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# A monographic research on the Assyrian culinary culture in Turkey



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## Abstract

Assyrians are the oldest civilization of Mesopotamia and have a history of 5500–6000 years. They are known as the first civilization in history, founded in Antakya by Mor Petrus in 37–43 AD and briefly announcing Christianity to the whole Middle East. Today, it is estimated that there are 12 and a half million Assyrians in the world and 45,000 Assyrians in Turkey. Most of them live in different regions of Eastern Anatolia, mostly in Istanbul. The Ottoman Empire served as home to countless cultures and religions with its 500-year history, and this cultural wealth made a positive impact on the culinary culture, creating a unique kitchen. Various sources argue that the cultures of Assyrians, especially in the regions where Assyrians lived, constituted Assyrian culinary cultures with a dense population.

In this study, the history of the Assyrian, the regions they lived extensively in the world and Turkey, and the beliefs and practices in birth, marriage, death, feast, and holy days have been examined in terms of gastronomic culture.

**Keywords:** Assyrian, Assyrian cuisine, Culinary culture, Ethnic culture

## Introduction

Mesopotamia, where history, civilization, religions, and early cultures are formed, has been a cradle of many civilizations. One of the most important elements of these cultures is Assyrians, and Mesopotamia is regarded as their homeland. Turkey's different provinces in the South-eastern Anatolia region are multicultural places where people from many religions and nations live together in peace.

It is announced that the Assyrian name comes from the Aramaic King "Sürrüs" who founded the city of Antakya in 1400–1500 BC. Patriarchate centers are still located in Damascus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and India with an estimated population of about 5 million today although they depend on various races [1].

Since the majority of the borders of the Tur Abdin region, which was the first geography of Assyrians, included the province of Mardin, this region has been regarded as one of the cultural riches of Turkey due to Assyrians who have started to define the public name with the influence of the media in recent years. Interest in these destinations has also increased due to the

importance of cultural and faith tourism which are becoming popular throughout the world.

Culinary culture of a region refers to the unity of the beliefs and practices that develop in this region that makes of its own culture [2]. Traditional Anatolian culinary culture has emerged as a result of hundreds or even thousands of years of efforts. This means that the share of many communities coming from different periods and times from the beginning is undeniable. Because the culinary culture of each community coming from different places and from different times played an important role in influencing and diversifying the development of Anatolian culinary culture, Assyrian culinary culture has been formed depending on the geographical and climatic conditions of the South-eastern Anatolia Region and has a structure that contains wheat, meat, and spices. The Assyrian cuisine, which is formed in the land that hosts all Mesopotamian civilizations, is a blended form of cultures of different civilizations. The culinary culture of Assyrians who have migrated to many countries of the world and live in small groups has been limited only in the regions where they live collectively, and their awareness of the world has not been achieved. Ensuring the sustainability of a culinary culture that is limited in family meetings and Assyrian churches

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is very difficult compared to the world's widely accepted Chinese, Italian, and Indian ethnic cuisines. In this study, it is aimed to introduce the ethnic origin of Assyrians, to explain the traditions and some traditional Assyrian dishes that are held on important days and feasts of the Assyrian culture, and to investigate how the cuisine culture of the Assyrian community, which has been living with the Turks for years, is influenced by the Turkish cuisine culture.

### Distribution of Assyrians in the world

Assyrians live mostly in Mardin, Sanliurfa, Adiyaman, Gaziantep, Diyarbakir, Hakkari, Sirnak, Malatya, Ankara, İzmir, and İstanbul, and they also have spread out almost everywhere including Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, Holland, France, Canada, Spain, Brazil, India, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Austria, Australia, and the USA (Fig. 1) [3]. However, demographically, Assyrians have lost blood constantly. The main settlement areas of Mesopotamia, terror in Anatolia and Syria, and lack of security caused Assyrians living in the region to migrate to various cities of Turkey, especially Istanbul. Meanwhile, there have also been immigrants to countries such as the USA, Switzerland, Germany, France, Holland, Brazil, and India [4].

Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, which belong to Mesopotamia Land in general, constitute the areas where Assyrians in the South-eastern Anatolia region intensify. In these regions, the culture of Assyrians is still alive. Today, it is estimated that there are 12.5 million Assyrians in the world and this number includes all the Assyrian groups in the world (Melkit, Keldani, Nasturi, Maronite, Assyrian Orthodox, Assyrian Catholic, and Assyrian Protestant). However, the total number of Assyrian Orthodox groups in the world is 2.5 million [5].

Historically, Assyrians have formed the largest outward migration group in and around Mardin. As of today, around 2500 Assyrians have been living in Mardin and the surrounding area [6]. Sixty thousand in Germany, 12,000 in the Netherlands, and 50,000 Assyrians in Sweden can be seen [7].

The number of Assyrians in İstanbul, which was 8000 in 1993, has increased to 10,000 today with migrations from Mardin and Şırnak provinces. This situation caused the number in the South-eastern Anatolia region to fall to 2000–3000 [8].

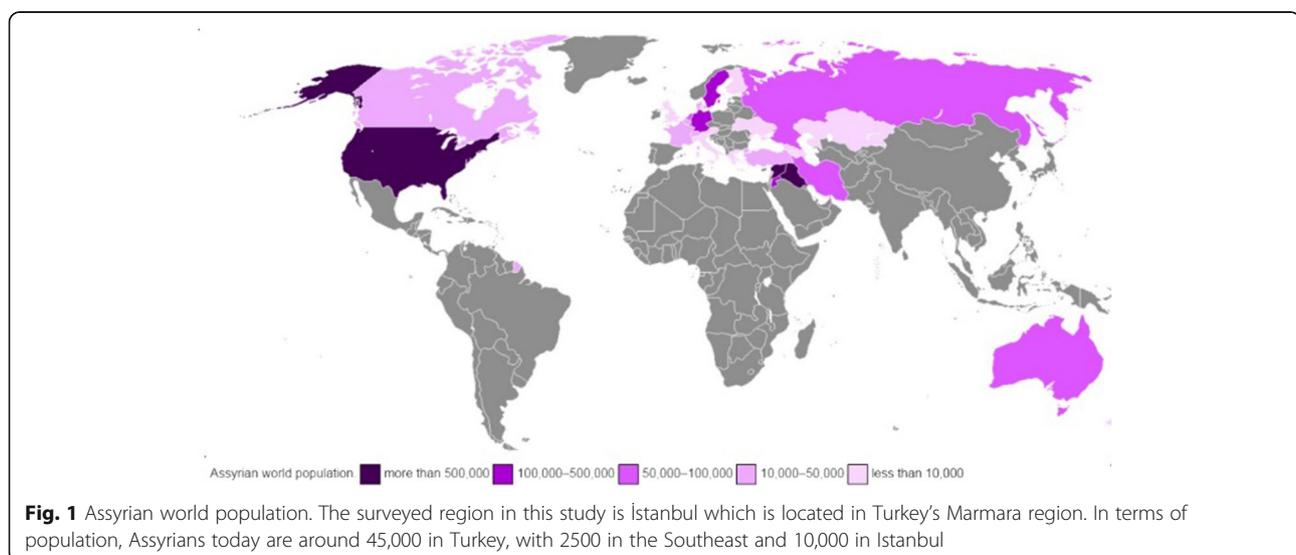
### Important days and the culinary culture

There are religious influences in the culinary culture which varies across regions. Therefore, special days based on belief have important role on the Assyrian culinary culture. Events such as the birth of Jesus, being crucified, the resurrection, and the ascension have importance in the community life and are regularly celebrated every year. There are also celebrations about Mary and various Christian saints [9].

### Festivals/celebrations

The festivals can be divided into two groups in the Assyrian culture: religious and irreligious festivals.

The events of Jesus the Messiah, especially from the time of his birth to the time of the crucifixion and the ascension, are celebrated as religious festivals. The events about Virgin Mary and the holy spirit are also assessed in this category. Some of these festivals are New Year (1 January), baptism (6 January), the Easter (the resurrection) (April), pentecost ("pentikost") (the coming of the holy spirit) (23 June), and Christmas (the birth) (25 December) [10]. The Easter festival, Hano



Kritho, Suboro, and fast days can be related to the Assyrian culinary culture.

**The Easter festival:** The Easter is the most important and longstanding festival for Assyrians. After 50-day fasting, the Easter is celebrated. During these 50 days, food of animal origin such as meat, milk, and egg is forbidden to eat [11]. One of the characteristic features of the Easter festival is that Assyrians give eggs to each other as gifts. It is a traditional occasion to give red eggs to guests. To prepare red eggs, first, one layer of onion skin is placed in the pan and one layer of egg is placed on this and the same process is repeated until the pan is full. Salt and vinegar are added to the eggs to avoid cracking, and eggs are boiled in water with onion skins. When the color of the onion skin is transferred to the egg, the color of the egg becomes red. In general, red eggs are prepared 1 day before the festival. This tradition, which still maintains its validity today, is colored with chemical dyes on the outer surface of the egg in big cities. The egg yolk represents reproductivity, light, and sun; egg white represents peace, naturality, and purity; the red color represents blood that Jesus raised for the redemption of people when he was crucified [12]. In the festival, red pitta, lebeniye, and rice pudding are served besides the egg.

**Hano Kritho:** As a traditional feast of Assyrians who lived in Mesopotamia for thousands of years, this tradition is applied on the last Sunday before the beginning of the 50-day Grand Fast (usually the middle of March) every year. Hano Kritho is a female figurine representing fertility and starts with collecting bulgur, "kavurma," and eggs from the dwellings. The gathered food is brought together in the church of the village and ends with the preparation of traditional foods like "kavurmalı bulgur," egged bulgur [13].

**Suboro/Siboro (Virgin Mary Gospel Festival):** This festival is celebrated in memory of Gabriel's gospel to Mary that she was pregnant and has to give her son the name "Jesus." On the night of this festival, the daughter of the family kneads unleavened dough and sprinkles grains on the dough. One white and one red yarn put on the dough, and the girl then walks around the neighborhood with the dough. After this ceremony, old yeast changes with the new one.

**Fast days:** Legend and beliefs are important influences in the formation of cuisines. Fasting and abstinence meals in the Assyrian cuisine are made with olive oil because of the religious belief that animal foods are not consumed [14]. In the Assyrian reverence, there are many abundant and long periods of fasting and abstinence that are not seen in any other society.

In the fast days, Assyrians eat kenger and ışgın, helhel, daşıto dugarso, davke hamığe, and derman. KiteL raha is the first meal that Assyrian priests eat after the fast day.

Derman was not actually considered a meal, but it was named as a meal because it was eaten during Grand Fast. Equal amounts of chickpea, corn, and wheat that are separately roasted previously are mixed and roasted with thyme, sesame, salt, and pepper. Then, the blend which is grinded with a hand mill and kept in sacks is eaten mixed with hot water and accompanied by hot bread in fast foods.

Irreligious festivals are commemorating ceremonies for historical people and events which are effective on the presence and protection of religion and church. They are also known as the memorial day of saints. There is no culinary culture about irreligious festivals.

#### **Yamino ceremony**

The name is given to the engagement ceremony of Assyrians in Mardin. After the engagement, a special donut (yamino bun) made by the bride's family is given to the guests from the "yamino cottage."

During the wedding meal, arriving guests are offered "Merge/Marga," a traditional wedding meal of Assyrians. It is a meal which is eaten with lavas bread and meat pieces cooked in broth. At the same time, this meal is made especially during the feast days of Christmas (Noel-Yaldo). Wedding meals differ in accordance with the economic situation in urban and rural areas. Dobo, maldum, and kavurma assume an important place in family visits made after the wedding. Dobo is known as the king's food and is one of the most important local meat dishes for the most valued guests. This dish is integrated with bulgur pilaf. Assyrians are called the next day of the wedding as "sabahiye." On the breakfast table arranged for the sabahiye are kaburga dolması (stuffed ribs), kuzu dolması (stuffed lamb), and stuff like şembörek (semburek, sembüsek) [15].

#### **Funeral ceremony**

Tea and mırra (a type of coffee) are served to guests who come to the condolence. It is a religious obligation to serve food during the 3rd, 9th, and 40th days and anniversaries after death in Assyrian traditions. Donuts are distributed on the 15th day of the mourning period [11], and the food is distributed to all neighbors in memory of the deceased person, and this food generally consists of rice or bulgur pilaf.

In the Assyrian tradition, bitter coffee is served in the first hours because it symbolizes sorrow. After the pray, meal and donut are distributed in memory of the person in the name of mercy. It is also a tradition to serve bitter coffee in the first year of death.

#### **Special traditional dishes**

Recipes and preparations of some special traditional dishes, belonging to the Assyrian culinary culture, had

been obtained by using questionnaire form and face-to-face interview technique held on 30 people from the Istanbul Assyrian Orthodox Church in Istanbul. All dishes were prepared in the practice kitchen of Istinye University, Gastronomy and Culinary Arts Department, with the help of voluntary Assyrian women. The photographs of prepared dishes are given in Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13.

#### Easter cake (Kliçe-ikliçe)

Ingredients: 1 kg flour, 250 g butter, 250 g sugar, 250 ml milk, 10 g roasted anise, mahaleb, gum mastic, baking powder, and brewer's yeast.

Preparation: Melt the sugar in the milk and mix with other ingredients thoroughly. Let the dough rest, then shape (generally breaded) and align in the baking tray. Wait 2–3 h for fermentation, spread egg yolk on the dough, and cook for about 40 min (Fig. 2).

#### Red pitta bread

Ingredients: 1 kg wheat flour, 200 g corn flour, 25 g yeast, 3 eggs, 15 g sugar, 50 g butter, sesame.

Preparation: Knead flour (wheat and corn) and yeast 1 day before. Divide the dough into small pieces, roll round to a thickness of 1 cm, and bake on sac (aluminum plate). Mix the egg, sesame, and sugar to make a slurry and apply it on to the surface of baked dough (Fig. 3).

#### Lebeniye

Ingredients: 100 g wheat, 1 kg yogurt, salt.

Preparation: Boil the wheat and add yogurt. Then, cook together continuously (Fig. 4).

#### Merge/Marga

Ingredients: ½ kg lamb meat, 1 kg onion, black pepper, red pepper, salt.



**Fig. 3** Red pitta bread is an example of Assyrian-specific local bread that is cooked for the Easter festival

Preparation: Cook the meat. Then, add the chopped onions in large slices, salt, black pepper, and red pepper and cook thoroughly for 40 min (Fig. 5).

#### Dobo

Ingredients: 1½ kg beef or lamb shoulder, 30 g tomato paste, black pepper, salt, butter, garlic, allspice.

Preparation: Place the garlic and spices in the holes drilled in meat by the tip of a sharp knife. Sear in butter and tomato paste. Then, add enough water to cover it and simmer (Fig. 6).

#### Maldum

Ingredients: 100 ml sunflower oil, 1 kg eggplant, 1 kg tomato, ½ kg ground beef, green pepper, tomato paste, salt, black pepper.

Preparation: Peeled eggplant is cut into a round shape and sliced to 1-cm thickness and lightly roast in oil. Other materials are kneaded as mixture. Then, 1 piece of eggplant, 1 slice of tomato, and the mixture are placed in a circle. Add tomato paste that dissolved in water into the mixture and cook for ½ hour (Fig. 7).



**Fig. 2** Kliçe is an example of Assyrian-specific local pastry that is cooked for the Easter festival



**Fig. 4** Lebeniye is an example of Assyrian-specific local dish that consists of wheat and yogurt that are cooked for Easter festival



**Fig. 5** Merge/Marga is an example of Assyrian wedding and also Noel-Yaldo feast meal



**Fig. 7** Maldum is an example of Assyrian wedding meal that is served the day after the wedding

### Kavurma

Ingredients: ½ lamb/goat breast, tail fat, salt.

Preparation: Chop the meat into cubes, mix it with fried tails, add salt, and cook. After the cooking process, the meat is either filled into tins or frozen. It can be eaten hot or cold on demand (Fig. 8).

### Şembörek

Ingredients: 1 kg flour, 1 kg minced lamb meat, 4 onions, 1 green pepper, black pepper, pepper paste, tomato paste.

Preparation: Knead flour, salt, and water as a hard dough. Mix minced meat, minced onion, tomato paste, and salt as stuffing. The dough is divided into small pieces and opened round to a size of 20 cm. Lay the stuffing in the half of the dough. Close and cut with a plate to a half-moon shape. Fry in a small amount of sunflower oil (Fig. 9).

### Kitel raha (one type of stuffed meatball)

Ingredients: 2 kg minced lamb meat, 1 kg fine bulgur, 1 kg cracked wheat, pepper paste, salt, coriander for dough



**Fig. 6** Dobo is an example of Assyrian local meat dishes for the most valued guests

and 2 kg minced meat, 1 bunch of parsley, 3 onions, spice for stuffing.

Preparation: Knead all ingredients for dough. For stuffing, onions are roasted until browning, then minced meat, parsley, spice, and salt are added and roasted for 10 min. Roll the dough using your hands. Fill with the stuffing between two rolled dough, then close the edges of the dough and boil in salted water (Fig. 10).

### Helhel

Ingredients: 1 teaspoon of molasses, 4 tablespoons of flour, 1 tablespoon of sunflower oil, 3 eggs, 1 teaspoon of water.

Preparation: Water, molasses, and flour are thoroughly mixed. Boil the mixture, add the eggs, and cook with stirring. It is served hot (Fig. 11).

### Daşıšto dugarso

Ingredients: 1 l milk, 100 g wheat, 700 ml water, 80 g sugar.



**Fig. 8** Kavurma is an example of Assyrian Hano Kritho feast and wedding dish



**Fig. 9** Şembörek is an example of Assyrian dish that is served the day after the wedding at the breakfast

Preparation: Boil the wheat with water. Add cold milk. When boiling together, add sugar and boil for 5 more minutes. It is served hot (Fig. 12).

#### Davke hamiğe (crepe)

Ingredients: 1 kg flour, 20 g yeast, 800 ml lukewarm water, salt.

Preparation: Mix flour, salt, yeast, and warm water. Cover and left to ferment for ½ h. Fry in lightly oiled pan (Fig. 13).

#### Results and discussions

Assyrian, Kurdish, Yezidi, and Armenian people in Mardin, which has hosted countless cultures and religions throughout thousands of years of history, are the main building blocks of the region's culture. Even though they have different beliefs after this interaction, this cultural wealth created a unique cuisine by positively affecting the food cultures. Various sources suggest that the basis of regional food culture is the Assyrian culture, which has a dense population in Mardin. Despite the variety of



**Fig. 11** Helhel is an example of Assyrian dessert that is eaten during fast day

soil characteristics and plant and animal existence of the region, the main food components are shaped in the frame of meat and bulgur. Especially in terms of edible plant variety, mahlep, ıkşut, ıbzor-fennel, ogulotu, gabbeze-mausoleum, şeh fit il acuze, and gıbzara are used in many foods.

Another crucial example for the continuity of inter-generational food culture is the preparation of traditional winter food (kavurma, puff pastry, molasses, tomato paste, peksimet) by family members, relatives, and neighbors all together.

It is a tradition to serve bun to Assyrians during the Easter festivals. This is a longstanding traditional food that Assyrians could not give up and called "festival cakes" when they cooked it during the festivals. Similarly, Muslims living in the same region cooked bagels which are called "Mevlid bagel" in Mevlids. It has been determined that both Muslim and non-Muslim communities practice similar eating habits at funerals and on certain days after death. Especially in the Eastern Anatolian region (Mardin, Adiyaman) where Assyrians live



**Fig. 10** Kitel Raha is a type of stuffed meatball of Assyrians that is served as the first meal after the fast day



**Fig. 12** Daşıto dugarso is an example of Assyrian dish that is eaten during fast day



**Fig. 13** Davke hamiğe is an example of Assyrian crepe that is eaten during fast day

intensively, it is seen that many dishes are consumed by the local people without distinction of beliefs and ethnic groups.

As a result, tolerance and loyalty caused by the existence of many different cultures, religious days, rituals, and traditions of different religions have led to the enrichment of diverse cultures. Assyrian cuisine recognition and promotion activities should be organized with various events. The necessary facilities should be provided to every person and institution that researches, writes, and wants to learn. The venues that will revitalize the local Assyrian cuisine should be opened, food competitions and festivals should be made available, and different cultures should be recognized. Assyrians must be pioneers in such organizations and should not spare their spiritual help. The culinary culture that constitutes an important part of the cultivated, cultured, and preserved richness in the soil where the Assyrian cuisine was born should not disappear.

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