



Turkey

by Stephen O. Murray

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Jutting into the Mediterranean Sea from southwestern Asia (and including some territory in Europe and the island of Cyprus), the modern nation of Turkey is 780,580 square kilometers in area. Roughly seventy percent of the population of 66 million lives in cities, with the interior lightly populated. The annual rate of population growth is 1.27%. Eighty percent of the population is Turkish, twenty percent (mostly in the southeast, close to Iraq and Iran) Kurdish. The inhabitants are nearly all (99.8%) Muslim, mostly Sunni.

The government--a parliamentary democracy--and even more so, the army-- which has intervened at any signs of Islamicist influence in the government--have been resolutely secular since the "Young Turks" headed by Ataturk (Mustafa Kemal, 1881-1938) overthrew the Ottoman dynasty, which had combined the secular power of sultans with religious primacy of caliphs for six centuries, and founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Ataturk shifted the capital from Istanbul (formerly known as Constantinople and Byzantium) to Ankara.

The center and eastern part of what is now Turkey was part of Assyrian and Hittite and other civilizations, the site of the court of King Midas, and the homeland of the self-castrated *galli* priests of the goddess Cybele.

The Mediterranean coast (and, just off it, the island of Lesbos, home of Sappho) was Greek in culture and language in ancient times. In addition to ancient Troy, the great trading port of Ephesus (modern Izmir) is on the west coast.

The western portion of modern Turkey was the Roman province of Asia, including what had been the kingdom of Pergamom that was bequeathed to Rome upon the death of Attalos III in 133 B. C. E. The capital of the eastern Roman empire, Constantinople (Kostantiniyya in Turkish), at the edge of Europe, became Byzantium and the center of (Eastern) Orthodox Christianity, until the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II conquered it in 1453.

Although homosexuality has figured prominently in Turkish history and literature, in modern Turkey the status of homosexuality and of glbtq communities are insecure at best.

Divan Poetry

Classical Turkish poetry celebrated beautiful boys and bemoaned both their fickleness and their growing up and sprouting facial and body hair. Some of the poetry praising the beauty of boys may be interpreted as metaphorical praise for the divine. The most famous of the homoerotic mystic poets, Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) became the leader of Sufism in Konya in what is now central Turkey, and was known as "Rum" within the Seljuk Empire.

Homoerotic poetry was much admired during the Ottoman period, as well, with the eighteenth-century court poet Nedim being the most important later poet.

The Ottoman Empire

In the Ottoman Empire, as in the Mamluk regimes of Egypt and Syria eventually subdued by and incorporated within it, the ruling elite consisted of slaves (*kullar*, singular *ku*) who were born Christian, acquired early, and trained to defend and administer the empire. Free of family obligations, they were bound only to the sultan who raised them.

The exclusion of those born Muslims, including the sons of the ruling elite, was consciously designed to prevent the concentration of inherited fortunes and the concomitant feudal growth in power of rich families.

Ajem-oghlan (foreign-born youths) were separated at an early age from parents, homeland, and the Christian faith. They were selected for their "bodily perfection, muscular strength, and intellectual ability, so far as it could be judged without long testing" at the non-Muslim margins of the empire. The very choicest--"all handsome boys, physically perfect, and of marked intellectual promise"--were taken into the palaces of the sultans as *iç oglans* (pages). When presented before the Sultan, they were clothed in silk and cloth of gold and silver thread.

As Busbecq noted in the sixteenth century, "The Turks rejoice greatly when they find an exceptional man, as though they had acquired a precious object, and they spare no labor or effort in cultivating him." Subsequent historians have not considered that criteria such as bodily perfection and muscular strength might encompass a sexual attraction, as well as an aesthetic one.

Because a sultan could not enjoy association on terms of intimate friendship with those who were high officials of state, he was practically forced by a combination of principles and circumstances to spend his leisure hours with boys, eunuchs, and women. Before the middle of the reign of Sulayman (the Magnificent, who ruled 1520-1566), no woman resided in the entire vast Topkapi palace, where the sultan spent most of his time.

Homosexual relations are a predictable outcome of a social system in which the sexes are segregated, individual masculine prowess is highly valued, and women derogated and isolated. That the boys were watched carefully by eunuchs, both day and night, paralleling the surveillance of harem women, indicates that homosexual relations among *iç-oglan*s was a concern.

While serving a sultan or other high official sexually might have been expected on the part of *iç-oglan*s, a high-placed Ottoman official would not have been eager to publicize such service, as it might subject the youth to taunts similar to those that reminded Julius Caesar of his youthful relationship with Nicomedes of Bythia (in the northern part of what is now Turkey).

There are many reports that sodomy was rife in the Ottoman Empire, but none suggests that being inseminated increased one's masculinity. However, such homosexual receptivity did not debar one from the responsibilities and honors of high office. Favorite boys grew up to marry their masters' daughters, and to take over management of businesses and properties. The Sultan's favorite boys often grew up to be generals, governors, and high court officials.

Although the system of staffing administration and army with aliens was successful in preventing hereditary power from accumulating outside the control of the sultanate, it did not prevent collective action in behalf of group interests. The "Janissaries" (the usual Western designation for the Ottoman army, derived from *Yenicheri*, which meant "new troops," the sultan's infidel-born infantry that comprised only a quarter of the army) meddled in successions, refused to go too far afield (thus saving Persia and Vienna from conquest), rioted, and increasingly extorted sultans.

The tribute in the form of boys (*devshirme*) officially ended in the late seventeenth century, but handsome males (especially Armenian ones) continued to be sold into service in male brothels and to powerful individuals until the disruptions of World War I.

In addition to much homoerotic poetry and a reputation for pederastic use of youth from the Balkans, Armenia, and Georgia, Ottoman Turkey was renowned for the institution of the *hamam* (bathhouse). *Hamams* were constructed throughout the empire (for example, one in Budapest continues to operate). The young male attendants (*tellaks*) were available for sex as well as for washing and massaging clients. The *Dellakname-i Dilkusa* (The Record of Tellaks) detailed the services, prices, and beauties of *tellaks*, even specifying how many times a *tellak* could bring a client to orgasm.

There were also baths for women. Pubic hair and any other body hair was rigorously removed. This required close scrutiny of women's bodies by attendants or friends, and some female *hamams* had a reputation for rampant lesbianism, though, like the reputed activities of those secluded in harems, there is vastly more male surmise than actual observation of behavior in the sometimes lurid accounts by foreign residents. (There are no sexual life histories written by women of the Ottoman Empire.) The Venetian envoy to the court of Sulayman reported that unsliced cucumbers could not be taken into the harem, because they would be used by the women on each other as dildoes.

Coffee houses were also notorious locales for male-male sexual liaisons in Ottoman Turkey. The first one opened in the capital in 1555. The government made periodic attempts to prohibit coffee houses, the most drastic being Murad IV's 1622 law mandating execution of coffee drinkers (and tobacco smokers). Throughout the empire, dancing boys were routinely prostituted.

The Ambiguous Current Situation

Very much as in Latin America, in contemporary Turkey sodomy is not prohibited in the criminal code, but transgendered and homosexual persons are nevertheless frequently harassed by police. Police have vaguely specified mandates to uphold public morals and order, and that gives them license to attack the more visible departures from conventional sex or gender patterns.

Moreover, glbtq organizations have recurrently been banned as affronts to public decency under the Law of Association's tenth article.

Also as in Latin America, in Turkey there is strong family pressure to marry and procreate, and those who do not are treated as less than adult.

The traditional and still predominant organization of homosexuality is "heterogender." That is, a masculine insertor (*kulanpara*) is not stigmatized as homosexual, while the *ibne* he penetrates is feminized by sexual receptivity and expected to be feminine in other ways. In the capital of Ankara and the metropolis of Istanbul, some persons have rejected being defined by these roles and consider themselves "modern" and "gay" (though the word *gay* is used as a new synonym for *ibne* by many).

Turkey is a member of the North American Treaty Organization and has sought to become a member of the European Economic Community. Since 2001, efforts have been made to bring Turkey's legal code into conformity with the Amsterdam Code's human rights policies, which specifically include concerns about discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation.

Despite pressure from those seeking integration into the European Union and some lobbying by Turkish gay and lesbian organizations, incidents of active repression have recurred. Police raids on bars and the detention of transvestites were commonplace in the late 1980s. In 1989 the publishers of *Yesil Baris* (the newspaper of the Green Party), were charged with "spreading homosexual information" because they published a series of articles about lesbian and gay issues.

A 1993 gay and lesbian pride conference in Istanbul (which had been approved by the Interior Ministry) was banned just before it was to begin by the governor of Istanbul on the grounds that it would be contrary to Turkey's "tradition and moral values" and that it might disturb the peace. Some 28 foreign delegates were detained by the police and deported.

Similarly, in 1995 a lesbian and gay festival that had been approved by the Interior Ministry was banned by Istanbul authorities just before it opened for being inconsistent with public morals. In 2000, 850 men and women from a gay cruise were detained in Kusadasi, though the mayor of the city apologized to the tourists the same day and invited them back.

Lambda Istanbul, a group advocating the liberation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in Turkey, was founded after the 1993 parade was banned. It has a stable membership of around 100. Lambda's raison d'être is "to reach homosexuals who have not yet made their coming out process and help them, to establish solidarity within the gay community, to fight the prejudice of the media and society, and to help gays in Turkey to develop their identity and work for equality and liberation."

Sappho is a group formed by lesbian members of Lambda during the late 1990s. Transvestites have been active within the Radical Democratic Green Party. Demet Dimir is a transgender activist who has received international recognition.

Beginning in 1995, Lambda published *100% GL*, a magazine devoted to gay and lesbian issues, but, beginning in 1997, supported instead the magazine *Kaos GL*, a magazine published by the Ankara group *Kaos GL*, which was founded in 1994.

In the 1990s, along with sociopolitical organizations, a commercial male homosexual subculture began to emerge in Istanbul, concentrated in the Beyoglu (Pera) district, especially the Cihangir Quarter.

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About the Author

Stephen O. Murray earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Toronto. Since completing a postdoctoral stint in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, he has worked in public health. His books include *American Gay*, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, and *Homosexualities*.