

Introduction

In a world that is constantly awake, illuminated, and exposed there is much to gain from looking into the darkness of times past. Paradoxically, the most significant thing that studying Ottoman nights allows us to see, is the benefits and costs of invisibility. This book shows that the night in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire created unique conditions for economic, criminal, political, devotional, and leisurely pursuits that were hardly possible during the day. It offered livelihood and brotherhood, pleasure and refuge; it allowed confiding, hiding, and conspiring. It was the ability to keep out of sight that created all these opportunities. To be “in the dark” surely involved the insecurity of not knowing, but also the promise of not being known, and the benefits of pretending not to know. This hide-ability, as I argue in this book, had far-reaching consequences on Ottoman state and society in the Early Modern period.

Counterintuitively, it was not only the socially or religiously marginal who sought to be hidden from sight. While certainly conducive to alterity and even subversion, the night also served hegemony. Darkness allowed easing economic, political, social, religious, and sexual pressures out of sight, without openly challenging the established order. In fact, the state benefitted directly from taxes levied on alcohol consumption and prostitution. As long as what happened in the dark remained in the dark, sellers, patrons, and state officials could all pretend it had never happened. In other words, the night was dark enough to hide everybody. It was a collective subconscious of sorts, a part of the self that is, nevertheless, not in focal awareness.

Yet, this productive neglect did not turn the night into some idyllic land of opportunity, equally open to all. For the feebler and more physically vulnerable, the impairment of vision and its negative effect on public security usually meant confinement, and sometimes fear and violence. Those who went out at night were either those who had no other choice, or those who could depend on their own stealth and

physical strength, or on the protection of others. The janissaries, the once-celebrated soldiers of the Ottomans, best fit these criteria. They were armed and trained in the use of arms and cultivated strong group solidarity. Officially the arm of order, the unruly, religiously antinomian corps turned into a major source of disorder, especially at night. By the end of the eighteenth century, against the background of military defeats and internal instability, reform-oriented circles began to push for a more centralist, orthodox order. They were growing less tolerant of janissary unruliness, urban violence, and antinomian Sufi currents, and by extension, of the night that allowed all of the above to flourish almost undisturbed. Starting in the 1780s, an undeclared war was waged under the cover of darkness between the palace and the janissaries, culminating in the crushing of the corps by Sultan Mahmud II in June 1826, and the subsequent oppression of the Bektaşî Sufi order. Mahmud's victory eliminated the forces that had pushed back against the incursion of sultanic authority into the night and kept it as an interval of dissent and freedom, but also of much violence and insecurity. A new nocturnal reality soon began to take shape under the sultan's direct authority.

Rather than dismissing the night as a dark corridor between days, when "real" history supposedly happened, the night is here shown to be more like dark matter, invisible and yet fundamental in shaping major social, cultural, and political processes in the Early Modern Middle East.

Reconsidering Darkness, Rethinking Sleep

My sensitivity to the productivity of darkness is informed by an already massive, and still rapidly growing, literature about the transformation of the night in recent decades, and artificial lighting in particular. Several factors have contributed to this trend, most notably, enhanced awareness of the economic costs of outdoor illumination, the immense amounts of carbon emission it involves, and its negative impact on humans and nonhumans alike. Scientists working in various academic fields are investigating the effect of "light pollution" on public health, on the well-being of city dwellers, on local ecosystems, and on stellar visibility. Governmental and nongovernmental organizations are working to educate the public and promote stricter regulation of outdoor illumination.¹ Darkness, which for generations has been

associated with danger and evil, and therefore as a sphere to be conquered and subdued, reemerges as an important interval that needs to be preserved.² It now appears that a brighter future for humanity may, in fact, be a darker one.³

Critical approaches to over-lighting contribute to a renewed interest in the history, sociology, geography, and anthropology of the night. Research conducted thus far has enhanced our understanding of the emergence of the modern night from the seventeenth century onward, and yet most of it is almost exclusively limited to various parts of Europe and North America.⁴ Far less is known about the realities, perceptions, and experiences of night in other parts of the world. Within the field of Middle East studies, there is almost no research on night-related issues and the little that has been published focuses almost exclusively on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵ Consequently, a whole range of human activity remains unknown. The poverty of research on the nocturnal in the Middle East also leaves the European and North American experience as an archetype, a model against which other areas are measured.

Ottoman nights share some of the traits of medieval and Early Modern European nights and yet, their particularities are equally important. While the history of the night in major European cities is often narrated along an axis of expanding street lighting, the streets of Ottoman cities remained bleak throughout the eighteenth century.⁶ The Ottoman case thus offers an interesting laboratory in which to test how darkness featured in, and interacted with, processes typical of early modernity, from urbanization to the expansion of the governmental apparatus. Placed against the background of these processes, the study seeks to reconstruct particular experiences of the night, unique traditions of nightlife, and culture-dependent arrangements and representations of darkness and light. Such an examination may contribute to current discussions about the hyper-illuminated night and its costs by allowing access to a very different nocturnal reality and enabling us to imagine alternatives.

A second discussion, to which I hope to contribute, is the study of sleep in past and present societies, which is again closely related to the rapid changes in contemporary nocturnal realities. New technologies including, most notably, portable computers and the internet, allowed carrying work home, thus blurring boundaries between the “work-day,” and the dark hours that had been mostly reserved for repose,

family, devotion, and leisure. New modes of online entertainment and consumption further exacerbated pressures on sleeping time in many post-industrialized societies. This is only the most recent link in a much longer process of extending both work and leisure at the expense of sleep, a process greatly intensified by the industrialization of lighting, followed by around-the-clock businesses, and radio and television broadcasts.⁷

In his 2013 book about the “24/7 society,” Jonathan Crary warned that sleep is the last barrier protecting us from being fully absorbed into a new configuration of non-stop capitalism that threatens to reduce us into full-time producers and consumers.⁸ As if to prove Crary right, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings stated a few years later that his company’s competition was not HBO nor Amazon: “We are competing with sleep, on the margin. And so, it’s a very large pool of time.”⁹

The rapid changes in sleep patterns are prompting a flurry of new research into the world of slumber in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences. Most relevant for the current discussion, a growing literature shows how sleep patterns vary over time, across geographies and between social groups, affected by social class, gender, seasonality, technology, modes of nocturnal entertainment, and many additional variables.¹⁰ While the need for sleep is biological, everything about it, from sleeping time to sleeping spaces and arrangements, is historically specific and socially constructed.

Historicizing sleep in the Middle East may contribute not only to our understanding of this crucial aspect of life in the region but also to wider contemporary discussions. While our bedrooms are indeed being invaded, we should be careful not to contrast dystopic accounts of a sleepless future with naive portrayals of the supposedly peaceful slumber of times past. Any conversation about the future of repose must consider its history, fraught as it was with inequalities. In this regard, this book follows in the footsteps of Roger Ekirch who has shown that in Early Modern England and its American colonies, various sleep disturbances deprived people – and commoners, in particular – of much-needed repose, possibly leading to widespread exhaustion and related health risks.¹¹ While joining Ekirch on this point, I found little evidence in Ottoman sources of Ekirch’s other major contribution, namely, the slumber pattern he dubbed “segmented sleep.” According to Ekirch’s hugely influential studies, in preindustrial

Europe, sleep was broken into two intervals that were known in most European languages as “first sleep” and “second sleep.” Preindustrial families typically went to bed around 9 or 10 p.m., and then woke up around midnight and spent the next hour or two in a kind of quiet wakefulness, performing choirs, reading, praying, conversing, having sex, or meditating. They then went back to sleep for another few hours, until daybreak. This discovery has far-reaching consequences on our understanding of “normal” or “natural” sleep. Ekirch, and later Sasha Handley, both pointed out that while biphasic sleep was common, sleeping times varied considerably depending on multiple personal, seasonal, material, and religious factors.¹² This book further complicates the picture. In the Ottoman Empire, so it seems based on the evidence at hand, biphasic sleep was not common. Monophasic, consolidated sleep which, in the European context, has been associated with the industrial revolution and the growing availability of artificial light, seems to have been common in the Middle East for centuries.

My final wider intervention concerns discussions of “oculocentrism,” that is, the perceptual and conceptual privileging of vision over the other senses which is said to be typical of western cultures. For more than a century, scholars in various fields worked to demonstrate that the seemingly biological hierarchy of the senses is largely a cultural construct that is supposedly typical of “the West.”¹³ The general impairment of vision of the pre-modern night allows testing these claims. Under these conditions, it is shown, confidence, security, and trust are significantly undermined. The analysis offered here certainly does *not* doubt that the human sensorium is heavily mediated by culture; it does provide further proof, however, that the hierarchy of the senses is not entirely constructed by culture and is not only typical of the post-Enlightenment West.¹⁴ In the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire – a “pre-modern,” “non-western” society – people wanted to know with their eyes. When it came to establishing order and truth in the dark, they relied – first and foremost – on light and sight.

Dark Ecologies

To reconstruct a thoroughly dark cityscape is to place urban society in its nonhuman environment. In the last few years, the environmental history of the Middle East seems to be finally taking off, significantly

changing our understanding of processes we thought we had understood.¹⁵ Yet, while some attention was paid to seasonal variation and its impact on humans and nonhumans, the daily cycle of light and darkness has attracted very little attention.

Things are not significantly different in the scholarship in other areas. Extant histories of the modern night have demonstrated amply that the night is not merely a “darker version of the day,” to quote Joakim Schlör.¹⁶ Nighttime activity does not merely continue uninterrupted into the dark hours. Rather, the night changes this interaction in fundamental ways. This literature, therefore, laid great emphasis on the particularities of after-dark life, from crime and law enforcement, through sociability, sexual adventures, intoxication, and on to political subversion. Yet, this scholarship generally assumes that, while nocturnal life is culture-dependent, the night itself is a constant. In other words, outside the realm of socially constructed nocturnal reality, there lies a natural phenomenon that looks and feels pretty much the same around the year and all over the world.¹⁷

This is, at least partly, the result of the process that concerns many of these very histories, namely the development and spread of industrial lighting (and heating) that made such conceptual separation between human society and “nature” appear real. Illuminated and heated, the modern night is seemingly detached from the fluctuations of “nature.” The second reason why this assumption held for a long time is that almost all extant histories of the night focus on Europe and North America, where street lighting began to spread relatively early, and where the most comprehensive lighting projects were put in place in the nineteenth century. To this day, these are the most illuminated areas of the Earth.¹⁸

As already noted, the history of the night in eighteenth-century Ottoman cities is not a history of gradual illumination, but rather, one in which darkness still reigns supreme. Ironically, this dark cityscape lays bare the material and environmental entanglements that are specific to the night. But since, unsurprisingly, entanglements are hard to untangle, it may be useful to distinguish between different “types” or layers that are usually subsumed undifferentiated under “night.” The prominent geographer and intellectual Katip Çelebi (1609–1657) does exactly that. He differentiates between the “natural night” (*leyl tabi’i*) stretching from sunset to sunrise, and the Shar‘i night, which begins at the same time but ends already at dawn.¹⁹

In much the same way, I will make a distinction between “astronomical night,” “biological night,” and “social night.” The three categories are interrelated but not overlapping. The astronomical night is the period between astronomical dusk and astronomical dawn. Its length varies with the seasons, affecting a range of physical phenomena including temperature, humidity, stellar visibility, tides, wind regime, and more. The biological night is defined as the time when the circadian clock promotes sleep, which, among humans, roughly corresponds to the astronomical night.²⁰ Yet, there is considerable variation between individuals in what regards the relation between darkness-light cycles and sleep-wakefulness cycles, depending on factors such as genes, age, and sex.²¹

The relation between the astronomical and the biological night is further complicated by what we may call the social night, here defined as the aggregate of technologies, practices, and norms that organize human life during the dark hours in any given society. We may say that the social night is affected by both the astronomical and biological night and, in turn, affects the latter. Cheap artificial lighting, for example, allowed extending the social day at the expense of the social night. Throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, it was considered one more front in civilization’s struggle to conquer nature. However, we now know that this apparent severing of the social night from the biological night has taken its toll. It is well-established that mistimed sleep, as result of night work, jet lag, extended leisure activity, and exposure to artificial light, disrupts circadian rhythms and increase the risk of disease. It has recently been suggested that desynchrony of sleep/wake times upsets key regulators of gene expression and may be responsible for a wider range of health problems than hitherto considered.²²

This study is focused squarely on the social night. My aim here is not to offer an environmental, or posthumanist history of the night, but rather to place a still anthropocentric history within a wider nocturnal ecology.²³ This ecology varies between seasons and locations and is affected by climate, currents, tides, flora, and fauna. For example, currents and water temperature affect reproduction and movement patterns of fish and humans moving through, or depending upon, these waters for livelihood. As night fell, Early Modern Istanbul’s fishermen would take to the sea, seeking particular fish depending on the seasons, aligning themselves with the tides and currents (see Chapter 1).

Rodents too, were waking up, leaving their nests, and moving closer to humans. Mosquitoes and fleas now became more active, upsetting the sleep of their human hosts, and sometimes infecting them with disease, just when they were laying immobile, unable to defend themselves (see Chapter 1). In short, humans shared their beds, or rather mattresses, with nonhumans. If they needed to use light, that too was grounded in particular geographies, flora, and fauna. For example, in northern Europe and North America it was mostly tallow and especially whale oil that served those who could afford to use light at night (especially from the seventeenth century onward). In the Mediterranean, too hot for whales and too far from whalers' ports, it was mostly vegetable oils, tallow, and beeswax that served as lighting materials (see Chapter 5).

The concurrent examination through social, material, and – to some extent – environmental prisms helps us think beyond “conceptual” light and darkness, which are usually perceived as two universal, absolute entities that are mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed. That is exactly what makes “light and darkness” one of the most effective metaphors for contradiction and conflict, a metaphor that was also commonly used by the historical subjects of this study. Yet, as a lived experience, light and darkness are relative, context-dependent, and interrelated or “mixed” to various degrees. Any light source at night is limited and surrounded by darkness and, moreover, creates its own shadows. Any darkness is relative and affected by whatever light sources are available, whether the moon and stars or various forms of artificial light.²⁴

That is why we should not think of night as synonymous with some primordial absolute darkness, nor think of artificial light in separation from the surrounding darkness. This has very real historical consequences. When I say that monarchs used great amounts of light (that is, fire) to “turn night into day,” we must not forget that this whole endeavor was only possible, and indeed meaningful, against the foil of darkness. When I say that the janissaries used darkness in different ways, what I mean is that they used a degree of darkness that allowed them more leeway, without completely hindering their orientation. They too, needed some form of light. In short, we must not be held prisoners by our tendency – and that of our historical subjects – to think of light and darkness only in theoretical terms, as opposing and mutually exclusive entities. Most often, what humans experience, and

indeed seek, is not maximum light *or* complete darkness but, rather, a controllable level of visibility and hide-ability, one that would suit their needs.

Framing and Chapter Outline

This study is predominantly focused on the imperial capital and yet, wherever the sources allow, I refer also to the nocturnal realities of the religiously central, but otherwise marginal, town of Jerusalem. The former represents a predominantly Turkish-speaking metropolis that served as a major port city, whereas the other was a small district capital in the interior of one of the Arab provinces. Jerusalem, in other words, is substantially different from Istanbul in terms of size, population makeup, dominant language[s], proximity to the sea (and hence interaction with the outside), and being completely (rather than partly) walled. The two cities, therefore, mark two extremities of a wide spectrum of nocturnal realities that coexisted in the late Ottoman Empire and examining them together allows a wider understanding of the topic than a focus on any one location would permit. While both cities are discussed, Jerusalem remains peripheral to the study, a reflection of its place in the imperial order but, even more importantly, of the much smaller body of relevant sources it produced. Therefore, while in some chapters (mostly Chapters 1, 4, and 5) a look from Jerusalem provides important insight, in other chapters, references to Jerusalemite realities are almost entirely absent.

In terms of period, the study covers a “long eighteenth century” beginning with the return of the imperial court from Edirne to Istanbul, following the rebellion known as the “Edirne Event” in 1703, and the efforts of the ruling elite to reassert its power in the city through monumental construction, processions, and festivals.²⁵ In this context, the nights became a means to demonstrate power, especially through extravagant displays of light. The same rebellion reverberated in Jerusalem, as local actors seized the opportunity to rise against their imperial lord in what came to be known as the Naqīb al-Ashraf Mutiny (1703–1705). The period that followed the crushing of the revolt was marked by a new balance of power between local and imperial forces, between competing elite families in Jerusalem, and between the Muslim population and the religious minorities.²⁶ Such power dynamics, in which central power was kept at check by other

actors from within the imperial and local elites, characterized the entire long eighteenth century. The study ends when this dynamic changed rather dramatically in the 1820s, following, in order, the outbreak of the Greek revolt, the crushing of the janissaries in Istanbul, and the occupation of Jerusalem by Mehmed Ali Paşa, the ambitious governor of Egypt. These events fundamentally disrupted power relations and ushered in significant economic, administrative, and political changes in both cities.²⁷ In both cities, these transformations gradually altered nocturnal realities.

This book is divided into two main parts: the first, comprising Chapters 1–5, explores various aspects of everynight life in a somewhat “sociological” manner. The discussion is concerned with the systems, norms, hierarchies, and relations that organized the urban night and less with processes of change these structures underwent during the period under discussion. In many of these aspects, little change was observable between the early eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. For example, the economy, ecology, and technology of lighting did not exhibit dramatic breaks. The political use of light, by contrast, witnessed significant changes, as did other aspects of the urban night. Part II is devoted to some of these changes, in particular to the political processes that affected nocturnal realities and the role the night played in these same processes. It narrates the intensifying use of the night for various purposes by both the palace and dissenting elements, most notably the janissaries and janissary auxiliaries.

Chapter 1, “Disquieting,” seeks to capture the experience of the night through a much-altered sensorium, one which relied on hearing to compensate for impaired eyesight. My main argument is that the deep darkness that reigned through the city undermined people’s sense of control, thus aggravating fears of very real nocturnal dangers. The second part of the chapter focuses on the domicile – the fundamental function of which is to counter this insecurity – to offer shelter in which one can close one’s eyes. The discussion accompanies people as they were readying themselves to sleep and shows that even at home, fears and real dangers could shake people’s security and disturb their sleep. But, while nocturnal threats, fears, and nuisances seem universal, their effect was highly differential since it depended on the means one could use to cope with them. My second argument is, therefore, that the night did not emancipate people from the social hierarchies and material conditions of their days. They remained unequal even in their sleep.