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*Adhan* as an Urban Soundscape Experience in  
the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Borderlands

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Rana Münteha Aldemir

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# *Adhan* as an Urban Soundscape Experience in the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Borderlands

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## Introduction

The *adhan*, the call to prayer, is an essential component of Islamic devotion that functions as a cue for Muslims to convene for congregational prayer. The act of announcing the commencement of the five daily prayer times is conventionally executed by an individual referred to as a *muezzin*<sup>1</sup>. This individual vocalizes phrases in a harmonious manner from an elevated location, such as a mosque minaret. The *adhan* functions not only as an auditory signal for the commencement of prayer, but also as a symbol of the collective identity of the Muslim ummah<sup>2</sup>, resonating across the various localities and urban centres inhabited by adherents of the faith. The invocation to prayer unites individuals from diverse backgrounds and serves as a reminder of their mutual dedication to their religious beliefs. The *adhan* holds a significant position in Islamic devotion as it functions as a cue for Muslims to congregate for collective prayer. The ritual has been in practice since the era of the Prophet Muhammad. Its purpose is to foster a sense of unity among Muslims in their religious beliefs and mutual dedication to prayer.<sup>3</sup>

As it does today, the masculine voice of the mosque, exemplified through the *adhan* vocalized by male muezzins, played a crucial role in shaping the mosque's identity and perpetuating gender-based dichotomies within sixteenth-century Ottoman society. The mosque served as a hub for fostering communal ties, imparting religious instruction, and facilitating social and political deliberations among men.

This essay is divided into two main sections. The first section examines the role of the mosque's soundscape in serving political, educational, and religious purpos-

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1 A *muezzin* calls Muslims to prayer by reciting the *adhan* from a mosque's minaret.

2 Ummah refers to the worldwide community of Muslims who share a common faith and adhere to Islamic principles.

3 A. Çetin, "Ezan", TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ezan#1>.

es, highlighting the adhan's importance as a sonic experience. The second section examines the impact of the mosque's soundscape on the formation of a masculine identity and its implications for gender relations and social dynamics, focusing on sixteenth-century Ottoman Europe. The source material includes travel accounts and letters by Baron Wenceslas Wratizlaw (1576-1635) and Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1517-1564). These sources offer valuable insights into the cultural milieu and auditory environment of the towns of Buda and Nissa (*Niš*) in the early modern period, as well as to the perception of this sonic experience by outsiders.

### Adhan as a Sonic Experience in Ottoman Cities

The mosque's role as a dynasty-serving instrument is evident in the additional performances on Fridays as shown by the imams reciting ten verses each from the mosque's gallery, a eulogist, and a salaried worshiper praying for the Ottoman dynasty. The mosque's soundscape provided a message that could be considered political, serving as a means of giving familiarity to the people and potentially providing an emotional experience. Additionally, the mosque's soundscape had an educational purpose. It served as a space where disciples were taught the art and science of Quran recitation by a *sheikh*, contributing to the mosque's role as a continuous voice for educational purposes.<sup>4</sup> The study of the soundscape architecture of Ottoman mosques demonstrates the multifaceted role that sounds played in Ottoman society including and beyond their religious function.

### The Masculine Voice of Mosques

The mosque played a significant but unacknowledged role in shaping the masculine identity of neighbourhoods and cities within the Ottoman Empire. This section aims to examine the impact of the *adhan* and other auditory elements of the mosque on the formation of a distinct identity, as well as its implications for gender relations and social dynamics within the Ottoman context. The mosque, being a site of devotion for male followers of Islam, functioned as a hub for fostering communal ties and imparting religious instruction. Additionally, it served as a forum for men to convene and deliberate on significant social and political matters.

The soundscape of Ottoman mosques, such as the Suleymaniye Mosque and Atik Valide Mosque, were examined in Nina Ergin's article, 'The Soundscape-Architecture of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques and the Quran Recitation'. Quran

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4 N. Ergin, "The soundscape of sixteenth-century Istanbul mosques: Architecture and Quran recital." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 2 (2008), 208.

recitation was an essential element of the mosque's soundscape, as indicated by the endowments, which detailed the duties and responsibilities of employees who read the Quran. The beautiful voices of the workers and their involvement in the soundscape while performing their duties contributed to a rich and textured continuous sound both inside and outside the mosque.<sup>5</sup> The *adhan* was also critical in establishing an acoustic bond between the city's locations and contributed to the soundscape of urban life.<sup>6</sup>

The *adhan* serves as a significant auditory indicator of the mosque's male-oriented identity. In Islamic tradition, the *adhan* is customarily vocalized by a male *muezzin*, whose vocalization reverberates throughout the vicinity, signifying the designated time for prayer and beckoning male individuals to congregate at the mosque. The *adhan's* auditory specifications, characterized by its low-pitched and reverberating qualities, evoke a perception of dominance and potency, thereby strengthening the notion of the mosque as a male-oriented domain. I argue that the act of congregating at the mosque for prayers facilitated a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood amongst male worshippers, strengthening their shared emotions.

Apart from the *adhan*, other auditory elements within the mosque also played a role in shaping masculine identity. The act of reciting the Quran was and is commonly performed by male readers who possess vocal training to produce a resonant and harmonious intonation. This practice serves to strengthen the connection between the male gender and the mosque. The prioritization of the male identity of the mosque had noteworthy consequences for gender dynamics and social interactions within Ottoman urban areas. The aforementioned phenomenon served to perpetuate the gender-based dichotomy between the public and private domains within Ottoman society.<sup>7</sup> Men were regarded as the primary agents within the public sphere. In other words, the mosque served as a pivotal factor in instilling a sense of masculine identity within various neighbourhoods and cities throughout the Ottoman Empire. Comprehending the gendered characteristics of the mosque and its auditory environment is imperative for the analysis of the wider social and cultural circumstances in which it was situated.

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5 People practiced *qiraat* and *mukabele*, repeated sounds by paid people that the mosque releases to the surrounding community, albeit at a lower volume than the *adhan*. *Qiraat*: شىءارق, Reading a part of the Qur'an in prayer. The person reads for himself or for someone else to listen. *Muqabele*: ملىءاقم, reading the Qur'an in the mosque and making people listen to it.

6 G. Necipoglu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton, 2005).

7 E. Keleş, Atik, and Bayrak, 'Visual Landscape Quality Assessment in Historical Cultural Landscape Areas,' *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 7, no. 3 (2018), 287-300.

## Travel Narratives on *Adhan* in Ottoman Cities

Ogier Ghiselin Busbecq served as the ambassador to Istanbul for Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I between 1554–62, publishing heavily edited letters to feed the interests of the wider public. Meanwhile, Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw of Mitrowitz was a young Bohemian nobleman in the retinue of an ambassador who had kept a diary that was published after his journey. Their narratives offer significant insights into the cultural milieu and auditory environment of Ottoman Balkan cities. During the mid-sixteenth century, Baron Wenceslas undertook extensive travels within the Ottoman Empire. The individual diaries accounts for his experiences and presents us with a comprehensive depiction of the auditory environment of Istanbul at the time, encompassing the *adhan*. He narrates his memories of the call to prayer he witnessed in the town of Buda on his journey to Constantinople on 11 Oct. 1591. This was most likely the first Muslim call to prayer he heard during his journey that began on Sep. 2 in Vienna. Baron Wenceslas defines the *adhan* as an auditory signifier, which, like a clock, divides the day into parts.

*They call or scream on the towers for the first time when day is about to dawn; next, instead of ringing bells, they summon the people to their churches in the middle of the space between sunrise and noon; thirdly, at noon; fourthly, at vespertine; and they call the people together for the last time at sunset, using for that purpose a loud voice with all their might and main, and stopping their own ears...and their voice is heard much farther than one would suppose. The group defined as the audience addressed by the adhan consisted of talismans or priests, courtiers, unoccupied persons, and persons of high rank, and also merchants.<sup>8</sup>*

The gender of this group is not given by the Baron, but it is known that the persons in the specified group consisted of males. The account provided by Baron Wenceslas underscores the significance of the *adhan* within Ottoman urban centres and its function in shaping the auditory environment of Buda.

In the memoirs of Ogier Ghiselin Busbecq, meanwhile, the ambassador compares ‘Ottoman’ society with his own society. He narrates the problems he and his comrades faced in the Ottoman lands such as accommodation, food, and drink in the town of Nissa (*Niš*), ‘one hardship almost worse than want of wine, and this was

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8 W. Wratislaw. *Adventures of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw of Mitrowitz: What He Saw in the Turkish Metropolis, Constantinople; Experienced in His Captivity; And After His Happy Return to His Country, Committed to Writing in the Year of Our Lord 1599*, trans. Albert Henry Wratislaw (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16.

the dreadful way in which our nights were broken,<sup>9</sup> referring to the call to prayer. Just like Baron Wenceslas, he mentions that the Ottomans did not use clocks to understand what time of day it is. 'Our Turkish guides mistook the moonlight for the approach of dawn and proceeded to wake us soon after midnight in a most noisy fashion. For the Turks, you must know, have neither hour to mark their time, nor milestones to mark their roads.' Busbecq, who describes the adhan as very surprisingly loud and not unpleasant, must have miscalculated, as he says he only hears it four times a day. He further explains the role of the *muezzin*, which he calls a talisman, writing, '[T]alismans know that morning is at hand, they utter a cry from a lofty minaret built for that special purpose, in order to call and invite the people to the performance of their devotions...each time repeating the cry in shrill quavering tones.' It is worth noting again that this loud voice that spreads to the town is a male voice. Additionally, a potent vocal presence that permeates the urban soundscape encompasses individuals who neither participate in the religious service nor adhere to the faith, effectively incorporating them into the auditory milieu of Islam within the city. Both narratives offer significant perspectives on the cultural milieu of Ottoman urban centres and the impact of the adhan in shaping the auditory environment of these locales.

Further, we ought to note the emotional impact of the adhan in the soundscape of the Ottoman Empire. It is an auditory manifestation of Islamic religion, intended to summon adherents to engage in prayer and foster a feeling of collective devotion. The mosque, being a place of worship for Muslims, also served as a natural venue for social gatherings for the residents, including both Muslims and non-Muslims who entered the courtyard.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, its influence extended beyond the realm of religion. The recitation of the adhan was a significant occurrence that could elicit a diverse array of emotions in individuals, including but not limited to, reverence, piety, joy, and elation. In addition, the affective influence of the *adhan* played a role in fostering a perception of communal interconnectedness and unity, as people collectively underwent a shared emotional encounter.

In summary, this essay asserts that the masculine soundscape of the adhan possesses powerful and emotive qualities. The auditory perception of the call to prayer has been of great significance in Ottoman culture, evoking sentiments of piety, communal solidarity, and affective release. As the male population receives these summonses within the confines of mosques or through their daily experiences in urban settings, it assumes a crucial role in their regular routines and

9 O. Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople, 1554-1562*, trans. Edward Seymour Forester (Clarendon Press, 1968), 102.

10 N. Tekgöl, *Emotions in the Ottoman Empire: Politics, Society, and Family in the Early Modern Era* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 15.

mutually reinforces the genuine emotional atmosphere that pervaded Ottoman society. Furthermore, the narration of the adhan within early modern European travelogues provides us with a unique perspective on how this integral feature of the soundscape of Ottoman cities was experienced by those for whom it was 'foreign'. This includes their attempts to situate the unfamiliar sonic experience within their own cultural context, as with Baron Wenceslas's references to Muslim "churches" and explicit contrast with the practice of ringing bells. By contextualizing the adhan and soundscape within the wider historical framework of emotions, we can attain a deeper understanding of how individuals perceived and traversed their surroundings. The examination of the adhan and soundscape within Ottoman cities presents a promising avenue for additional scholarly inquiry regarding the interplay between religion, affect, and cultural practices within the Ottoman Empire and its neighbors. This statement underscores the significance of recognizing the intricate and multifaceted character of historical encounters, as well as the pivotal function that emotions assume in shaping our comprehension of history.

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