

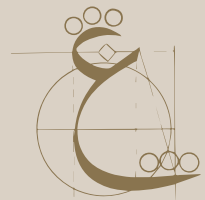


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SAYI / ISSUE 12 • EKİM / OCTOBER 2026



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Kadim is that no one knows what came before.

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A double-blind peer-reviewed open-access academic journal that is published semiannually (April and October) in the field of Ottoman Studies

SAYI | ISSUE 12 • EKİM | OCTOBER 2026

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TASARIM | DESIGN Hasan Hüseyin CAN

BASKI | PRINTED BY

MetinCopyPlus • Artı Dijital & Baskı Merkezi

Türkocağı Cad. 3/A Cağaloğlu - Fatih / İstanbul

BASIM TARİHİ | PRINT DATE • EKİM | OCTOBER 2026

ISSN 2757-9395 • E-ISSN 2757-9476

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**Bilgin, Arif –
Uybadın, Aynülhayat –
Yüzüncüyıl, Kübra Sultan.**
*Cultural History of
Muhallebicis in Istanbul.*

ISTANBUL:
ISTANBUL UNIVERSITY
PRESS, 2026. 113 PAGES.
ISBN: 9786050718706.



PRISCILLA MARY İŞİN *

ABSTRACT

This book examines Istanbul's muhallebicis as culinary and social spaces embedded in the rhythms of everyday urban life from the Ottoman period to the present. Drawing on archival sources, literary works and ethnographic fieldwork, it traces cultural transformation through the changing relationships between milk provisioning, ingredients, craftsmanship and consumption. Following the connections from water buffalo husbandry to a spoonful of muhallebi, it explores how urbanization, ecological loss and industrial food production have reshaped supply networks, sensory experiences and the social functions of these establishments. Refik Halid Karay's recollection of muhallebicis scented with cinnamon, rosewater and burnt milk frames its central inquiry: how and why did this sensory world change, and what has taken its place? Through these transformations, the book offers a perspective on Istanbul's changing food culture, urban life and collective memory.

Keywords: Water buffalo, Muhallebi, Cultural Studies, İstanbul.

ÖZ

Bu kitap, Osmanlı döneminden günümüze İstanbul'un muhallebicilerini, kentin gündelik hayatının ritimleri içinde yer alan mutfak ve sosyalleşme mekânları olarak incelemektedir. Arşiv kaynakları, edebî eserler ve etnografik saha araştırmasına dayanan çalışma, süt tedariki, malzemeler, zanaatkarlık ve tüketim arasındaki değişen ilişkiler üzerinden kültürel dönüşümün izini sürmektedir. Manda yetiştiriciliğinden bir kaşık muhallebiye uzanan bağlantıları takip ederek kentleşmenin, ekolojik kayıpların ve endüstriyel gıda üretiminin tedarik ağlarını, duyuşal deneyimleri ve bu işletmelerin toplumsal işlevlerini nasıl yeniden biçimlendirdiğini ele almaktadır. Refik Halid Karay'ın tarçın, gülsuyu ve yanık süt kokan muhallebicilere ilişkin hatırası, kitabın temel sorusunu çerçevelemektedir: Bu duyuşal dünya nasıl ve neden değişti, yerini ne aldı? Kitap, bu dönüşümler aracılığıyla İstanbul'un değişen yemek kültürüne, kent yaşamına ve kolektif hafızasına ilişkin bir bakış sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Manda, Muhallebi, Kültürel Çalışmalar, İstanbul.



MAKALE BİLGİSİ | ARTICLE INFORMATION

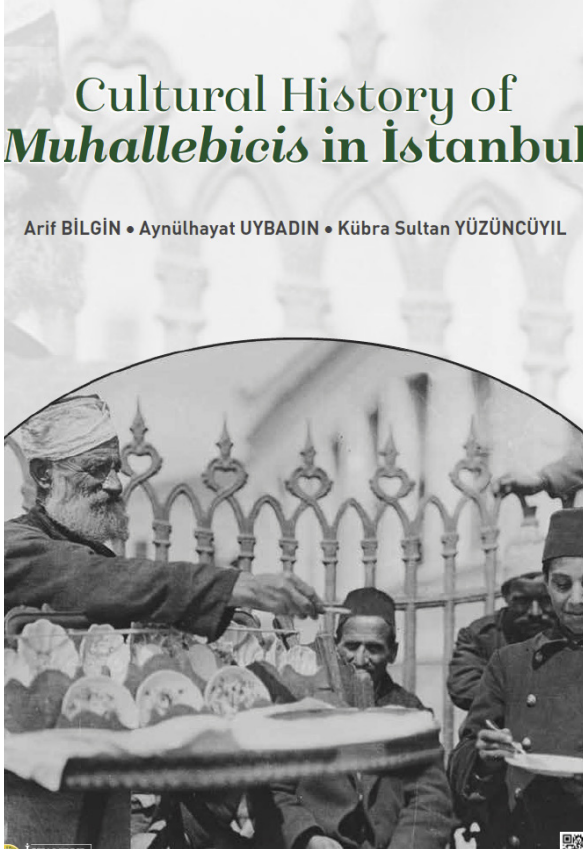
Makale Türü: Kitap Değerlendirmesi | Article Type: Book Review
Geliş Tarihi: 15 Eylül 2026 | Date Received: 15 September 2026
Kabul Tarihi: 22 Eylül 2026 | Date Accepted: 22 September 2026



ATIF | CITATION

İşin, Priscilla Mary. "Bilgin, Arif – Uybadın, Aynülhayat – Yüzüncüyıl, Kübra Sultan. *Cultural History of Muhallebicis in İstanbul*". *Kadim* 12 (October 2026), 197-201. doi.org/10.54462/kadim.2040086

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When I was asked to review the *Cultural History of Muhallebicis in İstanbul* I was delighted that these iconic eateries specialising in milk puddings were at last receiving the attention they deserved. Loving them myself, I have often envisaged the warm welcome a Turkish *muhallebici* would be given if one opened in my own home country of England. When it came to their history, however, information was sparse when I first wrote about them in 2008.

This book is the work of three academics. Prof. Dr. Arif Bilgin, known for his ground-breaking work in the field of Ottoman food history, has also transformed the field by his encouragement of many people from different backgrounds and disciplines to engage in food studies. This book reflects his broad, inclusive perspective.¹ His co-authors, Aynülhayat Uybadın and Kübra Sultan Yüzüncüyıl, both work in

the field of communications, which surprised me until I read the book, which includes reflections of *muhallebici* culture in poetry, novels and cinema, early 20th century advertisements, and oral accounts gathered in an extensive field study. Together with Ottoman period archive documents, travelogues and visual material, the authors weave the story of *muhallebi* and similar milk puddings, their producers, sellers, and consumers over the centuries.

The text is lavishly illustrated by historical and modern photographs, paintings, drawings, newspaper advertisements and street maps. Some of the photographs taken in the course of fieldwork show traditional utensils used in *muhallebici* shops whose owners have thoughtfully preserved them. These include handmills used to grind soaked rice, huge wooden stirrers called *mablak*, and small triangular spoons.

Discussions of ingredients and their source are an important aspect of the book. This subject is often ignored by food writers, yet the type of milk, rice or chicken is of undeniable importance in the flavour and texture of the finished dish. I was surprised to find that the first chapter is in-depth look at water buffalo husbandry. We discover how modern industrial

1 The book is available online at: <https://iupress.istanbul.edu.tr/book/cultural-history-of-muhallebicis-in-istanbul/home>

farming and centralization of supply chains have radically changed how *muhallebi* shops obtain milk, obliging some to abandon the use of buffalo milk in favour of cow milk. One factor here is the loss of land around Istanbul that was once grazed by water buffaloes, as a result of new infrastructure and housing construction in recent years.

Among other radical changes that have affected *muhallebicis* since the 1950s is the decline of local artisanal practices and the master-apprentice system that for centuries preserved traditional knowledge of cooking processes in these establishments.

Oral accounts make valuable contributions to all these discussions, by providing insights based on individual experiences. Interviewees relate not just their own memories but anecdotes passed down in their families. An interesting example is Hasan Fehmi Özsüt's account of how his grandfather worked in a small *muhallebici* near Karaköy Harbour as a teenager, saved up money to buy water buffaloes, and eventually established his own *muhallebici* shop in 1915.

The authors do not hesitate to criticise the practice of establishing dairy farms stocked with imported Italian water buffaloes that are fed industrial feed, rather than preferring local breeds that graze outdoors and are adapted to the local landscapes. They argue that this business model "stands far removed from a more ecologically friendly and sustainable model that would support pastures and wetlands, preserve local buffalo breeds, strengthen food sovereignty, support small producers and prioritize animal welfare." While agreeing wholeheartedly with this viewpoint, *muhallebicis* can hardly be blamed for being unaware of these concerns, since awareness of the threat to long-term sustainability in food production is not widespread among the general public anywhere in the world. This unfortunate situation is encouraged by international corporations and institutions which constantly argue that high production alone is the goal and actively suppress opposing views.

Oral accounts gathered in the course of the field study provide interesting details. We learn that in Istanbul's *muhallebicis* chickens were traditionally slaughtered on the premises, where "there were specially designed pools to drain the blood". Another respondent in the field study remarks that some modern customers have become so alienated from *tavukgöğüsü* (a type of *muhallebi* made with shredded chicken) that they complain about the texture. Of course there are still people who go out of their way to eat real *tavukgöğüsü* made with chicken, and its caramelised variation known as *kazandibi*, but their numbers are apparently in decline due to urban migration and the proliferation of foreign fast food chains following the success of the first Macdonald's branch that opened in Istanbul in 1986. These chains pose a serious threat to traditional Istanbul foodways, as a younger generation prefers pizza to *pide* and hamburgers to *köfte*.

An interesting revelation is that *su muhallebisi* (water *muhallebi*), which was originally made with water alone, came to be made with milk by most *muhallebici* shops at some point in the 20th century. Yet despite this trend some cookery writers continued to give traditional recipes with water, such as the well known chef Ekrem Muhittin Yeğen in his *Tatlı Pasta Öğretimi*.

Before reading this book I had assumed that in Ottoman period *muhallebicis* sold only puddings and perhaps *kaymak* (clotted cream). Interestingly, however, a document dated 1776 reproduced in the book tells us that as long ago as the 18th century these tradesmen had

attempted to expand their range of dishes into the cookshop market. Representatives of the guild of cooks complained to the court that *muhallebicis* had started to sell savoury dishes such as pilaf, *yahni* and *dolma*, in addition to their traditional products *muhallebi* and *aşure* (a milkless boiled wheat pudding with pulses and dried fruit). So the expansion of *muhallebici* menus over time, culminating in the addition of döner kebab, pastries etc. in the mid-1980s is not actually a new phenomenon.

I ate at *Çemberlitaş Muhallebicisi* in the early 1980s, when the menu featured chicken soup and pilaf with chicken, as well as various milk puddings. This establishment was picturesquely housed in a domed building that I took to be a disused Ottoman *hamam*. Thereafter *muhallebicis* became increasingly uncommon and so in 1984 I was excited to see the new *Sütiş Muhallebici* on the ground floor of a grand new hotel (the Intercontinental Hotel I seem to recall) in Taksim, with its fancy decor, shining wooden tables and eclectic menu. Albeit radically different from the old-fashioned *muhallebicis* I remembered, the fact that they were making a comeback in any form was encouraging.

The role of *muhallebicis* in 20th century Istanbul society is a fascinating story. The authors comment that they “provided a culturally acceptable and safe environment, particularly for women and young people, as shifting gender norms allowed for greater female participation in public life.” Another interesting aspect is the link with cinemas in the middle of the century, when it became customary to visit the nearest *muhallebici* before or after watching films. They were also places where people on their way to work called in to eat “pastries and *börek*”, as recalled by one *muhallebici* owner who says that he used to open shop around 5:30-6:00 to serve the first customers.

Five useful appendices follow the text: Appendix A, a list of historical recipes; Appendix B, a list of no-longer extant *muhallebicis* in Istanbul; Appendix C, a list of the establishments where fieldwork was conducted; Appendix D, historical information about the buildings that housed *muhallebicis*; Appendix E, early 20th century newspaper advertisements for *muhallebici* shops.

A notable feature of Appendix D is a detailed account of the so-called “Pudding Shop” in the Sultanahmet district of Istanbul, which won international acclaim in the 1960s and 1970s as a meeting place for hippies on their way to Afghanistan and India. This was not in fact a *muhallebici* but the Lale Restaurant, which is still in business today. However, it was the milk puddings on the menu that attracted the attention of foreign visitors.

In conclusion, this in-depth study of *muhallebici* shops sets a precedent with its unusually broad perspective. Drawing on written, visual and oral sources, it examines the subject in a seamless continuum from past to present and from many angles. Researchers and interested readers alike will be grateful to the authors for their painstaking work in compiling such a comprehensive range of material, their valuable analyses and contextual commentary. This is a book that will not lose its relevance and usefulness.



Source: "Muhalebim!", Andreas Magnus Hunglinger von Yngue, Abbildungen herumgehender Krämer von Constantinopel (Vienna: Albertische Schriften, 1800).