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The Coverings of an Empire: An Examination of Ottoman Headgear from 1500 to 1829

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The Coverings of an Empire: An Examination of Ottoman Headgear from 1500 to 1829

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Abstract
This paper investigates the socio-economic and religious implications of hats worn in the Ottoman Empire from the mid-sixteenth century to 1829, when they were all replaced with the legendary fez. It acts as an initial compendium, drawing heavily from primary sources to explain who wore which style of headgear and why.

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The Coverings of an Empire
An examination of Ottoman headgear from 1500 to 1829
Hats are a common feature in fashion throughout history. Many civilizations have developed some kind of head covering, both for practical and ceremonial purposes. The Ottoman Empire, for instance, developed a broad range of hats for equally diverse purposes from the sixteenth century to the mid 1800s. The use of headgear was so prolific that scholars could potentially deduce much about the socio-economic and religious dispositions of Ottoman society by examining the hats worn during the period. As a potential focus of scholarship, a compendium of Ottoman hats from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries - cataloging which groups of people wore which styles of hat, and explaining of their societal and religious implications - would be useful.

An obstacle to this endeavor, however, was a lack of scholarship regarding the topic. Ottoman headgear is almost always interspersed among passages regarding fashion in general, often with little differentiation between the two. A brief sentence about a person’s hat may appear in the middle of a long paragraph detailing their outfit. This makes research difficult, since the unimportance of hats relative to other fashion items means they are almost never mentioned in indexes and traditional Turkish names are seldom provided; or when they are, pictures are often missing. Though a number of scholarly works not mentioned in this piece may have information regarding Ottoman hats that could contribute to the topic, they were not easy to find and often consist of sparse references surrounded by exposition that was otherwise irrelevant. Undoubtedly further research will add to the findings of this compendium.

This dearth of secondary sources therefore dictates the methodology of codifying the range of Ottoman headwear. Much of the focus will be on a collection of primary-source

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images called *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures*, produced by the ministry of tourism in Turkey. The images depict a variety of images during the reign of Sultan Suleyman I in the mid sixteenth century. The information gleaned from these pictures will be cross-referenced with information from other primary- and secondary-sources to develop patterns and codify the myriad styles of hats depicted in the images. Since there is little scholarship, however, some speculation will be necessary, sometimes using a single source repeatedly because it is the only one available with that information. Other times multiple sources - or details of images - will be drawn upon to make single point. By basing conjecture only on the sources, the author hopes to add a new aspect to the field of Ottoman scholarship with as few errors as possible, so that future research may further collective understanding.

In examining the primary-source images, and comparing them to information in other sources, a number of motifs are noticeable that pertain to all Ottoman hats rather than any one in particular. One such feature of Ottoman headwear is its ubiquity in society. In all of the primary-source imagery, there are almost no examples of anyone appearing without some kind of head covering. The omnipresence of headgear extended to the Ottoman court, where the Sultans are recorded to have kept small armies of clothiers in their imperial palace, including the *kulahduzan*, who made a range of hats that “were so important in signaling rank and status.” If the sovereigns were willing to keep hat makers in the palace and on payroll alongside the other servants, that would suggest a desire to produce hats and keep them in good condition. Since

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1 *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures*, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey).

2 Ibid. Those that are are most often depicted as patients in a hospital setting, and the individuals who do not have hats are also depicted as not wearing any clothes.

everyone in Ottoman society - from the Sultan and his court, to soldiers, to lowly street
performers - have been depicted wearing hats, clear patterns can be established based on their
presence that reflect on larger social groups

One of the easiest methods to gauge patterns in the primary-source images is through the
examination of color in the depictions of hats. Colored hats added variety to the pictures, but the
Ottomans also used them to denote religious status. In Matthew Elliot’s *Dress codes in the
Ottoman Empire: The case of the Franks*, he presented a quote from a French diplomat who
visited the Ottoman empire, and noted that hats were color-coded according to the wearer’s
religion. He said that Jews were made to wear yellow headdresses, Zoroastrians wore black,
Christian groups had hats in a variety of blues, but “only the Turks wear white turbans.” 4 This
delineated the religious groups from each other, separating the Turks from their subjects. These
“dress codes” were supported by a variety of draconian clothing laws enacted by Sultan
Suleyman I in the mid sixteenth century. These regulations governed everything from shoes to
robes, but headgear received special attention in terms of certain groups only wearing particular
styles or colors.5 Those in breach of the dress codes, according to Elliot, were liable for
execution and seizure of their goods.6 Such harsh enforcement of laws differentiating social and
religious groups would suggest that the Ottoman rulers took differentiating between groups
seriously, and the easiest way to tell the groups apart would be to control the colors they wear.

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4 Matthew Elliot, “Dress Codes in the Ottoman Empire: The Case of the Franks,” *Ottoman Costumes: From Textile


6 Matthew Elliot, “Dress Codes in the Ottoman Empire: The Case of the Franks,” *Ottoman Costumes: From Textile
to Identity*, (2004), p: 107. Elliot does provide examples of certain exemptions for travelers or influential citizens,
but does not indicate if this was a common practice.
A detail regarding the use of color that is important to note, however, is that the Ottomans had different standards than Europe regarding the significance of color. In a letter written by the Austrian diplomat Ogier de Busbecq regarding his visit to the Ottoman empire in the mid-sixteenth century, he described that the Ottomans viewed black as an “ill omened” color, whilst “white, yellow, blue, violet and mouse-color” were considered lucky.\(^7\) By mentioning the colors that pertained to Muslims, Jews and Christians respectively (according to Elliot)\(^8\) in the same sentence without making a clear distinction between them, it would suggest that the three colors were considered equally lucky by the Ottomans during this period. Muslim white was not necessarily considered more important than Christian blues. This information would be helpful to researchers of different backgrounds investigating Ottoman hats since it provides a cultural basis for the selection of colors for their hats, and prevents them from inserting their own cultural biases regarding color into their speculation. The myriad groups of the Ottoman were delineated by their headgear, which was in turn influenced by the ruling Turks’ own cultural standards.

One particular group that was affected by these standards were women. In the case of women’s headgear, however, there is less information regarding them than men’s hats. A piece by Madge Garland does explore Ottoman women’s fashion in general, but her brief mention of headgear is vague\(^9\) and the images provided in her piece were more of noblewomen than commoners, and had a distinctly western style. Even in the primary-source imagery, depictions

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of women are infrequent, and many of the styles of headgear they sport are strikingly similar to each other.\textsuperscript{10} What can be deduced from the information available was that women’s hats in the Ottoman empire were subject to standards and styles, but these appeared to pertain mostly to the upper classes and little information for the lower classes available, making it difficult to create a reliable commentary on female hats from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, for want of sources. Therefore, only men’s headwear will be discussed at any length in this piece.

The most impressive headgear among the Ottomans was associated with the upper classes, denoting positions of leadership. The most important of these was the “royal turban,” for it was popular amongst the highest echelons of society, particularly with the Sultan himself and his court. In the various depictions of this large, slightly ovular turban, it always appears in images of ceremony and decorum, such as the reception of foreign dignitaries or formal army inspections by the Sultan. In the context of such gatherings the turban was likely designed to make the wearer appear larger and more imposing (figure 1). Despite its size, however, the royal turban was not overly heavy, since they were constructed by wrapping several layers of linen over a light balsa wood frame.\textsuperscript{11} Though the frame was most likely padded, this turban would have been uncomfortable due to its

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ottoman Empire in Miniatures}, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey). In many cases, however, when women were depicted being outside - unless they are street performers - they were wearing a veil that covers much of their face. In other images, a woman described as a “dancing girl” has an uncannily similar outfit to another image described as a “palace maiden.” This suggests either a similarity in dress between palace maidens and dancers, or a mere mislabeling of one of the images.

\textsuperscript{11} Valerie Steele, \textit{Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion}, vol. 2, (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2005), p: 194. The royal turban - which was not named - was described as being three to four times the size of the wearer’s head.
size and the turban may have made it awkward to wear, which may explain why this turban never appears outside of ceremonies or court settings. Drawing from Matthew Elliot’s explanation of only Turks wearing white headgear, and noting that the royal turban only appears in white, it seems likely that the men wearing them are therefore Turks. This in turn suggests that the Turks may have been a relatively insular group at the upper echelons of government by the reign of Suleyman I, not allowing other ethnic groups of religions into notable positions of power in the court.

Just below the social implications of the royal turban was a category loosely defined as the “affluent turban.” Appearing in imagery only on noblemen or individuals who appear to have some degree of affluence or position. Indeed, even the Sultan was depicted wearing this style of hat when not wearing a royal turban (see fig. 4). An affluent consisted of a squat, domed headpiece that was surrounded by a band of either linen or fur. The headpiece could come in a variety of colors, though there was little evidence that this signified the wearer’s social status, for the linen always appears white, whilst the headpieces depicted in the imagery vary wildly.13 It was therefore likely that such a turban was considered standard wear among those who could afford it, marking out the individuals more with its ornamentation than its color. For instance, the image of the falconer in figure 2

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Fig. 2: Image of a falconer wearing an affluent turban. Note the shape of the headpiece and the surrounding band of fur. *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures.*

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12 *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures*, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey).

13 Ibid.
was categorized along with several other portraits that appeared to pertain to individuals living in the palace. With some exceptions, all of the male figures wore some variation of an affluent turban, granting some leeway for variations in artistic representation. This falconer, however, is the only one depicting such a hat trimmed with fur, whilst all the others were wrapped in white linen. This suggests that linen was considered a more desirable material with which to adorn such a headpiece, with the falconer’s fur trimming marking him as a less prestigious individual; he could afford such a hat - possibly through association with the Ottoman court - but his position did not allow for him to adorn it with linen, for one reason or another.

Beneath the affluent turban was the “stock turban,” by far one of the most common styles of headgear depicted in the sixteenth century miniatures. Likely drawing from the style of headgear worn by Muslims for hundreds of years, the stock turban was made by wrapping layers of cloth about the person’s head. Its use appears to have been embraced by the Ottoman citizenry, for they can be seen in almost every image except those depicting battle. Its ubiquity

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Fig. 3: Painting of a crowd of Ottoman citizens. Note the subtle variations of the stock turban that are present, and their uniformity of color. *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures*

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14 *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures*, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey). Everyone seemed to wear this style, from certain depictions of courtiers, to skilled craftsmen, guild members, doctors, and so on.
in images would suggest it was popular among the middle echelons of society: not necessarily rich or influential enough to wear an affluent turban, but they did not seem to be poor. Such abundance would connote a thriving textile industry, or at least substantial imports of fabric, to provide for the thousands of citizens needing several feet of fabric to fashion this style of headgear.

A motif of these sixteenth century images, however, does lend to some confusion. In every image where the stock turban is present such as Figure 3, all of the turbans are white, with only a few exceptions. Adhering to Elliot’s mention of the importance of color in society, this would imply that almost everyone who wore a stock turban was a Turk,\textsuperscript{15} which would suggest an insular society in which only the Turks could wear turbans. This speculation, however, would be incompatible with the suggestion of trade and industry in the previous paragraph, for commerce inherently secularizes societies. In one of his letters, the diplomat Ogier de Busbecq commented that in a crowd of ordinary citizens, “countless folds of whitest silk, and bright raiment of every kind and hue,”\textsuperscript{16} which averred that there was a mix of various ethnic and religious groups in any given crowd. It was possible that the artist may have decided to take some artistic license with his representation of large groups of people. Though certain groups such as the guilds may have been selective, only allowing Turks to join, the presence of the stock turban appeared to be ubiquitous, serving as the hat that seemed to symbolize mainstream society.


Another example of a strange presence of a colored turban is displayed in Figure 4, in which a figure wearing a green turban is bowing before the sultan. The presence of a green was perplexing, since almost none of the available sources offer an explanation for what it could mean. It does not stand for a religious group, and its distinctive look is not present in any of the other primary-source images. A single reference, however, from *The Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, suggests this figure could be the *nakib ul-eshraf*, the “leader of the prophet Muhammad’s descendants,” who was said to have worn a green that matched his robes.\(^\text{17}\) This would explain why no other figures are depicted wearing a green turban - it having holy implications - and why the surrounding room contains individuals wearing the *urf*, a massive tall or mushroom-shaped turban normally associated with religious figures,\(^\text{18}\) that are almost as rare in the primary-source images. A detail from the encyclopedia’s description, however, does lend to some scrutiny. It claims that the *nakib ul-eshraf* wore an outer robe that matched his turban, which the man in Figure 4 is clearly not wearing. Additionally, the image is labeled as “Gift Presentation to the Sultan,” which would seem a strange title considering the prestige

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.
of the figure, though perhaps those that titled the picture were unaware of the figure’s religious significance.

The last of the hats that were associated with the Ottoman court was a style defined by religion and categorized as the “Jewish servant’s hat.” It looked like a tall thimble and was probably worn only by Jewish attendants and servants. The reason for such speculation is that in all of the imagery in which this style of hat appeared, there were three motifs regarding them. The first was that all of these hats were yellow, with some evidence of embroidery, drawing from Elliot’s quote that Jews wore yellow headgear. Second, each figure wearing these hats all had long, curling sideburns that reached far down almost to their shoulders. Such a style of hair has been the hallmark of Orthodox Jews for hundreds of years. And third, in all of the depictions of individuals in these hats, even in formal court ceremonies, they are never shown sitting down, which connotes servility as they are always on their feet, ready to serve. They do not appear outside of court images, however, which suggests that they must have been somehow affiliated with the ruling government in one form or another. This would likely mean they were well off as a collective group, acting as “high end” servants for the Ottoman court.

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20 *Ottoman Empire in Miniatures*, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey). Another full-body portrait in the collection of a man wearing the style of hat described and sporting the sideburns. The image was labeled “Palace Servant.”
Beyond the glamor of the court, the vast Ottoman armies preserved the realm for hundreds of years. These soldiers, most notably the Janissaries, have the reputation of being fierce fighters, as well as having impressive uniforms to demonstrate the affluence of the Ottoman government. These men also sported their own distinctive styles of headgear that became integral to their appearance. The most well known of them is the *keche*, described by Ogier de Busbecq as “consisting of the sleeve of a cloak . . . part of which contains the head, while the rest hangs down behind and flaps against the neck.” Looking at the hat from the different angles in Figure 6, the description appears apt. The style of hat does look like a sleeve perched on top of the head, which *The Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion* avers is meant to symbolize the sleeve of the order’s founder. Though no other sources could corroborate this assertion, the design of the *keche* appears very practical, with the sleeve allowing a pocket of air to circulate, cooling the warrior’s head, and protecting the back of his neck from the sun. An iconic feature of the Janissary’s appearance, this hat combined a simple design with ingenious functionality, providing the wearer a modicum of comfort in the hard tasks of soldiery.

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A style of headgear also associated with the Janissaries was the *tarbouz*. These were small, red, skullcap-like articles that appear to only be worn when the soldier was not in combat. The only times these specific hats appear in the primary-source images is in the context of military action, and those wearing them are not depicted as fighting (see Figure 7). A possible explanation for this is that commanders would want their troops to have some kind of head covering when digging tunnels, like in Figure 7, to keep dirt out of their hair. The *tarbouz* hats may have been padded to protect the head from blunt trauma during this kind of work, though there is no evidence to support this speculation. The squat design, however, would have been conducive to working in cramped conditions like tunnels, whilst the *keche* would have been too bulky under such circumstances. The hat appears to have been reserved for manual labor, a very specific purpose.

A third type of headwear which had a militaristic connotation was the long, red caps that hung down around the wearer’s shoulder (see Figure 8). According to *The Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, these unnamed hats were fashioned from felt and were worn by figures called *bostanci*; though the title is a

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cypher. When translated from Turkish, bostanci means a “truck gardener” or “a bodyguard of the Ottoman Sultan.”25 Since this style of hat infrequently appeared in militaristic settings,26 and was never depicted in pastoral scenes, it would seem likely that the title referred to the role of bodyguard. Though if this was true, it seems peculiar that these figures never appear in the presence of the Sultan in any of the primary-source images, though can be seen in other settings such as fireworks displays or other occasions (see Figure 8).

Though this is speculation, it seems possible that these bostanci may have been contractable bodyguards - possibly with some military experience27 - that were hired to keep patrons safe in the chaotic conditions of festivals, though they may have carried a disreputable stigma, since they are seldom seen outside of pictures of crowds and are rarely close to individuals wearing affluent turbans. The bostanci may have been men who were hired to safeguarded others from the rabble of the lower classes on special occasions.

The final category to be compiled pertains to the commoners of the Ottoman empire. Many of those depicted as ordinary citizens sported the stock turban, but there was one other type of hat that seemed to denote relatively low status. This category could be loosely defined as the “civilian skullcap.” Similar to the tarbouz in

![Fig. 9: A portrait entitled “A Rowdy” depicting a bostanci wearing a long-cap. Though the man’s exact role may be uncertain, his menacing posture, the stick in his hand, and the knives in his belt suggest he was not a farmer. Ottoman Empire in Miniatures.](image)


26 Ottoman Empire in Miniatures, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey). Figures wearing these hats are seen interspersed among a company of richly attired Janissaries and the picture is titled “Palace Guard Corps - Janissaries.”

27 Ibid.
appearance, the civilian skullcap appeared to be associated with the poorer echelons of society and was worn by street performers and drunks alike. A simple hat design not requiring much material to make would be appealing to a social stratum with comparatively little expendable income. Its association with the lower classes comes from its absence in any sociable depiction of affluent groups or court life, only appearing on people in the streets. Examining images of these skullcaps shows a striking similarity to the tarbouz worn by the Janissaries (see Figure 7). This raises the question of whether the Janissaries adopted the style from the civilian populace, or whether the design was original to the Janissary Corps, and gained popularity with the commoners afterwards. In this author’s opinion, it was more likely the design for the tarbouz was already established when the Janissary Corps was formed, and that they adopted the style for its usefulness in the conditions they used it for. The civilian skullcap was a common feature in the wider Ottoman society in the sixteenth century, and its use would last for hundreds of years.

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, there is little evidence to suggest these general categories of hats underwent any drastic changes. Donald Quataert suggests this could be due to a stratification of Ottoman society as their territorial conquests slowed, which created a landed nobility in the empire, and social mobility became increasingly difficult. As the affluent families established themselves, it made sense that they would not press to change the

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28 Ottoman Empire in Miniatures, Turkish Republic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, (Istanbul: Turkey).
existing fashions, since couture denoted position and “lowborn” citizens were less likely to rise in position to challenge them. Additionally, Charlotte Jirousek’s *The Transition to Mass Fashion System Dress in the Later Ottoman Empire* averred that various proscriptions against extravagant dress (excepting royalty, of course) curbed the demand for textiles by discouraging the market’s “tendency to systematically exploit the vanities of fashion as [an] . . . incentive.” Without a widespread want to alter the fashion paradigm, there would be no change since no extra money could be made. Though clothing laws did appear in the mid eighteenth century to supplant those laid down by Suleyman I, there is no indication this shifted the importance of hats in denoting status.

![Fig. 11: An picture of a fez.](http://www.photo-dictionary.com/photofiles/list/7937/10715Fez_hat.jpg)

Drastic change, however, came in the early nineteenth century. Amidst a flurry of reforms aimed at modernizing the Ottoman empire, Sultan Mahmoud II enacted a law which forbade the wearing of traditional Ottoman dress among all state servants, and required they wear more western dress. This new “uniform” consisted of pants, a long frock coat, and the fez as a hat. According to *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, this reform was instituted in an attempt to curb some of the politicking that took place in the Ottoman court. The reasoning may have

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been it would be harder for courtiers and administrators to have petty struggles with their peers if they had no way of telling who possessed a higher rank or who came from a different class aside from word of mouth or reputation. Many members of the middle and lower classes soon adopted the look themselves, embracing the chance to avoid the discrimination that could take place when a person’s religion or ethnicity could be determined by their clothing.  

This has been the most well-documented portion of the history of Ottoman hats, for it represented the end of a popular era. Now citizens could seamlessly blend in with each other, be they Turk or Jew, administrator or servant. The fez’s use became ubiquitous in the army as well, as evidenced by sketches drawn by visiting French diplomats of Ottoman foot-soldiers, all of whom sport the small, round hat. The effort to modernize effectively ended the need to produce the range of Ottoman headwear that was previously used.

The irony of the shift was the seemingly common origin of the fez. Examining the hat’s design, the squat, round, brimless fez looks similar to the civilian skullcap (see Figure 10) or the Janissary’s tarbouz (Figure 7). The only major addition to the fez appears to be the tassel hanging from the center of the top (Figure 11). Such banal design may have been the reason Sultan Mahmoud II decided the fez was the best choice for his new “uniform,” since wearing such a simple hat would give the impression of humility on the part of high-ranking officials. It could have also been to cut costs, since the relatively small size of the fez compared to a hat like the royal turban (Figure 1) would be cheaper to produce on a large scale. While there is little evidence to support this speculation, the logic behind such choices would be sound.

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The scholarship dedicated to Ottoman hats from the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries has been lacking, despite their connotation regarding specific people and groups. Ottoman society used headgear styles to denote a person’s position in society, whilst utilizing color to display their religious affiliation. It seemed so important to their way of life that their rulers made draconian legislation to safeguard against the breach of these dress-codes. With such societal organization centered upon the display of hats, the ranks and religious affiliations of individuals in paintings can be quickly determined by examining their head-covering. This emphasis would have made the forced homogenization of the fez all the more profound for Ottoman society, suddenly making everyone, either in power or among the proletariat, equal at a glance. The purpose of this piece was to establish a compendium of Ottoman male headwear, using the primary- sources available and cross-referencing them with the scattered scholarly additions. With further research, and using this piece as groundwork, it was the hope of this author that more information could be garnered and extrapolated upon, in an attempt to make the research of Ottoman headgear a dedicated scholarly pursuit.

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