



Historical Development of Liver Kebab Consumption Habits and Preservation Methods in Şanlıurfa
Şanlıurfa'da Ciğer Kebabı Tüketim alışkanlıkları ve Muhafaza Yöntemlerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the historical development of liver kebab consumption habits and meat preservation methods from past to present in Şanlıurfa. A total of 100 participants, primarily second- and third-generation butchers, were interviewed face-to-face, and the data obtained were supported by surveys. The findings indicate that most young butchers are unfamiliar with traditional preservation methods, whereas old techniques transmitted through master-apprentice relations remain vivid in collective memory. It was determined that the consumption of liver and other offal in the early morning hours during hot summer months was not merely a cultural practice but also a necessity arising from geographical and climatic conditions. Historical sources and oral narratives demonstrate that from Göbekli Tepe to the Ottoman era and the Republican period, meat consumption was widespread in the region and preservation methods evolved continuously. The practice of meat brokers selling meat on handkerchiefs, for example, was recalled only by elderly individuals and older butchers who had heard it from their fathers and masters. Methods such as burying meat underground, lowering it into wells, storing in underground cellars (zerzembes), drying, rendering (kavurma), and suspending it in cool storage areas (kabaltı) were among the main techniques used before the advent of modern refrigeration. This study emphasizes the significance of liver kebab in the



gastronomic culture of Şanlıurfa and highlights how this tradition, carried from the past to the present, reflects both dietary practices and the cultural value of culinary tourism.

Keywords: Liver kebab, meat preservation, traditional butchery, Şanlıurfa

Özet

Bu çalışma, Şanlıurfa'da geçmişten günümüze ciğer kebabı tüketim alışkanlıkları ve et muhafaza yöntemlerinin tarihsel gelişimini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmada, 2. ve 3. nesil kasaplar başta olmak üzere 100 kaynak kişi ile yüz yüze görüşmeler yapılmış ve elde edilen veriler anketler ile desteklenmiştir. Bulgular, genç kasapların büyük bölümünün geleneksel saklama yöntemlerini bilmediğini, ancak usta-çırak ilişkisiyle aktarılan eski yöntemlerin hâlen hafızalarda canlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Özellikle sıcak yaz aylarında ciğer ve diğer sakatatların sabah erken saatlerde tüketilmesinin, yalnızca bir kültürel alışkanlık değil, aynı zamanda coğrafi ve iklimsel zorunluluklardan kaynaklandığı belirlenmiştir. Tarihi kaynaklar ve sözlü anlatılar, Göbekli Tepe'den Osmanlı dönemine ve Cumhuriyet yıllarına kadar bölgede et tüketiminin yaygın olduğunu ve muhafaza yöntemlerinin sürekli geliştiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Mendil üstünde bir simsar tarafından gezerek et satma, sadece yaşlılar ve eski kasaplar babalarından ve ustalarından duydukları anlatılmaktadır. Toprağa gömme, kuyuya salma, zerzembelerde saklama, kurutma, kavurma ve kabaltına asma gibi yöntemler; modern soğutucuların yaygınlaşmasından önce kullanılan başlıca saklama teknikleri olmuştur. Çalışma, Şanlıurfa'nın gastronomi kültüründe ciğer kebabının önemini vurgulamakta, geçmişten günümüze taşınan bu geleneğin hem beslenme alışkanlıkları hem de mutfak turizmi açısından değerini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ciğer kebabı, et muhafazası, geleneksel kasaplık, Şanlıurfa

1. Introduction

Animal offals are akin to red meat in terms of nutritional content, as they contain protein, zinc, iron, saturated fat, and cholesterol, similar to those found in skeletal muscle (Zhang et al., 2022). The liver, in particular, is a rich source of protein, vitamin A, niacin, vitamin B12, copper, iron, phosphorus, zinc, and manganese (Fuerniss et al., 2024). From this standpoint, the liver functions not only as a food source but also as a natural multivitamin, providing essential elements for metabolic processes, such as blood formation and antioxidant defense, in a highly bioavailable form. Utilizing offals, which constitute about 40% of carcass weight, enhances dietary diversity and economic efficiency. They generally offer high quality and are abundant in protein, vitamins, and both micro and macro nutrients, sometimes in equal or even greater quantities than skeletal muscle, thereby aiding in waste reduction (Latoch et al., 2024). Recently, the global edible offal market has garnered attention due to its economic value and rising consumption. On a global scale, meat production is substantial; in 2018, approximately 333 million tons of meat were produced, with 95% used for food (Smith et al., 2022). The significance of the meat and offal market persists today and will continue into the future, just as it did in the past. Historically, particularly in the Southeastern Anatolia region and the Şanlıurfa basin, the consumption of meat and offals dates back to ancient times.

In the mountainous regions of the Taurus-Zagros range and the Euphrates-Tigris basin, known as the Fertile Crescent (Zarzian Culture), it is recognized as one of the earliest areas where animals were domesticated, with local inhabitants raising goats (Vigne, 2011). Archaeological excavations at Göbekli Tepe considered the zero point of history have uncovered numerous animal bones, attesting to highly organized societies, megalithic architecture, and animal rock art in the upper Euphrates basin, set against its striking landscape. This evidence also suggests that the society in Şanlıurfa had a tradition of meat consumption (Vigne, 2011; Özcan, 2014; Özkan, 2016; Avcı, 2019; Çelik et al., 2020). Among the 15,471 mammal remains found at Göbekli Tepe, there were 7,949 gazelles (*Gazella subgutturosa*), 2,574 European bison (*Bos primigenius*), 1,177 wild donkeys (*Equus hemionus*), 971 red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), 944 wild goats (*ovis/capra*), and 293 mouflon sheep (*ovis orientalis*). Furthermore, research at Göbekli Tepe has revealed information on a total of 38,704 mammal remains, of which 23,233 were unidentified mammals (Peters & Schmidt 2004). Consequently,



it is unsurprising that meat and offal consumption in the Şanlıurfa region dates back to ancient times.

Şanlıurfa is a province where meat consumption has deep historical and cultural roots. Notably, liver kebab emerges as a significant gastronomic feature in both urban and rural settings. It is particularly remarkable how this tradition has endured in a region where meat and offal are commonly consumed, even during times of high temperatures and the absence of modern refrigeration.

This study aims to offer preliminary insights for researchers exploring the history of Şanlıurfa's culinary tourism and gastronomy. It focuses on the tradition of consuming liver kebab for breakfast in Şanlıurfa, the reasons behind its morning consumption, especially in Şanlıurfa and generally across the Southeastern Anatolia region during eras without electricity and modern cooling methods, and the historical conditions of meat storage.

2. Materials and Methods

The primary materials for this study include publications from the Şanlıurfa Governorship Şanlıurfa Province Foundation for Culture, Education, Arts, and Research (ŞURKAV), along with insights from at least one hundred elderly individuals who are third-generation butchers still active in their trade. These individuals participated in face-to-face surveys and question-answer interviews, and additional oral information was exchanged with the Şanlıurfa Butchers' Association. The study collected data on the care conditions of animals destined for butchery in Şanlıurfa, the locations of slaughter, meat consumption practices, historical reasons for consuming liver kebab in the mornings, and methods of meat preservation. The survey questions asked during interviews with butchers are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey questions asked during interviews with butchers

1. Could you describe how you started practicing the butchery profession and share your observations on the intergenerational transmission of this trade? (This question aims to understand how professional skills and traditional knowledge are passed down and acquired.)
2. What differences do you notice between the past and present regarding pre-slaughter care, feeding routines, and the environmental conditions of animals? (The goal here is to grasp the dynamics of change in traditional animal husbandry practices.)
3. Can you share your insights and comments on the cultural, economic, or logistical reasons for consuming liver kebab, especially in the morning? (This question seeks to explore the historical background and social context of local consumption habits.)
4. Could you elaborate on the traditional methods used to preserve meat without spoilage before modern refrigeration became widespread? (This question investigates the knowledge and continuity of past preservation techniques.)
5. What are your observations on the structural, technical, and socio-cultural transformations the butchery profession has undergone in Şanlıurfa over time? (The purpose here is to analyze the historical evolution of the butchery trade and its impact from urbanization and modernization processes.)

3. Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the findings from face-to-face interviews regarding the liver kebab tradition in Şanlıurfa. These interviews reveal that consuming liver kebab in the mornings is a cultural tradition. In times before electricity and refrigerators, animals were slaughtered daily as needed, with butchering taking place in an area known as MASLAK. With the advent of electric refrigerators, offal and carcasses were consumed within 2-3 days.

The Meat and Fish Institution was established by the Council of Ministers' decision dated 28.08.1952 and numbered 3/15557, in accordance with Article 6 of the National Protection Law No. 3780. In Şanlıurfa, this institution was set up in 1968 in the Kuyubası area near the Eyyübiye Cemetery (Anonim, 2025), around Harran Gate, where slaughter activities were conducted for some time. On 23.04.1995, this facility was transferred to DEM-ET, a private company, and slaughtering operations continue at the same location.

According to second and third generation butchers, similar to the Ottoman period, butchers in Şanlıurfa transported carcasses on wooden boards carried by donkeys or mules to sell in the market. They also walked around with meat on hangers slung over their shoulders. In the evenings, meat brokers would tour the market with meat placed on handkerchiefs, determine prices, and conduct sales accordingly.

Due to the rapid spoilage of offal from freshly slaughtered animals, it is imperative to consume liver kebab by 9–10 in the morning. This necessity has given rise to the tradition of consuming liver kebab during the early morning hours, not only in Şanlıurfa but also in cities such as Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, and Adana. In Şanlıurfa, liver is considered to be satiating, and it is reported that heavy load porters consume it early in the morning before commencing their work. Conversely, affluent individuals or certain jeweler shopkeepers, in an effort to avoid being likened to the porters, are said to consume it discreetly and at different times.

During the summer months, when preserving meat and offal becomes challenging, butchers and consumers have devised various methods. According to accounts from 2nd and 3rd generation butchers and living witnesses, unsold or unconsumed meat from the same day was typically stored in boxes or hung under the counter. Meanwhile, non-butcher members of the public reportedly employed techniques such as burying the meat in the ground, lowering it into wells, storing it in cellars, or preserving it by frying or drying.

Table 2. General findings regarding the liver kebab tradition in Şanlıurfa

Morning Consumption Requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Due to hot climate conditions, offal spoils quickly, making it necessary to consume liver early in the morning. -The offal of freshly slaughtered animals had to be consumed by 9–10 a.m., especially during the summer months.
Cultural and Historical Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Offal consumption is common in societies that have transitioned from a nomadic culture to a settled lifestyle. -Consuming liver kebab in the morning has been adopted as both a tradition and a social sharing ritual in Şanlıurfa's culinary culture.
Economic Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Liver is preferred because it is an economically more accessible type of offal.
Historical Sales and Slaughter Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Since the Ottoman period, especially second and third generation butchers have sold carcasses by placing them on donkey or mule backs and parading them around the markets. -In the evenings, meat dealers would walk around the market with meat on handkerchiefs to get prices and make sales. -In the days before electricity and refrigerators, meat was slaughtered daily and according to need.

ŞURKAV publications and literature data reveal that the presence of a mangal (charcoal grill) in the kitchen of Göncü Hacı Abdurrahman's estate, dated 1880 and recorded in the Urfa Estate Records, underscores the significance of liver and meat kebabs in the local Urfa culture (Dumanlı, 2013; Demirgül, 2018; Benzer, 2020; Oğan, 2021). The Butchers' Bazaar,

constructed adjacent to what is now the Melevihane Mosque, is a T-shaped building with a cradle vault, though its exact construction date remains unknown (Erdoğan, 2004). As depicted in Figure 1, estimated to be from 1910, a mobile liver master is seen beside his wooden-looking mangal. Instead of the lavash bread commonly consumed today, he serves what locals refer to as “tirnaklı ekmek,” which appears slightly smaller than contemporary bread. Although the photograph is purportedly taken in Jerusalem, Palestine, no definitive reference could be identified.



Figure 1: Liver kebab from the Ottoman period, 1910 (Anonim, 2017)

During the Central Asian and Seljuk periods, offal such as heart, liver, and kidney was consumed after being cooked over an open fire or in tandoor ovens. In the Ottoman era, offal consumption was prevalent among both the elite and the general populace. According to Düzgün and Özkaya (2015), the flavors of Asian, Central Asian, and Anatolian cuisines are derived from Mesopotamian culture and are linked to the earliest settled societies. Aksoy and Sezgi (2015) note that, historically, *çig köfte* was made from gazelle meat. The abundance of mammalian animals at Göbekli Tepe suggests both the consumption of offal and the necessity to develop methods for preserving meat. When selecting their settlements, the Yoruk people would hang kid goat livers on specific trees, favoring locations where spoilage was minimal (Koyuncu & Tuncel, 2010). A similar practice is observed in how Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn

Zakariya al-Razi, before constructing new hospitals in Baghdad and Ray, would hang meat in various areas and build the hospital where spoilage occurred last (Terzioğlu, 2002; Keskinbora, 2018).

Following the 1950s, the widespread adoption of electricity throughout Turkey and the advent of home refrigeration appliances led to the decline of traditional meat preservation methods. However, in Şanlıurfa and the Southeastern Anatolia Region, the challenge of meat spoiling rapidly during the intensely hot summer months prompted the development of alternative preservation techniques tailored to local and geographical conditions.

During the reign of Abdulhamid II, George Baker and his partners, with government approval, established a cold storage facility in Istanbul (Figure 2). Yet, in Şanlıurfa, where such facilities were unavailable, traditional methods persisted. In the Ottoman period, both butcher shops and street vendors operated in Şanlıurfa.

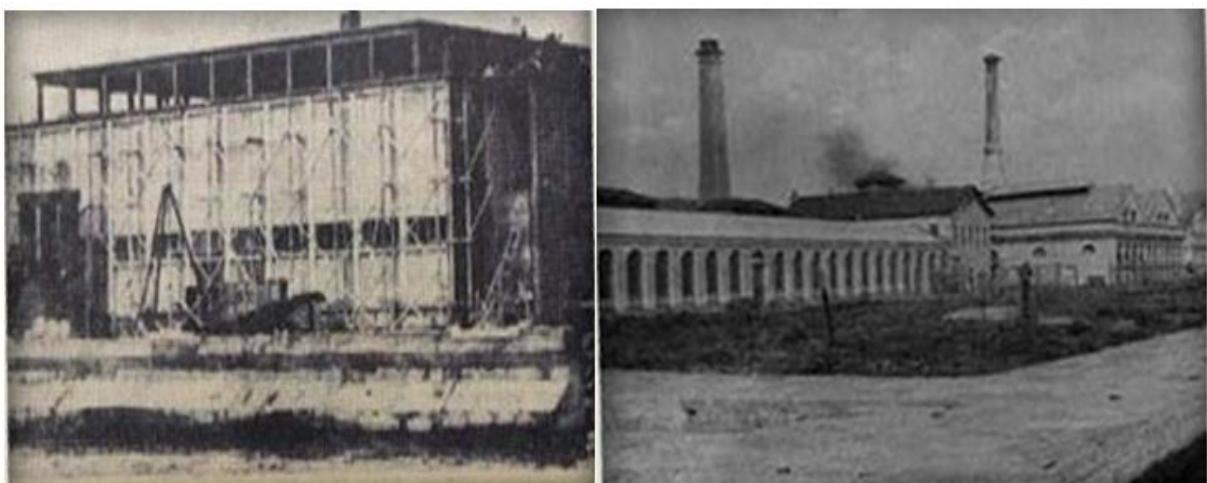


Figure 2. Cold storage facility established with the concession granted by Abdülhamid II (Anonim, 2019)

Drawing from face-to-face interviews and ŞURKAV publications, it has been noted that various methods for preserving meat and liver have been employed from the past to the present.

Storing in Zerzembe: In the zerzembe, enough grain to accommodate guests and sustain the household is stored without spoiling (Şurkav, 2018). The "zerzembe," a significant feature of Urfa houses, can be described as a natural cold storage area, resembling a basement, situated beneath and lower than the other rooms, where meat and other foods are preserved.

Storing in cisterns: In villages or cities with a hot desert climate, where wells were absent, cisterns (dating back to the Roman era) were utilized. The interiors of these cisterns were cooler; people would place their meat in a container and lower it with a rope, thus preserving their fresh meat.

Lowering into wells: Wells were present in both urban and rural areas. Similar to cisterns, people would lower their meat into the well using a rope, or they would use small alcoves near the water's surface in wells to store their meat.

Burying in the ground: Alongside products like cheese and grape leaves, cooked meat (prepared as kavurma) was also buried by placing it in a jug or container and burying it in the soil, a method predominantly practiced in rural areas.

Hanging under the kab: In the old houses of Şanlıurfa, there were structures called "KAB," constructed in the style of a bridge from sarcophagus stones, with either a house above or covered with soil. Due to the air currents in these structures, meat would be placed in a container and hung in these locations. The areas known as "kabaltı" were quite cool during the hot months, especially Ramadan, they were the most suitable spots. As illustrated in Figure 3, it is shown how, next to the Mevlévihane Mosque and in a structure made of sarcophagus stones with good air circulation and noticeable coldness, meat leftover from the butcher's market was hung from the ceiling using hooks.



Figure 3. Old Butchers' Market in Şanlıurfa (Şurkav, 1988).

Storing in ice chests: Unsold or uneaten meat from the butcher shops was placed at the bottom of wooden chests they crafted, after breaking up ice taken from the icehouse (Icehouse: Ammonia vapors cooled by evaporation chill the surrounding salt water. As the machine operates, the continuous up-and-down motion of the piston repeats this process, causing the temperature of the salt water to drop below 0°C. Clean drinking water in molds immersed in this water turns to ice within 24 hours). The broken ice was spread at the bottom of the chest, the meat was placed on top, followed by another layer of ice pieces, and then the chest was closed.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that liver consumption in Şanlıurfa is influenced not only by nutritional needs but also by deeply ingrained cultural rituals and regional economic dynamics. Consuming liver, particularly in the early morning and during sahur, is closely tied to the city's social life and gastronomic identity. The extensive production and processing of liver in local marketplaces underscore the significance of this tradition for the city's economy and employment.

The fact that new-generation butchers are unaware of the reasons for consuming liver and other offal in the morning, and lack knowledge of meat preservation methods, indicates that in times without cold storage or refrigerators, slaughtering was done only as necessary. The information shared by living witnesses and 2nd–3rd generation butchers serves as a historical and cultural record. Especially during the hot summer months, the practice of cooking and consuming liver to prevent spoilage has been passed down through generations as knowledge shared in a master-apprentice relationship.

From a historical and geographical perspective, the liver culture in cities such as Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Adiyaman, and Adana represents a vibrant legacy in gastronomy tourism. Comparative research on meat consumption and preservation indicates that similar methods existed among societies in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Central Asia, yet some techniques developed uniquely in Şanlıurfa. These findings are a valuable resource for understanding both regional food culture and historical meat preservation practices.

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