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Coffee and Politics

According to Louis Figuier,[1] coffee seems to have been drunk in Persia since the ninth century. The great doctor Abu ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, the prince of physicians, was already acquainted with coffee around the year 1000, and called it not *kahwa* but *bunc*, the name by which it is still known in Abyssinia.

At the time it was still a very rare drink, a decoction of seeds brought by caravans from Upper Egypt and Libya from an even more distant country, Abyssinia. Only very high Arab dignitaries drank it, as a tonic. The first European to mention coffee is Prospero Alpino of Padua. In 1580 he went to Egypt, then under Ottoman rule, with a consul of the Venetian Republic. The work in which he mentions coffee is written in Latin and addressed to one Gianni Morazini: 'The Turks have a brew, the colour of which is black. It is drunk in long draughts, and not during the meal, but afterwards . . . as a delicacy and in mouthfuls, while taking one's ease in the company of friends, and there is hardly any gathering among them where it is not drunk.' Alexandre Dumas too, in his *Dictionnaire de cuisine*, says that 'the taste for coffee went so far in Constantinople that the imams complained their mosques were empty while the coffee houses were always full.'

Not just in Constantinople but in Medina, Mecca, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and all the capitals of the Islamic world, coffee houses were opened and customers flocked to them to enjoy the brown brew while discussing their affairs – and affairs of state.

Discussing affairs of state was as dangerous then as it still is now in countries with a totalitarian régime. Sultan Amurat III, after celebrating his accession by assassinating his five elder brothers, thought there was too much talk about the matter in the coffee houses. With a view to closing talkative mouths he had the coffee houses of Constantinople closed and their proprietors tortured. Coffee was proclaimed *mekreet*, undesirable.

Gradually people plucked up courage, and under Mahomet IV there were many coffee houses again. Mahomet IV, admittedly, proved to be one of those sovereigns

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who indulged themselves in pleasures and left the business of running the state to their favourites. The man who governed in his name was old Mahomet Kolpili, a vizier who could neither read nor write and did not care for the liberty of the press, or in this case of the tongue, for tongues wagged freely in the coffee houses of the Ottoman Empire. He answered criticism with the bastinado, conscientiously applied to all coffee consumers taken *in flagrante delicto*. When the bastinado proved ineffective he ordered *all* public establishments to be closed this time. People came in through the back yards. He had the walls razed to the ground, condemning the proprietors and their more conspicuous customers to be thrown into the Bosphorus, sewn into leather sacks.

. . . Ce sont des sacs pesants d'où partent des sanglots.	They were heavy sacks, whence came sobs.
On verrait, en sondant la mer qui les promène,	Scanning the sea that carried them away,
Se mouvoir en leurs flancs comme une force humaine.	one might see something like human strength moving within them.
La lune était sereine et jouait sur les flots.	The moon was serene, playing on the waves.

These cruel measures did not discourage coffee drinkers, and indeed later sultans had officers solely concerned with coffee in their seraglios, called *kahwaghis*. They supervised *battaghis*, slaves especially charged with preparing coffee for their master and his armies.

An English tourist who visited those parts in 1617 tasted a beverage which he said was called *kahoua*; he described it as being made of a blackish bean boiled in water 'to which it imparts almost no flavour'. Later on the English were to take a warm, coloured water of a different flavour to their hearts and make it their national brew. One wonders whether this seventeenth-century Englishman had thought of grinding his coffee bean. The two circumstances might not be unconnected.

In the eighteenth century the city of Marseilles was already the gateway to the Orient, and its merchants were on very good terms, as trade demanded, with their foreign colleagues. The people of Marseilles, true descendants of the Massalian merchants of classical times, had trading stations or agents in all the main Mediterranean ports ruled by the Sublime Porte. A Turco-Algerian family living not far from the Vieux Port acted as a consular office for the Grand Turk and were also import-export agents. Naturally there was fraternization between colleagues (and in the course of time the Samat family became genuine Marseilles, baptised and speaking with the local accent). It was at the house of these merchants that the Sieur La Roque was offered a cup of the Turkish brew around 1643. Legend has it that La Roque liked everything Turkish. Thanks to his friends, and taking advantage of his voyages, he had furnished a room in his house as an Eastern divan, with sofas, hookah pipes and low tables. He liked the drink called *cahoua* as much as he liked Eastern furniture, and invited his friends to taste it at the first opportunity. It was the first European coffee party.

Some years later Jean de Thévenot, a relation of Melchisédech de Thévenot, founder of the Academy of Sciences and the author, like Jean, of travel writings, also mentioned the drink *caoué* or *caffé*, which he could no longer do without. The manuscript of his *Relations d'un voyage fait au Levant* (1664) was sold in January 1981, the auctioneers inaccurately claiming that he was the inventor of coffee.

Subligny, a lawyer who also wrote poetry, put in a plea for the black liquid in verse in the number of *La muse de la cour* of 2 December 1666. He had it acquitted on the principle of the benefit of the doubt. From the literary viewpoint the work was relatively successful, but the public at large did not take to its subject.

At last, three years later in 1669, Soleiman Aga, the Grand Panjandrum in person, really launched coffee in the Western world. The diamond jewellery and kohl-rimmed eyes of this turbaned ambassador to Louis XIV had the duchesses of the courts swooning in raptures. He offered his visitors tiny cups filled with the oriental brew. Whether because of the dark, hot liquid, or because of the impressive muscles of his equally dark slaves, the ladies' hearts beat faster. 'Caffé' became tremendously fashionable. As we would say today, Soleiman Aga's embassy was lobbying for coffee, and his promotion of the product was a huge success. Everyone wanted coffee; few could get it. You needed relations in Marseilles, the only port through which it might pass, and the importers were agents of the Sultan.

In Paris a person described as a 'Levantine' soon set up a sales outlet at the sign of the 'Cahuet' in the alley leading to the Petit Châtelet. His shop offered for sale 'German boxes, lined with lead and closed with screws'. They contained small, hard, black objects rather resembling droppings, which were roasted coffee beans. He also sold stone-ground coffee in leather bags greased to preserve the aroma (the manual coffee mill was not available until after 1687). Unfortunately these 'boxes' and the cost of handling them raised yet further the price of a foodstuff which already cost the equivalent of about a thousand pounds a pound in modern money. Such prices obviously put a brake on the spread of coffee.

The Levantine, or his suppliers, tried a promotional sale to bring the price down, mixing the 'caffé' powder with a certain proportion of ground broad beans, cornel stones, acorns or barley. The barley was roasted in a manner revived, as historical events sometimes do recur, after the 1940 armistice in France. It tasted no better in the seventeenth century than it would during the Occupation, and there were not even patriotic reasons for pretending to like it. Customers would have nothing to do with the 'German boxes' and their adulterated contents.

Then a little hunchback had an idea. He was said by some to be Turkish and others to be Greek, but in any case came from Candia, the Greek island of Crete then occupied by the Turks, and so he was called 'the Candiot'. His idea was to take the drink to its potential customers: he would wave the irresistible aroma of a cup of 'caffé' under their noses. It was an even better idea in that he had no money with which to open a shop and pay for a licence. Tea was already being sold in this way in London.

The little cripple Candiot, a white napkin tied round his waist doing duty for an apron, announced his arrival at door after door by singing, at the top of his voice, a Greek song, which he was happy to translate:

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'A history of coffee in pictures': lithograph by Develly, 1831. Well known in the Islamic world, and popular in Turkey, coffee did not appear at the court of Louis XIV until 1669, when Soleiman Aga came there as ambassador. Captain Des Clieux took it across the Atlantic and planted it successfully in the West Indies.

O drink that I adore
You rule the universe!
O drink that I adore,
You rule the universe!
You wean the faithful from the vine
You're more delectable than wine.

He held his cap in one hand and in the other a miniature stove with a pot on it, the kind used for making tisanes. How could anyone resist the aroma escaping from the coffee pot, and the charming smile of the little singing hunchback? For two sous – two gold sous – you could hardly do better than offer coffee to your guests, for the Candiot had advance notice from the servants of any parties in the offing, and they of course obtained a commission on his sales. The master of the house would try to appear delighted to see him rather than look miserly.

Moreover, even if you could afford coffee beans (and the price finally came down), making a cup of the brew was no light matter; you could see why the Grand Turk had required a body of slaves to do it. Louis XV and Mme Du Barry (who had her portrait painted in Eastern dress, drinking coffee) discussed the subject for evenings on end.

First you had to get hold of 'coffee cherries' through a complicated commercial circuit (Louis XV actually grew them in his glasshouses at Versailles). You dried the 'cherries', which were sold fresh so that they would weigh heavier, then skinned them, roasted the berries without burning them too much, crushed or pounded them, and make the decoction in the Turkish manner, boiling it as many as ten times. 'Boiled coffee' was not thought to be spoiled coffee in those days.

He who invented the cafetière in two sections was therefore a real benefactor of humanity. Cardinal du Belloy mendaciously claimed responsibility for that brilliant little utensil.

The sale of ready-to-drink coffee from door to door had a long innings. There was also an Armenian called Pascal (or in some accounts an American called Pascall) who had a booth at the Saint-Germain fair where, for the first time, a cup of the decoction was sold in a public place. The price was just a little cheaper than that of coffee sold door to door, but it must have suited the customers, since Pascal (or Pascall) soon moved to the quai de l'École and made a fortune there, enough to employ a waiter – the first café waiter in history, an Italian called Procope.

Procope was not just any Italian; he came from Palermo and he was of noble birth, a double misfortune in that the aristocrats of Sicily were the most impecunious of all European noblemen. Short of money but not ideas, Francisco Procopio dei Coltelli (literally, 'of the knives') did not intend to stay in Sicily waiting for some miracle to save him from starvation. He left for the Continent when very young, rolled up his sleeves and set out in search of a job with prospects. It was thus that he came to make his mark around 1672 serving in the establishment of the famous Armenian or American purveyor of 'caffé', Pascal or Pascall.

In 1683 Procope did not know that his eleventh year as a paid employee would be his last, though he was already looking around for a new situation. Several thousand kilometres away, however, something happened which was to affect his subsequent fate: the Turks were soundly beaten by the king of Poland, Jan Sobieski, at the siege of Vienna. The Turkish general Kara Mustapha had no faith at all in the valour of his armies and fled – leaving behind him a vast quantity of coffee which, had it been drunk before the battle, certainly ought to have given the soldiers of the Crescent the strength they needed.

Opening up the mountains of sacks left in their city, the people of Vienna thought at first that they had found the cavalry's stocks of 'Turkish corn', i.e., maize, for

their horses. But a compatriot of Sobieski's, formerly a prisoner of war of the Turks and now liberated, told the general in command how lucky he was. This man, Franz Kolschitsky, had been a *battaghi*, one of the slaves employed in the making of coffee, and he brought back with him from captivity a great talent for the art of making mocha. Perhaps Sobieski gave him some of the sacks as a reward? In any case, he soon opened a genuine coffee house in Vienna, in a style of oriental magnificence which made it a dazzling success. Within a few years he was at the head of a whole chain of establishments in Central Europe, and Vienna was its coffee-making capital. Viennese coffee, first with whipped cream and then made into an ice, was all the rage.

Iced coffee had been drunk since the middle of the century, with such enthusiasm that Boileau mentions the craze for it in his *Repas ridicule*. But ice cream, actually a Venetian invention and descended from the ancient Roman sorbets, seemed the very last word in luxury.

There was much talk in Paris of these delicious Viennese specialities, and Francisco Procopio dei Coltelli told himself that he could hardly continue to make his fortune, as they say, by selling cups of coffee out of doors at a sou each (the price had fallen steeply). Paris needed a *salon de café* along the lines of the Viennese *Kaffeehäuser* – an attractive place, even more attractive than the customer's own home, where people could enjoy an atmosphere of luxury at a reasonable price, where they would come in order to meet each other, and where they could find a menu of specialities not confined solely to coffee.

The Viennese ices made by Procope attracted as many people as the mirrors on the walls and the crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceilings of the establishment he opened in the rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, opposite the Comédie-Française (you could even go there after the play). Then he moved to the rue de Tournon, and finally to the rue de l'Ancienne-Comédie, where the Café Procope still stands.

People met at a spot where, as its advertisements boasted, 'the luxury guarantees the fine quality of articles consumed', not just to drink coffee and enjoy other delicacies, but for amusement, to play chess, to read the journals and the news of the day pinned up by the astute Procope on the stovepipes, and to discuss current events and fashionable ideas. At this period the newsmongers, who were simultaneously informers, philosophers, agitators, secret or double agents, both discreet and glib of tongue, were everywhere in salons, ante-rooms and 'ruelles' – the alcoves where ladies received guests – to give and receive information, retailing all the rumours of Paris and Versailles. Procope had been shrewd enough to attract some of these people, who in their turn attracted customers as much as the lampoons and satires on the stovepipes.

Many others imitated Procope, just as they imitated but could not equal his menu, which offered the very best of coffees and also sweetmeats, sorbets, syrups, liqueurs, apéritif wines and other delicious drinks. In 1721 there were 300 cafés in Paris. There were to be 2000 at the time of the Revolution and 4000 at the beginning of the Empire. Montesquieu wrote in his *Lettres persanes*: 'Were I the King, I would close the cafés, for the people who frequent those places heat their brains in a very tiresome manner. I would rather see them get drunk in taverns. Then, at least, they

would harm only themselves, while the intoxication which coffee arouses in them causes them to endanger the country's future.'

Such too was the opinion of the King's police, whose raids were announced in the smoke-filled cafés by boys posted at strategic spots. (The fashion for tobacco had become associated with that for coffee.) There was too much talk in cafés, as had been the case in the coffee houses of Turkey two centuries earlier, and the police were severely overworked. 'If all who criticize the government were arrested, one would have to arrest everyone', commented d'Argenson.

At the dawn of the French Revolution, therefore, the cafés had become clubs of a kind, with meetings parallel to those of the National Assembly. Camille Desmoulins perched on a gable in the Café du Foy in the Palais-Royal, shouting, 'Let us wear a cockade!' and pinning a leaf to his hat. Desmoulins, Danton and Marat built the Republic in such cafés, particularly Procope's, which was now run by a man called Zoppi. Robespierre preferred a café called La Régence (rather inappropriately, for the resort of a Republican) but came to Procope's to drink its still incomparable mocha and suck oranges.

At the end of the seventeenth century in England, Charles II, like the Turks, had begun by fulminating against both the coffee houses (one of the first of which was opened by the Armenian Pascal, who had gone bankrupt in Paris after Procope left him) and their rivals the alehouses, on the very reasonable grounds that such places were hotbeds of sedition and a breeding ground for subversive movements. But the young Cavaliers resorted in great numbers to those malodorous caverns, where more brandy was drunk than coffee or tea. They were the scene of duels, cock-fighting and dog-fighting, horrifying the Puritans as much as the seditious propositions and scandalous anecdotes which were the staple of conversation in them. Coffee houses not open to the general public eventually became such famous London clubs as the Kit-Kat Club, the Beefsteak Club and the October Club, where a man could get drunk among others of his own background. And it was in the back room of a coffee house opened in 1689 by one Edward Lloyd that merchandise bound for the East and West Indies could be insured, in a kind of wager against misadventure and shipwreck. This was the origin of the greatest insurance company in the world.

Doctors had appropriated coffee, as they did everywhere else, at least for the purposes of dissertation. Pocock, Sloane and Radcliffe declared it a panacea for all ills, a remedy for consumption, ophthalmic catarrh, dropsy, gout, scurvy and smallpox – although taken mixed with milk it might give you leprosy.

Unfortunately coffee as a beverage aroused the ire of the brewers who regarded England as their personal property. They protested loudly, denouncing the Levantine café proprietors 'as being no free men', i.e., having no right to compete with the vendors of ale in particular, that honest national product. Moreover, so the brewers said, coffee houses disturbed the neighbours with their bad smells and put the whole vicinity in great and constant danger day and night (because of the fires kept alight under the coffee pots).

Like the British Navy, however, coffee and the coffee houses held out against wind and weather. Finally, permission was definitively given for the drinking of coffee in public. Pope praises it in *The Rape of the Lock*:

> Coffee (which makes the politician wise,
> And see through all things with his half-shut eyes).

At the time far more coffee than tea was drunk in England, and without the coffee houses seventeenth-century English literature might not have flourished so well. England came late to neoclassicism, and provided fewer of its original ideas than other European countries, but writers came into contact with the thinking of the century in the coffee houses. Perhaps they also nurtured the English sense of humour. It was in the coffee houses where they met that the style of such writers as Pope, Addison, Steele, Philips, Johnson, Defoe, Sterne and Dryden was formed. Dryden, according to Dr Johnson in the *Lives of the English Poets*, frequented Will's Coffee House, where he sat in an 'armed chair, which in the winter had a settled and prescriptive place by the fire' and 'was in the summer placed in the balcony'. The tale goes that he was thrashed there by men hired by the Earl of Rochester. However, the vogue for coffee was overtaken in England around 1730 by the vogue for tea.

In Germany too, coffee had a strong traditional rival in beer, generally regarded as a better drink even if it did leave you with a nasty hangover. The Prince-Bishop of Paderborn imposed a thrashing as well as a fine on coffee drinkers, and only in the second half of the eighteenth century did middle-class snobbery, emulating the courts (Frederick the Great practically lived on coffee), call coffee houses into being *en masse*. The first recorded German coffee house was at Hamburg in 1690, but it was opened for the benefit of British sailors.

Leipzig, a rich commercial city, proud of its fairs and its men of letters (it was the European capital of printing), had to open coffee houses for the rich merchants passing through and the whole subversive body of intellectuals wanting to get their works published. The baroque German literary style with its use of the hexameter was born here, and so later was Romanticism, a movement hatched out at student meetings in the warmth of those smoke-filled rooms.

Although both coffee and cafés, the drink and the places where it was drunk, enjoyed a parallel vogue they did not always make for a quiet life, to the way of thinking of many honest citizens as well as the police. The Princess Palatine, the German wife of Monsieur, Louis XIV's brother, compared the odour of coffee to the Archbishop of Paris's breath. Malebranche, at the same period, would have nothing to do with coffee except as an enema, although he did think it answered that purpose very well. Saint-Simon was scandalized by the amazing number of cups of coffee drunk by the Regent – 'mud which is good for nothing but the very dregs of the people', he called it. Doctors continued to condemn coffee as a 'dangerous poison' and warn that it might prevent conception. If so, retorted Voltaire and Fontenelle, who both enjoyed coffee, it was a slow poison, and indeed the former lived to 85 and the latter to the age of 100.

The Prince de Ligne tells us that an experiment was made 'in some northern country, I know not which' to judge the relative violence of those two poisons, tea and coffee. Two criminals condemned to death, men in their prime, had their sentences commuted to imprisonment on condition that one of them drank a cup of tea and the other a cup of coffee three times a day. 'As a result, he who took tea died at 79, and the other at 80.'

Frederick the Great of Prussia, bowing to the advice of his physicians who were alarmed by his excessive coffee consumption, cut down on it. 'I take only seven or eight cups in the morning, and a pot of coffee in the afternoon.' Frederick's coffee, incidentally, was made with champagne, and as a further refinement flavoured with a good spoonful of mustard.

Mme de Sévigné, after an initial enthusiasm for coffee, took violently against it, just as she had taken against chocolate. After recommending sweet white coffee as a consolation in Lent, the versatile and inexhaustible letter-writer stated confidently that the fashion for coffee would pass, like the fashion for the works of Racine. Her reputation for foresight has never quite lived it down.

The first coffee plant was introduced to Brazil from Guiana in 1727. The history of that vast country was to revolve around coffee thenceforward. Unlike rubber, coffee has managed to survive a number of economic crises, being inimitable and irreplaceable. In our own day it accounts for half the revenues of Brazil. Up to the end of the nineteenth century the coffee-growing economy was inextricably linked to slavery, and it shaped a society, almost a culture, unlike any other. The *fazendeiros* (farmers) soon chose to grow coffee rather than sugar, since it needed only rudimentary industrial plant and far less capital than the sugar mills. The main requirement was a large labour force. The acquisition of large stocks of slaves eventually led the large *fazendas* into a state of heavy and permanent debt, but it was worth it in view of the profits that also accrued and a policy of marriages and alliances between *fazendeiros* which encouraged the concentration of properties and their businesses. Credit, constantly renewed, was in the hands of the banks until 1850, the date of the abolition of the slave trade.

For ten more years coffee production and the surface area under cultivation continued to expand. Then signs of fatigue set in. The human livestock of the *fazendas* was getting old and the soil was becoming exhausted. The small farmers or *sitientes*, having no new slaves, became tenants or *agregados* of the large *fazendas*. This development was the death blow for any other food crops. There followed a steep rise in prices, until the time when disease, pests and drought ravaged the plantations one after another.

The price of coffee rose spectacularly because of its scarcity and the enfranchisement of the slaves, now wage-earning labourers. Feverish progress was made with the building of railroads to facilitate the transport of convoys; that had previously been the job of one-third of the slaves, who transported the coffee over appalling roads. Unfortunately the European depression of 1870–71 saw prices fall again. Severe unemployment was the result, and was at the root of the primitive urbanization of the notorious suburbs of Rio, São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. During the great periods of prosperity of the coffee and sugar trades, the southeast of the country had already seen a vast influx of European immigrants who were now demanding work.

Those *fazendeiros* who managed to survive the crises, either because they had reserves to fall back on or because they changed to growing rubber, developed for themselves a smart society which was entirely up to date with the fashions of Paris and London. Offenbach immortalized the stock figure of the Brazilian millionaire in *La vie parisienne*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the coffee consumption of the industrialized countries of Europe and the United States increased spectacularly, practically doubling. The first international syndicate to control coffee had been set up at Frankfurt am Main in Germany after the 1873 crisis. An organization controlling import and sales was set up in New York in 1880. In 1906, the yield from São Paulo represented 64 per cent of world production, almost 22 million sacks. This record harvest obviously caused prices to collapse.

Various further cyclical crises, in 1912 and 1929, were also heavy blows, and the *favelas* of Rio and other large Brazilian cities saw a new influx of the unemployed. In 1931 the Coffee Institute was set up to regulate over-production. Each new coffee tree planted was to be taxed, and whenever capitalists became anxious about the amount of their profits the precious beans were to be burned in locomotive engines.

Even at the best of times coffee is a major field for speculation, and a kind of war is conducted between the coffee-growing states, manipulating stocks to cause artificial rises or falls in the price. The great planter families have become formidable speculators, while small tenant farmers are in debt to the real estate companies, who may distrain upon their land and treat them very badly indeed if the interest of the moment seems to require it.

Finally, the huge influx of slaves to the sugar and coffee plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has made the population of Brazil today an extraordinary spectrum of half-castes, mulattos, blacks, whites, Asians and Indians, a mixture of races unique in the world.

Coffee from the Islands

Coffee originally grew best in the kingdom of Yemen in the Aden and Moka areas; it was from there that the Dutchman Van Hom had plants taken to the Dutch colony of Batavia in Indonesia in 1690. The coffee plants grown in the Botanical Gardens of Leyden did so well that specimens were generously given to several other European capitals. Louis XIV was presented with one at the Peace of Utrecht, and had it grown in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Cuttings were taken, and produced many more coffee trees.

Captain Gabriel des Clieux obtained permission from the naturalist Jussieu to naturalize coffee in the French colonies of America. Jussieu was initially horrified at the idea of mutilating the tree for which he was responsible, and the King's physician had to plead for des Clieux to get him his cutting. The crossing to the West Indies was a long and difficult one. Fresh water on the ship began to run short, and had to be carefully rationed out to the crew and passengers. They quenched their thirst with a few drops of the precious liquid a day. There was also a Dutchman on board – perhaps a secret agent, but in any case he tried to destroy the coffee plant which might injure the Batavian trade.

Not content with mounting guard on his cutting day and night, des Clieux deprived himself entirely of drinking water. 'Stronger than Tantalus', he tells us in his memoirs, 'I stifled and repressed my desires, so that every day I could sprinkle a spoonful of water on the soil containing my treasure, even though it would evaporate in a few

moments because of the temperature of those latitudes.' The vessel was also attacked and damaged by Spanish pirates, which prolonged the voyage yet further. By the time it touched land both the coffee plant and its guardian were very unwell. Planted in suitable soil and caressed by the trade winds, however, the plant revived. Des Clieux continued,

> At the end of eighteen months, I had a very abundant crop. The beans were distributed to the religious communities and to various inhabitants who knew the price of the product, and guessed how it would enrich them. The coffee plantation grew by degrees; I continued distributing fruits of the young plants that grew in the shade of the father of them all. Guadeloupe and San Domingo were soon well provided with the plants. . . . They spread the more rapidly in Martinique because of the disease which had struck down all the cocoa trees without exception, a disaster attributed by some to the eruption of a volcano on the island, which had opened a new crater, by others to abundant and continual rains lasting over two months. However that may be, the inhabitants of the place, to the number of five or six thousand, completely deprived of the food crop they had grown, which was almost the only thing they had to exchange for foods from France, had no resource but coffee-growing, to which they devoted themselves exclusively, with success which went far beyond their hopes and soon repaired their losses. Within three years the island was covered with as many coffee trees as there had been cocoa trees before.

As the Creole poet Esmenars wrote:

Heureuse Martinique, ô bords hospitaliers	Happy Martinique, O hospitable shores,
Dans un monde nouveau,	in a new world you were the first
vous avez les premiers	to receive
Recueilli, fécondé ce doux fruit de l'Asie	and fertilize this sweet fruit of Asia,
Et dans un sol français mûri son ambroisie!	and ripen its ambrosia on French soil!

The story of this miraculous plant rather suggests that of the breadfruit trees which were the cause of the mutiny of the *Bounty*. Des Clieux's cutting was the ancestor of all the coffee trees of Martinique, the West Indies, Brazil and Colombia, and some of them went back across the Atlantic to become a source of income to the African colonies that have now gained their independence, in particular the Ivory Coast and Cameroon. In gratitude to des Clieux, the French colonists of the West Indies awarded him a well-deserved pension. However, after the peace of 1763 over-production ruined a number of planters, and for the first time coffee was burnt on the quaysides. (There were no steam engines yet to make use of this new kind of fuel, as happened in Brazil at the time of the great Depression.)

Only the French colonists of the American acquisitions grew coffee at this period. It did grow in the wild state in the Île de Bourbon, now La Réunion, but no one thought much of it. Not until a schooner arrived from Moka in Arabia with a branch of a coffee tree in flower fixed to her mast, to announce what cargo she carried, did the planters of the island think of growing it as an alternative to the sugar cane which was so subject to disease.

When Pierre Poivre was governor of the French colonies in the Indian Ocean, he imported coffee plants to be grafted on native stocks; they took so well that 50 years later the island of Réunion had almost a million trees. Its volcanic soil grew one of the best coffees of all. Madagascan coffee was also very highly esteemed.

Coffee in Legend

Once upon a time, perched on the hillsides of the coast of South Yemen in Arabia, there was a monastery of devout Muslims which derived its main resources from a flock of goats. The goats gave them milk and meat, and provided leather which they took to town to sell.

One day the goatherd complained to the Imam that sometimes, and against their usual nature, his beasts remained awake and lively all night. The Imam suspected that this wakefulness was the result of whatever the goats were grazing. He visited the flock to investigate, and saw some shrubs with firm, glossy leaves, which the goats had ravaged. They had also eaten the fruits: small, red berries like cherries with not much flesh and a large kernel. The holy man cut a branch still bearing berries, and back in the monastery he searched his library for a treatise on botany, for the members of these Arab religious communities were very learned men. He found no reference to the berry, but on reflection it occurred to him that the shrubs seemed to have been growing in regular rows, as if they had once been planted by the hand of man. They must have reverted to the wild long ago, although it could be seen that they had once been aligned in an orchard. But how could an orchard have been planted in this remote spot?

It turned out, however, that a colony of black people said to have come from the country of Kaffa in Abyssinia had once lived in those parts. Islamic tradition gave their greatest queen the name of Balkis. The Imam read that:

> This queen, having heard tell of the Jewish king Soliman (Solomon), left her country of Sheba, the old name of that region, to visit him. When she came home she bore a son, called Menelik, who later returned to Abyssinia to introduce Judaism there, and that cult became Coptic Christianity. The Sabaeans, because of their geographical position at the entrance to the Red Sea, long had a monopoly of trade in spices, gold, and also the copper necessary to make brass, for they had fabulous mines somewhere. They vanished from history two centuries before the Prophet Mohammed, may his name be praised, revealed the truth to the faithful.

It seemed likely that the Sabaeans had brought some of the plants they most valued from Kaffa, their native land in Africa. What, then, was the use of the trees which had so excited the goats, always supposing the subjects of the Queen of Sheba really had planted them or their descendants? To find out, the Imam decided to try eating them. The red berries, eaten raw with their kernels crushed, tasted unpleasant to any palate but a goat's. So he boiled the crushed fruits, which did not bulk very large, apart from their kernels, and bravely drank the purée-like infusion. It was nothing special.

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'A history of coffee in pictures': lithograph by Develly, 1836. The ten vignettes depict the story of coffee, from its first discovery by goats, who found the shrub stimulating (see p. 593), to its planting in the West Indies.

Suddenly remembering that cereals were sometimes roasted to make them more appetizing, he put some of the kernels in the embers. They gave off an exquisite aroma, even though they now looked like goat droppings. He crushed them with a stone and made a liquid gruel of them; it looked like tar, and as it was still bitter he sweetened it with a little honey.

A few moments after tasting this mixture, his heart began beating so fast that he had to lie down, but instead of falling asleep he felt extraordinarily lucid. His brain, becoming as active as in his youth, was teeming with brilliant ideas. The Imam, a

man of considerable intellectual powers in any case, became even more knowing. He watched through the night, feeling as if he could embrace the universe, and did not even feel tired next morning. At the midnight hour of prayer he was the only man in the monastery to be truly wide awake; as usual, the other members of the community dragged themselves wearily to their devotions, muttering. But when the Imam gave them some of his decoction the same miracle happened to them all.

It was subsequently discovered that the tree from Kaffa also had therapeutic qualities against fevers. In their gratitude the monks gave the brew the name of *kawah*, a triple play on words, meaning 'that which excites and causes the spirits to rise', and also referring to the name of Kawus Kai, a great Persian king who, according to legend, had been able to free himself from his terrestrial weight and fly to the heavens by the mere power of thought.

This story was told around 1670 by Antonio Fausto Nairone, a Maronite scholar who taught Syriac at the University of Rome. He wrote the first book on coffee. In the next century the French encyclopedists, Diderot and d'Alembert, who were also very fond of coffee, rediscovered a passage in the *Odyssey* which they thought might refer to it. 'An Egyptian lady, Polydamna', has given Helen of Troy some seeds. 'Into the bowl in which their wine was mixed, she slipped a drug that had the power of robbing grief and anger of their sting and banishing all painful memories. No one that swallowed this dissolved in wine could shed a single tear that day . . .' (*Odyssey*, Book IV). Helen used it to calm the grief of Telemachus and his companions at the failure of Odysseus to return home. It has since been scientifically proved that a dose of caffeine is not only cheering but dries up the secretions of the lachrymal glands.

It seems quite possible that Helen of Troy might have encountered coffee, since the Achaeans traded with Pharaonic Egypt, and some foods came to them from Nubia along the land routes taken by the caravans and in the trading vessels of the 'peoples of the sea'. However, some scholars think Helen's berries might equally well have been the cola nut, of which the Africans are extremely fond; it is even richer in caffeine. Be that as it may, a flight of fancy or so is surely permissible by way of a daydream: the Turks themselves say that the first cup of coffee in history was given by the archangel Gabriel to the prophet Mohammed when he was weary with his pious watching.