

# Notes On The Attar-Poets In Ottoman History: Reflections From The Shari'a Court Records Of Bursa And Poets' Biographies

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## Summary

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Traders who deal in fragrant substances, attar of roses, medicine, spices, and other small objects are called *attars*, herbalists, perfumers, and sometimes pharmacists. In this study, attars have been examined as part of the Ottoman trade guilds. While the study gives information about the Ottoman trade guilds and their functioning on the one hand, it also attaches particular emphasis to the world and activities of attars. The study has been based on, and contextualized in, the Shari'a Court Records of Bursa (BŞS) as well as the biographies of poets.

**Key Words:** Bursa Shari'a Court Records (BŞS), biographies of poets, attars (perfumers, herbalists, and pharmacists), trade guilds.

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### Introduction

The word *attar*, derived from the Arabic root *itr*, which means scent or fragrance, is falsely used today in colloquial language as *aktar*. The attar shops selling attar of scenting herbage and dealing in nice odors during Ottoman period can be discerned as the prototypes of pharmacies in the present. The attars, who could be expected to have the knowledge of a pharmacist, were to beware of preserving the substances in their shops in good conditions. A wide range of substances were kept in their shops. Some of these include various dried herbs, leaves, flowers, seeds and wholesome herbage as well as vegetable, animal and metallic substances. As part of their job, the attars were also engaged in preparing the medicament recommended by physicians to their patients with prescription. They used to prepare purgatives or laxatives, medicated taffy, salve and mixtures such as tonic to that end by boiling or cooking (1).

### The Place of Attars within the Ottoman Guild System

Guilds can be defined as the professional organizations that are specialized in particular branches of business sectors engaged in producing goods and ser-

vices. The Ottoman guilds were organized in specialized and limited groups. If we take leather industry, for example, various stages of this industry from animal husbandry to making shoes as final consumer goods were organized in separate guilds. Drovers and cattle dealers (*celeps*) engaged in live animal trade, butchers (*kasap*) doing the slaughter, tanners processing raw skin and hide into leather, merchants distributing the processed leather, and shoe-makers producing the final goods were organized independently into autonomous guilds. Furthermore, professionals dealing with different raw materials or final products at each stage were organized into separate groups. For example, butchers dealing with sheep and cattle subscribed to different unions. Likewise, the artisans making final products were organized according to their specialization such as shoe-makers, boot-makers, inner boot makers, and slipper makers. What is more, producers of these goods were further branched according to the color and shape of the shoes matching with the dress code or tradition of different religious communities such as the Muslims, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews (2).

The highest supervisor of guilds (*hirfet*) was generally called warden (*kethüda*). In some branches

the same supervisory task was being performed by a sheikh or a chief (*reis*). The duties of the sheikh included resolving the conflicts that arose among tradesmen and artisans, having the rules of the central government applied in the guild, preventing the manufacture of non-standard goods, and testing and giving permission to junior colleagues who completed their apprenticeship successfully to launch up their own business (3). Although the office of the guild warden became increasingly established both in terms of function and of name beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the office of sheikhdom, which was also common in the past, continued to exist in many guilds especially in provinces. In the guilds constituted exclusively by non-Muslims, the titular term sheikhdom was almost never used. One exception encountered in this context is the bakers' guild in Aleppo. The titular term wardenhood (*kethüdalık*) was also rarely used in the guilds of non-Muslims. Instead, the term foreman (*ustabaşı*) was preferred (2). When one of the guild sheikhs died, the members used to appeal to the judge (*cadi*) for the election of a new one, often giving the name of a candidate determined by consensus.

Concerning the election of sheikhs, the degree of their expertise in their professions was one of the principal criteria. In 1649 herbalists and perfumers (*attars*) applied to the court when their sheikh Yumni Mustafa died. They asked the court for the appointment of the Ali Çelebi, son of Abdurrahman, who had expert knowledge of medicine and pharmaceuticals, to this deserted place as the new sheikh, stating that "he is qualified and authorized for the office in every respect". The court thus announced him the new sheikh of *attars* (5).

Trades people and artisans working in the same area of specialization were in principle entitled to organize in separate unions. In practice, however, for a group of professionals to organize in an independent guild with their own supervisory cadres such as the warden and the legal expert, *yiğitbaşı*, they had to meet a certain numerical size. If they were numerically undersized, they were annexed or patched to the nearest sector or spatially closest professional guild. If their number exceeds the limits of organizing in a single union or if they were scattered across an array of different spaces, they could organize in more than

one separate union (2). What is more, even some sectors where no professional formation was necessary could occasionally be denied by state authorities any right to organization. As a matter of fact, when the chimney cleaners applied to the authorities in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century for establishing an official organization, the Council of State (*Divan*) rejected their application on the grounds that their sector did not require any qualified talents, and announced that whoever wished could freely work in the sector (2).

The Ottoman army used to obtain some of the personnel and logistic provisions needed for supply service behind the front from the tradesmen and artisans in provinces and districts. Each province was required to send a certain number of personnel as well a certain amount of materials. Nevertheless, this was not an ordinary practice but an obligation to be met during war time. The sending off of personnel to the service of the army was called '*ordu ihracı*' (military extraction) and such a personnel was named as '*orducu*' (tradesman accompanying the military people). Provinces were liable to afford the expenses and tents of the *orducus* they sent, and this stipend was called '*orducu akçesi*'. Concerning the payment of *orducu akçesi* some guild branches were patched to others. That is why they used to pay the *orducu akçesi* to their superiors within the formal inter-guild hierarchy instead of paying it directly to the military tax collectors (3). When the records of *orducus* belonging to the year of 1777 are examined, it comes quite clear that the guild of attars had a capital of 27.000 akçes in total. According to the same records, their subordinates were the confectioners, flax weavers, dealers in beeswax, coffee sellers, paper-dealers and stationers, musk traders, engravers and decorators. It is also understood that they were responsible for the supply of two tents (5). During previous centuries, too, attars from Bursa had been ordered to accompany military campaigns as *orducus*. During the wars on the East in 1583 there were four attars among the *orducus* from Bursa (6), two in 1587 (7), two in 1598 (8), and two in 1615 (9), respectively. According to an archival document dated 1688, the guild of attars in Bursa were responsible for supplying 14.000 akçes and a tent (10).

It is discernible that within the Ottoman guild system the shops of certain professional groups were

clustered spatially according to their work. According to a record dated 1583, Bey Hanı (commercial building) and the 30 shops in today's Kapalı Çarşı (Covered Bazaar), known as the bazaar of chest makers/sellers and attars at the time, were destroyed in a big fire. In order to protect the building and the shops from fire, arches were constructed at the two edges of the bazaar, and the building was restored (11).

In cases where the professional groups whose fields of work were overlapping one another used to apply to the central government for correction when they believed they were subjected to unjust treatment concerning the distribution of raw materials. In 1795, for example, the guild sheikhs in Bursa sent a petition of complaint to the sultan. In their petition they complained that no coffee beans had arrived in Bursa for months. Attars and coffee-dealers asked the merchants living in Bursa who had connections with Aleppo to bring coffee to Bursa from Aleppo. When coffee was being brought to Bursa by one Ahmet Ağa and one Abdullah, some people with evil intentions made a false reporting according to which the caravan bringing coffee from Yemen to Istanbul had been destined by hoarders to Bursa from the bridge of Geyve. Osman Ağa was charged with investigating the incident. 22 bundles of coffee were discovered and suspended by the qadi under seal. In the petition sent to the sultan it was reported that the destination of this coffee caravan was not in fact Istanbul, but it was being brought from Aleppo to Bursa by the solicitation of the city tradesmen, including attars first and foremost (12).

At times, some attars were punished for dealing in contraband plants with the order of firmans sent from the center. According to one such firman dated 1786, it is observed that a non-Muslim attar dealing in contraband plants was punished. Although the contraband plants were not specified in the firman, we can assume that they were most probably abortive herbage (13).

### Notes on the Multiple Qualities of Attars

It is understood that some attars were highly self-educated. They held expertise not only in their area of specialization but also in a number of different fields.

One of such brilliant attars is the Salih Çelebi, son of Mehmet Efendi and from Yaniçoğlu neighborhood. When he died around the middle of 1733, his heritage included, among other things, many valuable books, *rubu'tahtası* (an ancient device of astronomy invented by the Turks and commonly used in the Muslim world), and his Divan (collection of poems). This shows that he was interested in cosmography and poetry (14).

"Şair Tezkireleri" (15), biographies of poets, one of the genres constituting the principal sources of classical Turkish literature, which present information about the lives and works of poets, point to the existence of six attars who were also poets of the classical school, *Divan şiiiri*. What is more, when these sources are surveyed, it is also discernible that these attars had other qualities besides their competence in poetry.

The first one of these attar-poets is Nasuhi. According to the information obtained from *tezkires*, Nasuhi was also interested in astrology besides poetry. It is observed that in addition to his qualities as an attar and physician, his poetry, too, was well appreciated and liked. In Sehi Bey's *Heşt Bihişt*, the first *tezkire* of the Anatolian literary zone, no information is found as to the qualities of the poet as attar. He is depicted as a virtuous and well-conducted physician. Although his poems were well appreciated by the biographer, his interest in astrology was emphasized rather than his qualities as a poet or doctor. Prime importance was given to his work, Nasuhi calendar, which he had formulated according to the understanding of astrologists (16).

On the other hand, in his *Meşairü's-Şuara*, Aşık Çelebi notes that one corner of the poet's attar shop was full of various perfumes, another corner with bottles of wine, and that the elite of the time used to gather here and were plunged into the world of wine and opium. Additionally, it is also reported that when he was a physician in the Edirne Dar'üş-Şifa (the Hospital of Adrianople) he also served as the *reisü's şu'ara* (chief minstrel or the head of poets' society). The biographer also recounts an incidence that took place between Nasuhi and Ahi Çelebi, according to which when the poet was disappointed one day by Ahi Çelebi who denied the help and protection he had

asked for, he formulated the following couplet to criticize satirically his medical qualifications:

Derde dermân ider ânurdum Âhî  
Oñulursa óakim imiř daòı

“I used to know Ahi Çelebi to be remedy for troubles, he will prove a doctor if he also cures this one”.

In reply to Nasuhi's couplet, Ahi Çelebi wrote the following stanza which is quite interesting as a criticism of Nasuhi's qualities as doctor, according to a number of biographies. According to *Meşairü's-Şu'ara*, the stanza was written by another poet called Basiri. Two other biographies, namely, *Beyani Tezkire* (17) and Hasan Çelebi's *Tezkiretü's-Şuara* (18), the stanza was written by Ahi Çelebi himself. It reads as follows:

Kim bi-mâr-òÂneye girdi  
Eceli geldi úabø-ı rýó itdi  
Her kim içdi Naâyòı şerbetini  
âiúóate tevbe-i naâyó itdi (19).

“Whoever had entered the hospital, he died a natural death. Whoever drinks Nasuhi's sweet medicine, he irrevocably vows not to have good health again.”

Another attar-poet is Rahiki. He was well known for his pharmacy shop in Istanbul. According to Sehi Bey's account, the poet whose real name was Yusuf, is an Istanbulite. He is depicted as highly dexterous and without any rival in medicine and pharmaceuticals (16). In Latifi's *Tezkiretü's-Şu'ara* (20), his poetic qualities were not quite liked, but his qualities as attar were repeatedly emphasized. In Aşık Çelebi's *Meşairü's-Şu'ara*, on the other hand, extensive information is given about the poet. Rahiki, whose genuine name was Sinan Çelebi, was an Istanbulite Janissary of ascription through heredity (his father was also a Janissary). While he was at service as Janissary his ulufe (tri-monthly salary paid to palace Janissaries in Ottoman history) was cut off during the interregnum of Mustafa Ağa. He thus opened an attar shop in the Mahmut Paşa market area. He filled his shop with pots and bottles of wine, thus turning it into the locale where those who had formally used to go to Galata to drink wine gathered. His shop also became a place to which those were going to

Balık Pazarı (Fish Market) could not help calling on. In the *Tezkire* the mastery of the poet in pharmaceuticals is praised with exaggeration. He is depicted as being capable of serving as a physician in the Sublime Court (*Mahkeme-I Hükümet-i Hikmet*). He died in 953 (Hegira)/1546 (Gregorian) (19). Hasan Çelebi (18). and Beyani (17). repeat the same information, and give examples of his poems. Nevertheless, the following couplet in Beyani's biography is interesting. The couplet points out that the poet, who serves the whole world as physician thanks to his dexterity in medicine, cannot give up drinking the syrup of love that many a beautiful lovers offer him.

Kendi úabib-i èÂlem iken gör Raóíúiyi  
Her yıl bir iki Âfetüñ ol şerbetin içer

“See what Rahiki does while he is the doctor of the world. He drinks every year the syrup of love offered by one or two women of bewitching beauty” (21).

We understand from *Künhü'l-ahbar* of Ali, a biographer from Gallipoli, that the poet invented a medicated taffy with the name of “*filonya-i Selimi*”, and that it came to be in popular demand after his death. It was such a taffy that its ingredients were to be pounded for a full month, day and night, and cooked all together in large cauldrons for reaching their propitious point. According to Ali's account, when some attars began to make a daily sale of about 3.000 akçes from this taffy, the business drew the attention of tax collectors. Thus, dealers in *filonya-i Selimi* were held to be liable to pay an annual tax between 40.000 and 50.000 akçes. The poet had not been able to make so much money during his heyday, yet he could succeed in earning a profit of 300 akçes per day from the taffy immediately before his death (22).

Another attar-poet whom we learn from *Arif Hikmet Tezkiresi* written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is Rahmi. Unfortunately, it could not be clarified which century he lived in. The fact that he knew advanced Persian and that he had a good mastery of calligraphy shows that attars were highly talented in multiple subjects. *Arif Hikmet Tezkiresi* does not give sufficient information about the life of Rahmi. However, it is certain that he was an attar from the city of Aintab (Antep) known with the name of Gülahmetzade (23).



that he was quite interested in chemistry besides medicine, and he died when conducting an experiment. The date of his death is given as 990 (Hegira)/1592 (Gregorian) (18). Beyani repeats the same biographical information like Hasan Çelebi about him plus states that his father's name was Attar Ahmet (17).

### Conclusion

The major function of the guild system was to maintain the daily activities of economic life in social solidarity and coherence with minimal controversies. By this token not only could the state free itself from a heavy bureaucratic control burden, but also a standardization of goods in production could be established, unjust competition was prevented, and the guild system could resolve the internal conflicts in house through an auto-control mechanism it developed. As can be seen, like other professional groups, attars too were able to choose the most talented persons as their leaders to manage their guild and keep them in good relations with the central government. At times of war they elected their own *orducus* to accompany the imperial army. Attars proved to be one of the most intellectualized and multidisciplinary professional groups. Besides tradesmanship, they were engaged, most of the time as hobby, in gaining mastery of other realms, whether allied to their true occupation or distant from it, such as poetry, astrology, chemistry, and medicine.

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15. One of the first prototypes in Turkish literature of the *tezki-res* depicting the lives of famous figure is Ali Şir Nevai's work, *Mecalisü'n-Nefais* written in Jagatai. Following this prototype although the genre developed under the precedence of Arab and Persian literature, it also survived in Ottoman-Turkish literature from the 16th century well into the beginning of the 20th. In the Anatolian zone of Turkish literature 35 *tezkires* were written from Sehi Bey's *Heşt Bi-hişt* to Nail Tuman's *Tuhfe-i Naili*.
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