors of the <i>divan</i> and the needy	166 sheep	155 kile
ambassadors	122 sheep	229 kile
<i>dariüssade ağası</i> kitchen	1,534 sheep	834 kile
soldiers	2,174 sheep	759 kile

In the nineteenth century, the kitchens of the palaces between the Dolmabahçe Sarayı and Ortaköy distributed prepared food. The amount of food sent out was so abundant that the kitchens of these palaces actually functioned as imarets. According to several memoirs, during the reign of Abdülhamid II, this practice reached such a level that some considered it a waste. Food given away by the palace was so generous that some people stopped cooking in their homes and moved into the neighborhood to save money. This practice led to such enormous expenses for the imperial kitchen that during the reign of Sultan Reşad (1909-1918), when a reorganization of the palace was undertaken, reductions in kitchen

³² Some sources show that food was sent from the *perakende* kitchen. This unit could be affiliated with the *misafir* kitchen. See: BOA, Cevdet Saray 1852.

³³ Ottaviano Bon, *The Sultan's Seraglio: An Intimate Portrait of Life at the Ottoman Court* (London: Saqi Books, 1996), 36.

³⁴ Barkan, "Muhasebe Defterleri," 145.

expenses were implemented.³⁵ For example, the palace sent out smaller numbers of food carriers (*tablakâr*).³⁶

An account book of the Topkapı and Çırağan Palaces' *matbah-ı âmire*³⁷ shows that for the month of April 1833, 2,862 *kıyye* of rice were used in meals prepared for the poor.³⁸ The same document indicates that for the gardeners, guards and *suyolcus* (people in charge of the maintenance of waterways) 145 *kıyye* rice were used. The amount of rice given to visitors in one month was detailed separately in the same document. For example, Daranizade Mehmed Ağa who, together with nineteen staff members, came to Istanbul from Damascus, consumed 120 *kıyye* of rice in one month. Since the kitchen figured rice consumption at 6 *kıyye* of rice per person per month, we can conclude that 2,862 *kıyye* was enough to feed 477 people. This indicates that, in addition to the residents of the palace, the kitchen was feeding an average of 500 people every month.

Table 3: Rice consumption

Beneficiaries	Monthly amount of rice
Poor	2,862 <i>kıyye</i>
Guards, <i>suyolcus</i> , gardener	145 <i>kıyye</i>
Mehmed Ağa and his staff	120 <i>kıyye</i>

Both the palace kitchen and the grand vizier's residence at the *Bab-ı Âli* (Sublime Porte) also distributed food on special occasions, such as the sultan's accession to the throne, religious holidays, royal births (*veladet-i hümayun*) and the *uhufe divanı* (distributions of salaries) where soldiers or students might be the recipients.³⁹ The most sizeable donations were handed out during the holy month of Ramadan, with the sultan personally contributing to the money for *iftar* meals and gifts (*diş kirası*). Especially during the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), between the hours of *iftar* and *teravih* prayers, Serencebey Street which connects

³⁵ Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil, *Saray ve Ötesi: Son Hatıralar* (İstanbul: İnkılap ve Aka Kitapevleri, 1981), 21-23; Tahsin Paşa, *Sultan Abdülhamid: Tahsin Paşa'nın Yıldız Hatıraları* (İstanbul: Boğaziçi Yayınları, 1990).

³⁶ Arzu Terzi, *Hazine-i Hassa Nezareti* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2000), 135.

³⁷ The Çırağan Palace was used as a summer palace at that time; therefore, one register included the two palaces' expenses. For the official functions of summer palaces, see: Selman Can, *Belgelerle Çırağan Sarayı* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1999), 9.

³⁸ BOA, Cevdet Saray 2589. One *kıyye* equals 1,280 gram.

³⁹ About distributing *pilav* and *zerde* to elementary school students, see: BOA, Cevdet Saray 6505 (13 S 1224 [1809]).

the Beşiktaş district to the Yıldız Palace would fill up with people coming to take advantage of the free meals and gifts given away by the palace.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the budgets of the imperial palace kitchens included allocations for providing food or stipends for the poor. In the nineteenth century, food aid was mostly in the form of cooked meals. Palace kitchens, in their capacity as imarets for visitors and neighborhood inhabitants, usually served four kinds of meals. These were rice pilaf, meat, bread, and *zerde*, a rice pudding cooked with saffron. Rice pilaf was served with a piece of boiled meat. On special days, rice soup cooked with meat and parsley, and baklava prepared with honey and walnuts were added to the menu. The quality of the food prepared in the palace kitchen was always better than that of food cooked in imarets outside the palace. In the nineteenth century, many memoirs and palace account books described a fantastic diversity and quantity of food distributed from palaces, a kind of culinary hyperbole to match the architecture of the Dolmabahçe Palace.

In conclusion, the imperial kitchen continually assisted the poor and functioned as one of the largest imarets of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, the same kitchen fed an enormous diversity of people, as did the imarets scattered throughout the imperial capital and in the other towns of the empire.

⁴⁰ Tahsin Paşa, *Sultan Abdülhamid*, 143.