

ISTANBUL'S BOSTANS: A MILLENNIUM OF MARKET GARDENS*

PAUL J. KALDJIAN

ABSTRACT. For centuries, a network of market gardens throughout Istanbul provisioned the city with fresh vegetables. These *bostans* and their gardeners held a respected place in Istanbul life, contributing to the city's food and employment needs. Today, only fragments remain. Massive urban development, intense competition for metropolitan space, modernization, changing institutions and laws, and the global industrialization of food have threatened this tradition with extinction. But in spite of the overwhelming forces behind their demise, some of Istanbul's *bostans* persist. Efforts to support and promote the gardens, and to draw from the expertise and experience of their gardeners, are emerging. From a historical perspective, this article examines Istanbul's *bostans* to understand their meaning and contribution to the city's people and landscape. *Keywords:* *bostans, Istanbul, market gardens, Turkey, urban agriculture.*

Bounded by urban noise and bustle, construction and itinerant vendors, concrete and pavement, cars and trucks, multistory apartments and ateliers, litter and dust, the garden of green, neatly subdivided into units of different shades and textures, sits in sharp contrast to the surrounding environment (Figure 1). A man is directing water into perfectly prepared squares of dirt with a shovel, and some women are sitting among swaths of green, weeding. Patches of purslane, arugula, parsley, eggplants, peppers, lettuce, black cabbage, and beets can be seen at various stages of maturity, some intercropped between columns of pole beans or along the edges of radish plots and others being allowed to go to seed for next year's crops. Every piece of the garden is producing. On the edge of the nearly 1-hectare expanse sit a shack and a few small storage sheds surrounded by baskets, stakes, and other gardening tools. A rototiller is parked to the side. Another man is rinsing vegetables in a concrete pool of water and packing them in tall baskets made of woven strips of wood. Over him grows a lush arbor of grapes and hanging squash. Although the image seems spliced from the countryside, it is Istanbul, a scene that is rapidly disappearing from the city's landscape. "I am the last gardener here," explained Sabri, one of Istanbul's traditional urban agriculturalists. "This is the last year. It is sold and will be turned into a garage or a car park. This year I am having my last love affair."¹

Urban agriculture has a long history in Istanbul. Traditional market gardens, known as *bostans*, were woven into the fabric of daily life and supplied the city with

* I wish to thank the Office of Research and Support Programs, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire and the American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) for the funding that made the fieldwork supporting this article possible. I would especially like to thank Tony Greenwood and the staff of ARIT-Istanbul for always doing everything within their means to assist me when I am in Turkey. Finally, I must acknowledge the value that Maria Elisa Christie and Clarissa Kimber added through their conscientious and thoughtful reviews of drafts of this article.

✪ DR. KALDJIAN is an assistant professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54702.