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## Fires in Early Modern Istanbul: Mapping Transformations in the City's Social Fabric

Fires were a central part of life in Ottoman Istanbul which became only more frequent and devastating over time. Ignited by accident or arson, they were propelled forward by the city's notoriously fickle winds, leapt between densely packed wooden houses as the population grew, and raced down narrow and sloping streets for days on end. In doing so, they left large swaths of the city in ruins and thousands of people homeless, injured, or dead. Lady Montagu, an Englishwoman stationed in Istanbul in the early eighteenth century, claimed that "most families...had their houses burnt down once or twice" while the grandmother of a prominent nineteenth-century Istanbul banker lamented losing her house five times to fire.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the late eighteenth-century English traveler James Dallaway wrote, "fires are so frequent that few months pass without them, and they are generally so furious, that whole districts are laid in ashes." The French writer Théophile Gautier also observed in the 1850s that "'fires' may...be considered as constituting the normal condition at Constantinople. A house sixty years old is a rarity" and in 1922, Osman Nuri Ergin, Istanbul's chief municipal secretary, reported that fires were "an unavoidable and historic affliction" of the "wooden-building" city, "calamities" which the capital had relentlessly "been subjected to for seven centuries."<sup>2</sup>

Despite being hugely important parts of everyday life in the Ottoman capital, and the rich possibilities that fires in Istanbul offer for understanding topographic, demographic, political, and economic transformations there, much remains to be studied and documented about them. Motivated by such questions, my dissertation examines how fires transformed early modern Istanbul's social fabric. How did fires move throughout the growing city? Where and when did they usually begin and were certain neighborhoods or social groups disproportionately affected by them? What policies, practices, and technologies emerged (or did not) in response? Why did the fires grow consistently worse?

The present project, which has benefited from the Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative's generous support, focuses on five fires that broke out in Istanbul between 1515 and 1645. As preliminary research for my dissertation, my goal has been to gain a firmer sense of the rate and reach of early modern Istanbul's fires and to improve my data visualization skills. Mustafa Cezar's pioneering work from 1963, entitled *Osmanlı Devrinde İstanbul Yapılarında Tahribat Yapan Yangınlar ve Tabii Afetler [Destructive Fires and Natural Disasters in Ottoman Istanbul]*, has served as my guide for it contains a detailed timeline of over 120 fires in Istanbul from the late

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (London: Virago, 1994), 108; Yorgo Zarifi, *Hatıralarım: Kaybolan Bir Dünya: İstanbul 1800 – 1920*, trans. Karin Skotiniyadis (Istanbul: Literatür, 2005), 122; both examples are cited in Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77.

<sup>2</sup> James Dallaway, *Constantinople ancient and modern: with excursions to the shores and islands of the archipelago and to the Troad* (London: T. Bensley, 1797), 73; Théophile Gautier, *Constantinople To-Day*, trans. Robert Howe Gould (London: David Bogue, 1854), 263; Osman Nuri Ergin, *Mecelle-i Umûr-ı Belediye* (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür İşleri Daire Başkanlığı, 1995), 2:1077.

fifteenth through early twentieth centuries, as well as relevant excerpts from contemporary chronicles, decrees, and epics.

The five fires that I have focused on were selected because relatively more detailed accounts of the monuments and neighborhoods that came in their way were available to me, and because I was then able to find references to these places in the existing literature on early modern Istanbul's topography.<sup>3</sup> In turn, I estimated – with varying degrees of precision and certainty – the coordinates of these topographical features by using satellite images on Google Maps. Finally, I entered this data into the open source mapping software QGIS via Microsoft Excel. The resulting maps are pasted below, showing the paths of several fires and their burn perimeters, and giving a sense of the extent to which these devastating events were an integral part of everyday life in the city.

As for how to read the maps, blue stars indicate where the fires reportedly broke out. Orange dots represent sites that burned entirely or partially, or mark where a fire stopped. As each site generally has several names, and each name has its own variant spellings, I have left place names untranslated on the maps so as not to add to the existing ambiguity. However, I have provided English translations in the notes that accompany each map.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I have benefited in particular from Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi's *Fatih Devri Sonlarında İstanbul Mahalleleri, Şehrin İskanı ve Nüfusu* [*Istanbul Districts, Urban Settlement and Population Toward the End of the Conqueror's Era*] (1958), Wolfgang Müller-Wiener's *İstanbul Tarihsel Topografyası* [*Historical Topography of Istanbul*, first published in German in 1977], Çiğdem Kafescioğlu's *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital*, and Reşad Ekrem Koçu's *İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* [*Encyclopedia of Istanbul*] (1958-1974).

<sup>4</sup> Another aspect adding to this ambiguity and the difficulties of translation is that some place names might refer both to a particular building or monument as well as to a neighborhood. This requires further research.

**August 25, 1515 [15 Recep 921]**



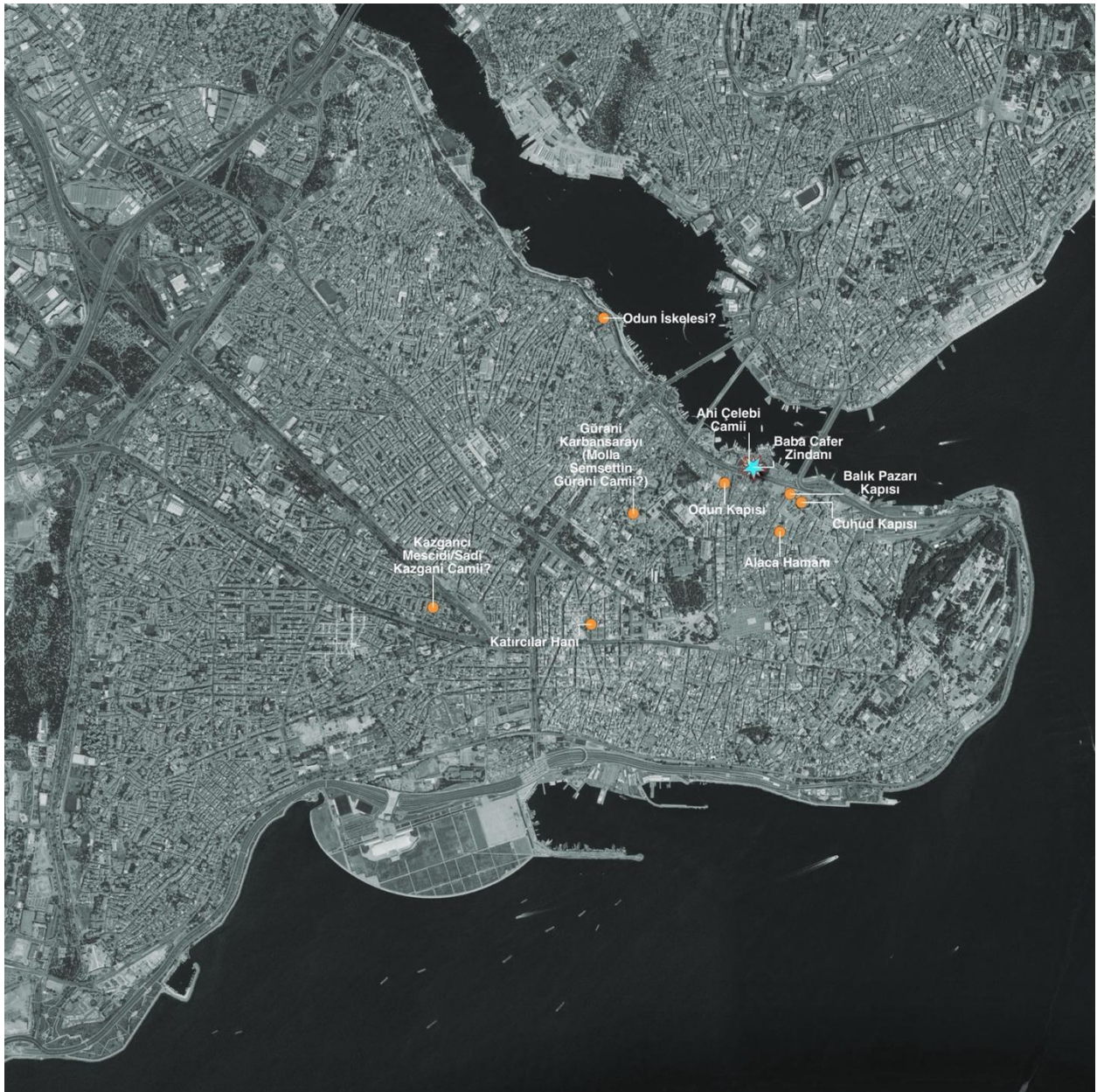
A fire broke out on a late August morning in 1515 around the Bedesten (covered market). Spreading quickly and burning down many shops, the flames reached Gedikpaşa Hamamı (Bathhouse) around midday, where they were finally put out. According to Cezar, Sultan Selim I came to supervise the extinguishing of the fire. As he gazed at the flames, he remarked that they must be the “fiery sighs” of Tacızzade Cafer Çelebi, a statesman whose execution he had ordered a week earlier.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mustafa Cezar, *Osmanlı Devrinde İstanbul Yapılarında Tahribat Yapan Yangınlar ve Tabii Afetler* (Istanbul: Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi Türk San’atı Tarihi Enstitüsü Yayınları / Berksoy, 1963), 5.



July 2, 1539 [15 Safer 946]

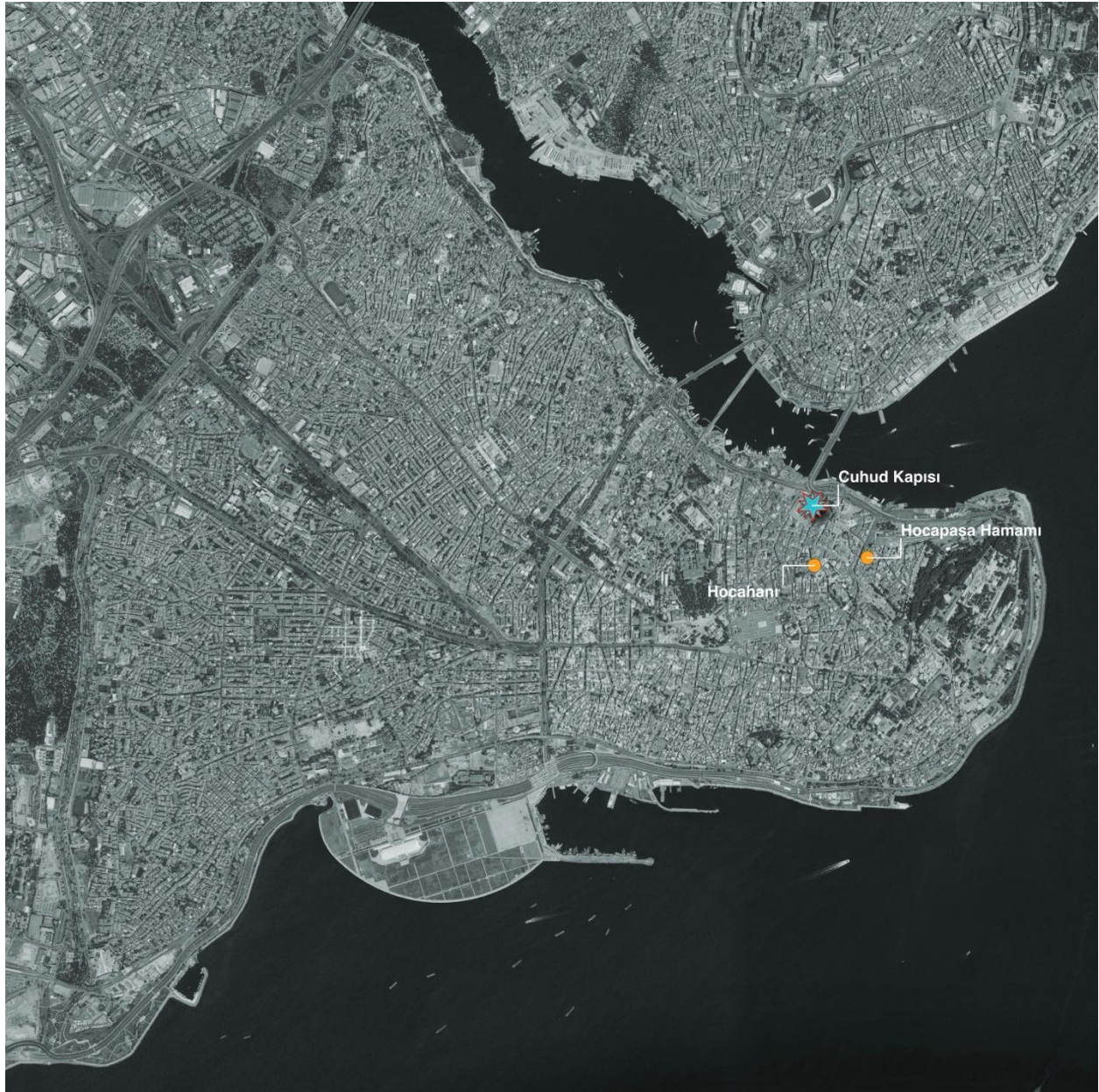


According to Cezar, 1539 saw one of the first “great” fires in Ottoman Istanbul. The fire began after sunset in a shop around Baba Cafer Zindanı (Prison). The flames spread around the prison and over the city walls. As the prison’s doors were locked and could not be opened, many of the inmates burned to death. Spreading toward Odun Kapısı (Gate), and from there to Katircılar Hanı (Caravanserai), the fire destroyed many shops and neighborhoods. Alaca Hamamı (Bathhouse) burned too, along with other shops and markets and the areas between Cuhudlar Kapısı (Gate)



and Balıkpazarı Kapısı (Gate). Janissaries, who were the city's designated firefighters, spent all night struggling to put out the fire. The Ahi Çelebi Camii (Mosque) also burned down.<sup>6</sup>

**May 22, 1606 [14 Muharrem 1015]**



This fire from 1606 began in a Jewish neighborhood by Cuhud Kapısı (Gate). It spread to Hocahani and the Hocapasa bathhouse. As with the fires above, several markets and districts burned down and the damage was extensive.<sup>7</sup> More research must be conducted on the specifics

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10.



of this fire but it should be noted that Jewish homes and shops were often the favorite targets of arsonists, particularly after dark, in early modern Istanbul.<sup>8</sup>

**September 2, 1633 [27 Safer 1043]**



<sup>8</sup> Gülru Necipoğlu, “Volatile Urban Landscapes between Mythical Space and Time,” in *A Companion to Early Modern Istanbul*, eds. Shirine Hamadeh and Çiğdem Kafescioğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 205.

This fire from 1633 lasted for three days. It began in a shipyard on the Golden Horn just outside Cibali Kapısı (Gate). A strong north/northeasterly wind (*poiraz*) was blowing, which pushed the fire toward to an adjacent boathouse, then over the walls, and onward to homes. After burning shops around Cibali, the fire split into three arms, one of which went as far as the Yavuz Sultan Selim Camii (Mosque). The second arm stretched between Cibali and Unkapanı, burning the Üsküplü district there, then proceeded toward Zeyrek and Atpazarı. The third arm, which was the longest, went from Aşıkpaşa to the area around Fatih Camii (Mosque), where only the minarets were partially damaged. It also burned the markets of Büyük and Küçük Karaman, as well as Saraçhane, and Sarı-gürz/Sarıgüzel. The fire spread as far as the janissary barracks (presumably Yeni Odalar) and the Bali Paşa and Lütfü Paşa mosques were partially damaged. After dark, the flames proceeded to Orta/Şehzade Camii (Mosque) and destroyed the janissary barracks there too. The fire then continued toward Molla Gürani.<sup>9</sup>

According to Cezar, many victims of the fire took refuge in coffeehouses. Sultan Murad IV worried that the growing crowds there would cause unrest (*fitne*) and ordered that the coffeehouses be shut down.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Katib Çelebi, an Istanbulite polymath who lived through the 1633 fire, claimed that the sultan ordered the shutting down of coffeehouses on the pretense that too much smoking went on there, posing a fire hazard. Katib Çelebi also claimed that one-fifth of Istanbul burned down in this fire. The map above shows quite strikingly that he was not exaggerating.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Naima Mustafa Efendi, *Tarih-i Naima*, ed. Mehmet İpşirli (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2007), 2:754.

<sup>10</sup> Cezar, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



**June 26, 1645 [2 Cemaziyelevvel 1055]**



In late June, 1645, a fire broke out overnight in a shop around the Darphane-i Amire (Imperial Mint). From there it spread north to the madrasas of the Bayezid mosque and south toward the seawalls of Langa and Yenikapı. The area around Kumkapı also burned, including four Greek Orthodox churches and the Armenian Surp Asdvadzadzin Kilisesi (Church). The fire went at least as far as Kadirga Limanı.

The maps above, which cover a small sampling of fires that occurred between 1515 and 1645, are only the tip of the iceberg. Still, they clearly demonstrate what an integral role fires played in the everyday lives of Ottoman Istanbul's inhabitants. These preliminary visualizations are a first step toward more complex analyses of how fires transformed this early modern city's social fabric. In my dissertation, I investigate numerous major and minor fires as constitutive historical events,

whose intersections with architectural, social, cultural, political, and economic conditions have the potential to reveal understudied histories of the first few centuries of Istanbul's life as an Ottoman capital.



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## Notes