



ALLAH, TULIPS, and TURKS



JD Harrell

In Arabic script, the word Allah (Arabic word for God) resembles a tulip. The word Muhammad resembles a rose.

From <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/noble-flower-past-present-future-of-tulips-in-turkey.aspx>:

“Tulip is the stately flower associated with spring that is native to Central Asia and the Middle East. One could also argue that the Turks brought the idea of cultivating tulips when they migrated through Persia to Anatolia, after all tulips would travel easily as bulbs. For whatever reason, the Turks seem to have adopted the tulip as their favorite flower while the Persians chose the rose.

İskender Pala has written in “Lale Güzellemesi” (In Praise of the Tulip): “The tulip bulb produces one flower on one stalk every year; this represents the unity of Allah and the shape of the tulip resembles the Arabic letter elif, the symbol of monotheism. All of these characteristics caused the tulip to be imbued with a form of sacredness in Ottoman society and it was perceived as a unique flower that reflected the existence of Allah; the secret of its beauty was attributed to this characteristic.”



Edirne (formerly: Hadrianopolis, Adrianople) with Selimiye Mosque in the distance. July 2013. Courtesy: JD Harrell

Some of the earliest Ottoman poetry uses the tulip in its imagery to suggest aspects of beauty rather than something religious although men of religion did incorporate the tulip imagery in their poetry.

The beauties are always wearing tulips and roses

Probably the flowers have lowered the prices of the pearls and jewels.*

*From "Lale Güzellemesi"

The verse was written by Sheikh-ul-Islam Yahya (1553-1644), the head of the Ottoman religious establishment, and says it all for a period during which flowers supplanted precious jewels as decoration.

The tulip and especially the red tulip symbolize perfect love and that in itself can have a religious connotation. Other colors had different meanings but all consistent with beauty.

We know in the time of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) that bulbs were brought from as far away as the Crimea and Manisa to be planted in the imperial gardens at Topkapı Palace. Professor Nurhan Atasoy has even mentioned an invoice that proves the sultan's gardeners were ordering plants for the imperial garden in 1526.

The Sheikh-ul-Islam Ebu es-Suud (1490-1574) had a reputation for loving flowers and in particular tulips. Jon Mandaville, a number of years ago in Saudi Aramco World, described him as follows:

"One of the most notable Turks of the 16th century, the empire's supreme justice, Ebu es-Suud Effendi, was a gardener and tulip hobbyist. One can imagine him at the end of the day strolling quietly through his gardens beside the dark flowing Bosphorus, his long full robes brushing the brick path, draped sleeves flapping gently in the evening air, his hugely wrapped white turban bent down to the rows of small red turbans lifted up beside the paths.

"Some evenings he might have been joined by his colleague Sokollu Mehmet Pasha, the Grand Vizier, who also enjoyed gardens. Sokollu Mehmet not only kept a garden of his own near Ebu es-Suud's, but also had one laid out for his sovereign, Selim II, complete with garden house and tulip beds."

Ebu es-Suud is also known to be the person who developed the first tulip variety in Istanbul. His name is given as are the names of 200 gardeners in a book written in the 18th century. In the 16th and 17th centuries some 2000 varieties of tulip are listed although many of them were not pursued because they did not prove to be popular.

That did not stop the cultivators from applying fanciful names to the various varieties of the tulip such as rose of youth, shadow of the diamond, light of the ruby and golden goblet.

The Austrian ambassador Oghier Ghislain de Busbecq is credited with having brought the first tulips into Europe in 1558 and they were first seen growing in a garden in Vienna the following year. From there tulips spread throughout Europe and in 1562 an Amsterdam merchant imported the first tulip bulb from Istanbul. The tulip really caught on in the Netherlands where bidding on rare bulbs reached ridiculously high prices and eventually ruined many investors.

The Ottomans had their own devotion to the tulip, which came to a head in the first quarter of the 18th century under Sultan Ahmet III and his son-in-law Damad İbrahim Paşa. Extravagant parties and competitions over tulips were held but ended when the common people who were unhappy about salaries and social conditions revolted in 1730. From then until the modern era, the tulip barely received any attention.

It was former Istanbul metropolitan mayor Bedrettin Dalan in the 1980s who brought tulips back in fashion and now every year the metropolitan municipality holds special spring festivities in honor of the tulip. The current mayor, Kadir Topbaş, has taken a particular interest in tulips and not only has been interested in celebrations at various points around Istanbul including Emirgan, Taksim and Gülhane Parks but has also encouraged the municipality to invest in growing tulips near Istanbul. This year the festivities will include exhibitions, competitions, concerts and tulip sales during the first half of April.””

20 million tulips, the national flower of Turkey, are planted in Istanbul's parks every April during the annual International Istanbul Tulip Festival.