

Evolution of the Valide Sultan's Power

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How did the practices introduced by Hürrem Sultan evolve into the institutionalized power of the valide sultan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?

Introduction

Women reclining amid marble baths echoing with quiet laughter, intricate tiles and rich Persian carpets adorning opulent chambers, and the warm gleam of lantern light - these are the most remarkable features of the Ottoman Imperial Harem, concealed behind the tall walls of Topkapi Palace, which conjures an image of a gilded prison of idle beauty forever beyond the reach of outsiders. At least, this is the Western gaze at the harem immortalized in European paintings. However, subjects of these orientalist works residing within its walls were not merely odalisques but women whose voices reached the sultan's ear when few others could. Through both direct and indirect engagement in the affairs of the state, they shaped the very course of Ottoman history.

This political agency was not inherent to the harem, though. Efforts toward forming a more nuanced understanding of institutional adaptation and political transformation that the Ottoman Empire went through have profoundly transformed its historiography, departing from a once popular teleological "Decline Thesis." The most sacred and exalted place in Topkapi palace transcended its established role of a secluded domestic sphere with the arrival of Hurrem Sultan, also known as Roxelana to Europeans. Born Aleksandra Lisowska to the family of a Ruthenian priest,¹ Hurrem wielded unprecedented influence that redefined the notion of female authority within the imperial household. Her legacy gave a rise to the era of the Sultanate of

¹ Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 58.

Women (1534 - 1715) also referred to as the era of the Valide Sultan - period when the Imperial Harem became a locus of political power, with the Valide Sultan, Queen Mother, at its head.

For decades, however, the historical framework suggesting that the Empire entered a long period of steady decay of institutions, military, and leadership following the death of Suleiman the Magnificent was predominant. Early narratives, like that championed by prominent sixteenth-century historian and bureaucrat Mustafa Ali and later historians such as Ahmet Refik Altinay attributed perceived weakening of the empire following Suleiman the Magnificent's reign to the growing political influence of Valide Sultans whose power was viewed as an illegitimate meddling in state affairs. Framed as corrupt, manipulative, or excessive in popular history, women's participation in governance was even believed to have precipitated the demise of the empire in the 20th century.²

Modern scholarship, however, has challenged these unverified assumptions and obsolete perspectives. Modern -often termed "revisionist" - research of scholars such as Leslie Peirce and Baki Tezcan argues that the unprecedented political prominence of women was not a catalyst of decay but a predictable, logical, and increasingly institutionalized consequence of the empire's centralization. By re-evaluating the structural changes of Ottoman power and dynastic politics under the rise of the Valide Sultans, we gain a clearer understanding of female sovereign agency within the field of Ottoman as well as gender history.

The definition of sovereignty was reshaped as the imperial harem moved into the heart of Ottoman governance. The transition from a warrior state towards a sedentary, imperial household model shifted the locus of power from the battlefield to the palace's inner chambers. This centralization gave an advantage for those residing within these chambers, who could gain

² Mathilde Alazraki, "The Queen and the Sultana: Early Modern Female Circuits of Diplomacy and the Consumption of Gendered Luxury Items Between East and West," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, January 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4000/11vhd>

political influence by staying close to the sultan. The beloved consort of Suleyman the Magnificent, Hurrem Sultan pioneered practices that by the 17th century had evolved into the institutionalized power of the Valide Sultan and created the framework of the Sultanate of Women. Her practices that broke with centuries of tradition were carefully woven into the empire's administrative and ceremonial fabric, becoming not only common, but expected from Sultanas that followed her. They did not operate illegally or against the state. In fact, they became the guardians of the throne's authority, training heirs, handling factions, and managing high-level diplomacy. Having studied how Hurrem Sultan's both political and personal image shaped larger European perceptions of the Ottoman court, Galina Yermolenko argues that Hurrem's negative public image was not confined to the Ottoman Empire, with Western stereotypes casting her as a schemer and manipulator.³ Bernadette Andrea supports Yermolenko's call to reassess Hurrem's role, rejecting Hurrem's image of a "seductress and schemer" and instead recognizing her as a "political actor".⁴

This project explores her unprecedented practices such as her formal marriage to the sultan, strategic architectural patronage, political alliances formed within the Ottoman court, and diplomatic correspondence to argue that these once extraordinary practices matured into an established political institution at the Ottoman court. Doing so, it aims at re-interpreting this phenomenon, once viewed as a mere aberration, as a logical and intended consequence of the empire's transition from an expansionist, military-focused frontier state to a sedentary, bureaucratic, and centralized world power. Hurrem's architectural, legal, and diplomatic practices were precedents that reshaped the Ottoman state, shifting the center of power away

³ Galina Yermolenko, "Roxolana in European Literature, History, and Culture," *Journal of Early Modern History* 7, no. 1 (2003): 233.

⁴ Bernadette Andrea, *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 17.

from the battlefield to the palace. Harem became the new locus of power and hence the heart of the government.

Structure of the Ottoman Dynastic System and the Transition to Female Power

It is important to start with a broader discussion of the intricate politics of reproduction of the Ottoman court to understand how practices ushered by Hurrem transformed the Ottoman Imperial Harem. The harem shaped by politics and power was designed to ensure the continuity of Ottoman dynasty survival and the consolidation of imperial power. The practice of concubinage lying at the heart of this system was important in securing both political and dynastic stability. As Islamic law strictly prohibited the enslavement of free-born Muslims, Ottoman concubines were predominantly non-Muslim slave women who were converted to Islam and could be manumitted - freed from slavery. While Western orientalist interpretations often framed young odalisques - concubines within the harem - as passive subjects of desire, their role was far more complex. They hold a legal status of slaves that could change based on their relationship with the Sultan. A concubine who bore the sultan a son who ascended the throne, she would rise to the status of *Valide Sultan* - the Queen Mother. Often of foreign origin, acquired mostly through slave trade or captured during raids, not legally married to the sultan, concubines did not have political or familial power either within or outside the palace. This lack of formal marriage eliminated the potential for rival claims to the throne.⁵ In essence, the influence of outside noble families or their claim to the throne through a wife's lineage - risks associated with formal marriages - were neutralized. Another benefit that the system conferred was securing succession through eradicating the risk of a "childless wife." Even in the presence

⁵ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 28.

of legal wives, Ottoman reproductive politics relied on concubines to produce offspring, ensuring that there would be heir-apparent to continue the dynastic lineage.

That said, the Ottoman dynasty did not entirely reject legal marriage; interdynastic marriages did take place, serving as a tool of diplomacy and alliance. Though, as Peirce notes, “by the mid-fifteenth century, legal marriage had lapsed for internal as well as external reasons”.⁶ The last of the neighboring dynasties was conquered under Mehmed II (1451-1481), marking the loss of Ottoman dynasty’s traditional marriage partners.⁷ The internal reason for the cessation of interdynastic marriages, apparently, was the empire’s perceived superiority: as the empire expanded and solidified its power, no external power was “seen as worthy of such an intimate bond”.⁸

Another crucial aspect of the concubinage system that secured political stability was limiting concubines to bearing only one son.⁹ Having multiple sons who were rival claimants for power would destabilize the court as the mother might try to secure the throne for her own son by forming alliances with other influential figures. This strategic limitation, therefore, was a pragmatic solution that made power struggles less likely.

“The harem administration adopted a policy of one mother, one son, so that when a wife gave birth to a son, she was henceforth denied access to the king. In this way the number of potential sons born to the same mother was limited, and thus the number of contenders to power was also reduced.”¹⁰

Bearing more than one heir to the throne would have also posited a “logistical issue.” After reaching a certain age, young princes were sent to govern provincial posts otherwise known as

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰ Janet Afary, “Iran: A Modern History,” *Iranian Studies* 52, no. 3–4 (2019): 4.

sancak, with his mother accompanying him and acting as an important advisor and parental guardian. A mother physically would not be able to accompany multiple sons to different provinces, so having only one son per mother solved this issue. Sümertaş notes that *sehzade*'s mother was "the most loyal ally" as in case her son failed to ascend the throne, she was sent to exile.¹¹ She managed her son's household; oversaw the appointment of administrative officials by her son; ensured that he got proper education from his *lala* - high ranking slave responsible for *sehzade*'s administrative and military education; and, most importantly, involved intricate political maneuvering, forming alliances, to ensure her son's survival and ascension to the throne. Thus, Imperial mothers were not only *sehzades*' most important allies, but also one of the most important figures, in line with their *lala*, in their yearly years.¹²

The practices discussed earlier were so firmly entrenched into the Ottoman system that any breach of tradition was seen as disruptive. Therefore, through unprecedented practices that broke with established custom in several ways, Hurrem caused public resentment. She became the first concubine to be legally wed to a reigning Sultan, violating the established custom of *kanun*. Another radical break from the tradition was her role as a consort who bore multiple sons to the sultan, thereby acquiring exclusive role and further challenging established norms. This altered the hierarchy of the harem allowing imperial women to exercise greater political authority. That is, her legal marriage and exclusive status as a mother of princes initiated the creation of a new title of Chief Consort also known as *Haseki Sultan*. Before Hurrem, sultan's consorts were referred to as *Hatun* who may have had social prestige but lacked a specific, formalized administrative rank. Hurrem's rise to the status of legal wife and the creation of the *Haseki* title conferred her a unique, semi-official standing in the imperial hierarchy. She was the

¹¹ Firuzan Melike Sümertaş, *Female Patronage in Classical Ottoman Architecture: Five Case Studies in Istanbul* (M.A. thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2006), 25.

¹² Sümertaş, *Female Patronage*, 26.

first consort to hold this title and became the second most powerful woman in the harem after the Valide Sultan. This enabled the institutionalization of the consort's power in later years as with this new title *Haseki Sultan* the favorite consorts became highly involved in political matters. In other words, this new rank "normalized" female political activity. The consort's role was no longer limited to her personal relationship with the Sultan but transformed into an official position that granted significant daily stipend. As Haseki Sultan, Hurrem corresponded directly with foreign monarchs, influenced the appointment of high-ranking officials, and acted as an advisor - real political player.

Sedentarization of the Sultanate

Another important change initiated by Hurrem that enabled the institutionalization of female power was the move of the Imperial Harem from the Old Palace (*Eski Saray*) to the New Palace now known as Topkapi. Administrative and reproductive functions of the Ottoman court had historically been segregated, with no woman residing in the same building where government affairs were conducted as decreed by Mehmed the Conqueror. The 1541 blaze reduced the residence for the sultan's mother, sisters, consorts, and daughters - (*Eski Saray* - to the ground, and Hurrem used this catastrophe to convince the Sultan to move the Harem to the Topkapi Palace permanently - a strategic decision that marked a turning point in Ottoman history. This administrative re-spatialization allowed Hurrem and her predecessors to observe and influence in state affairs, which would not be possible from the distant Old Palace far from the Imperial Council. Merge of reproductive and political hearts of the empire in Topkapi would then redefine the course of the history of the Ottoman Empire.

The move from the Old Palace to Topkapi coincided with the abandonment of the practice of sending young shehzades to provincial governorships. As discussed earlier, traditionally, mother, accompanying her son to a *sancak* (province), left the capital and lost both proximity and a direct influence over the sultan. Unlike her predecessors who left the capital to mentor their sons, Hurrem did not accompany her sons to provincial governorship but remained at the palace. On the contrary, when Mustafa was sent to Manisa as soon as he reached adulthood, his mother Mahidevran - who also was a consort of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent - followed him as was customary. Andrea offers a more nuanced interpretation of Hurrem's departure from dynastic precedent - her decision not to accompany her son as expected. She suggests that "as a mother whose interests encompassed more than one son she could not" - following one would unfairly advantage him in succession competition.¹³ This explanation is supported by Sümertaş, who uses the same logic to explain why Hurrem was the first woman who remained in the capital instead of following her sons to Sancak.¹⁴ Her departure from tradition had more profound implications beyond practicality: By staying at court, she could stay close to Suleiman and exercise power. Following Hafsa Sultan's - Suleiman's mother's death - Hurrem filled her role of the Valide, governing harem and advising Suleiman, redefining the role of imperial mothers. In later years, this served as a precedent for mothers of princes who remained in Istanbul to influence the Sultan as Hurrem did. What is more, as Muzaffer Özgüleş stresses, not only did mothers remain in Topkapi Palace, so did their sons who were no longer sent to the provinces.¹⁵ Peirce referred to this process as "sedentarization of the Sultanate.," which made Istanbul the seat of power.¹⁶ Sümertaş argues that this development "limited their

¹³ Andrea, *Women and Islam*, 17.

¹⁴ Sümertaş, *Female Patronage*, 27.

¹⁵ Muzaffer Özgüleş, *The Women Who Built the Ottoman World: Female Patronage and the Architectural Legacy of Gülnuş Sultan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 11.

¹⁶ Peirce, *Imperial harem*, 168.

[Sehzades'] knowledge, intelligence and actions" as young princes stayed in the harem and "most of their expected responsibilities were fulfilled or defined by their mothers."¹⁷ She further argues that this change in enthroning system and the cessation of the practice of sending young princes to govern *sancaks* made their mothers more invisible as "not only their sons' but also their political maturity was not anymore publicly acknowledged as opposed to the case in moving to sancaks."¹⁸ However, the same development that in Sümertaş's view made them more invisible could have actually favored sultanas who remained at the locus of the power - Topkapi Palace.

Succession and the Valide Sultan

Succession in European monarchies governed by primogeniture - the right of the firstborn legitimate son to ascend the throne - differs from more complex, competitive and violent Ottoman practices that were based on merit. This dynamic often resulted in the fratricide - execution of rival brothers to prevent succession disputes and civil war.

"[T]he majority of legists have declared that those of my illustrious children and grandchildren who shall ascend the throne shall have the right to execute their brothers, in order to insure the peace of the world; they are to act comfortably."¹⁹

Yet, Anthony Dolphin Alderson cautions that within the context of the Ottoman Empire, the concept of fratricide extends beyond its literal interpretation; not only brothers, but every male member of the Imperial family was subject to execution if perceived as a threat to the

¹⁷ Sümertaş, *Female Patronage*, 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ George Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Sultan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 161.

reigning sultan.²⁰ Such violent practices would have been far more complicated, if not impossible, had the sultan married into other powerful dynasties, which could have introduced additional political and familial complexities. However, by the early seventeenth century, the empire transitioned to a system of agnatic seniority, according to which the eldest living male relative succeeded the throne. This shift in succession transformed the role of the Valide Sultan into the most powerful and stable office in the empire.

While the law of fratricide was not always invoked, Ahmed I's decision to spare his half-brother Mustafa I's life is particularly significant as it set the precedent for ending fratricide. Ahmed I acceded to the throne at the age of 13 after his father Mehmed III's death. According to Börekçi, while the tradition of regency at the Ottoman court had not been institutionalized yet, "his mother, Handan Sultan, and the royal tutor, Mustafa Efendi, acted as *de facto* regents," setting a precedent "for all other underaged sultans' reigns in the seventeenth century."²¹ There has been much dispute over why Ahmed I did not execute his rival brother as was customary. Some sources stress the influence of Ahmed I's mother Valide Handan Sultan who persuaded her son not to have his half-brother killed as the latter was allegedly mentally disabled and ergo was not a threat. Alderson also cites one contemporary source to provide alternative spiritual explanation for this decision: "And at this day the Grand Sultan hath a brother [Mustafa] of this Society [the Mevlevi Dervishes] that liveth in the Seraglio, whom he hath often intended to put to death ... but he [Ahmed] hath happened to fall into some bitter disease whensoever he hath thought upon any such matter, which is the reason that he suffereth him to live."²² An equally valid justification is that Ahmed I, who ascended at age thirteen, had no children; had he executed Mustafa -the sole remaining heir - and then died childless, the House of Osman would

²⁰ Anthony Dolphin Alderson, *The Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 25

²¹ Börekçi, *Factions and Favorites*, 14.

²² Alderson, *Structure of the Ottoman Dynasty*, 29.

have come to an end.²³ There is insufficient evidence to address the question of why Mustafa I's life was spared, and this inconclusive question would be one of little importance had it not redefined the course of the events that would follow. Following the death of Sultan Ahmed I, there was a major shift in succession supported by his legal wife Kosem Sultan, with his half-brother Mustafa I - the one whose life the late Sultan spared - acceded the throne instead of Ahmed's son. Though, for the sake of accuracy, it is important to caution that the word "accede" fails to capture the essence of what happened. Baki Tezcan dedicated special attention to the language used by scholars to describe the events of 1617. Critical linguistic distinction was that while previous sultans "acceded" (*cülus*, literally "sitting") to the throne through their own power, Mustafa I was "enthroned" (*iclas*, "seated him") by the *ashab-ı hall ü akd* - the statesmen who had the authority to "loose and bind."²⁴ Legal basis for Mustafa I enthronement was his maturity as he was older than Ahmed I's son Osman II, though the age difference was insignificant (2-3 years). Peirce makes a valid point in bringing up a royal family member in whose interests would it be to support Mustafa I's cause: Kosem Sultan. Originally a concubine of Greek descent, Kosem Sultan became the favorite consort of Sultan Ahmed I. She bore him several children, including future sultans Murad IV (1623-1640) and Ibrahim (1640-1648). According to the Venetian ambassador, "she [Kosem] lobbied to spare Mustafa the fate of fratricide with the ulterior goal of saving her own sons from the same fate."²⁵ The heir-apparent, Osman II, was the son of a rival consort and was only four months older than Kosem's own son, Şehzade Mehmed. Had Osman acceded to the throne, Mehmed and his three brothers would likely have been executed. The rise of the seniority principle, therefore, was not a simple dynastic accident but a

²³ Günhan Börekçi, *Factions and Favorites at the Courts of Sultan Ahmed I (r. 1603–17) and His Immediate Predecessors* (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2010), 82.

²⁴ Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 73

²⁵ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 106.

political choice in which Kösem Sultan played a central role to protect her children. This seniority-based succession instead of execution resulted in the abolition of fratricide. Sümertaş is not mistaken in comparing *sehzades* to prisoners as they were held captive in *kafes* (cages) in Imperial Harem instead of being executed.²⁶ This structural change had unintended consequences. By raising princes in the seclusion of *the Kafes* rather than in provincial governorships, the system produced sultans who were often young, inexperienced, or mentally unstable. Mustafa I had spent his life in *kafes* fearing execution when he was enthroned with the support of his mother - Halime Sultan - and Kosem Sultan; he, therefore, proved feeble and was deposed after only 96 days. Instead, Osman II was enthroned, but his rule did not last long: he was imprisoned by eunuch corps and palace soldiers loyal to Halime and Kosem Sultan, and then assassinated by Janissaries in 1622. Backed by Halime Sultan and Kosem Sultan, Mustafa I was restored to the throne. Shortly thereafter, he was finally deposed in 1623 and his nephew Murad IV - son of Ahmed I and Kösem - was seated at the age of 11, not without the help of his mother who negotiated with viziers to gain their support in her son's enthronement. An important observation that can be inferred from the frequent mention of the names of imperial women is how much power they held in the Ottoman court, affecting the questions of who must be enthroned or deposed. The brief history of succession struggles that lasted for 6 years (1617-1623) hints at another important observation: "the basic and exceptional weakness from which Osman II suffered was the conspicuous absence of a female power basis in the harem."²⁷ Piterberg argues that while Osman II had the support of a chief black eunuch, he lacked, what

²⁶ Sümertaş, *Female Patronage*, 26.

²⁷ Gabriel Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 25.

Piterberg calls, “winning combination”: a strategic alliance between the Valide and the chief black eunuch.²⁸

Murad IV’ minority created a power vacuum which necessitated the creation of a new position - official regent who would tackle the crisis of leadership. Hence, in 1623, Kosem became not only valide sultan but also the first official regent to the sultan, governing the state as a de facto ruler for almost a decade, formalizing the power of valide sultan, and setting a precedent for later valide Turhan Sultan. The Valide Sultan’s formal recognition as the Regent of the Sultanate (*Naibe-i-Saltanat*) was an institutional necessity. A minor sultan was too young to rule , yet he was the only person who had the legal right to do so. The Valide Sultan was the only figure who could lead the state in her son’s place without being seen as a threat to the royal family. That is, her rule was perceived not as a competition with the throne but a protection of it, while any other figure’s regency would raise concerns. Traditional historiography has often portrayed Kosem’s reign as a precursor to the decline of the Ottoman Empire, while Kosem introduced policies that, in fact, preserved the House of Osman. The sudden death of Mehmed, the enthronement of the minor Ahmed I, and the unprecedented decision to spare Mustafa complicated succession, producing a series of inexperienced sultans and resulting in a leadership crisis. However, these developments did not lead to the collapse of the dynastic order. Imperial mothers intervened, stepping into a power vacuum to effectively govern on behalf of their sons. Dynastic continuity and the preservation of the state was hence secured by a formal era of female regency of figures like Kosem Sultan who is recognized now as the “Shadow Queen.”

The rule of Kosem Sultan (1589-1651) and Turhan Sultan (1627-1683) marked the apex of institutionalized Valide Sultan power. They were valide sultans as well as de facto rulers of the empire acting as regents for child sultans. Examining their rule demonstrates that Hurrem’s

²⁸ Ibid.

practices evolved into a formal political office wielded by the Sultan's mother. After Ahmed's death, Kosem served as Valide Sultan to Murad IV and Ibrahim , and even a regent for her grandson Mehmed IV. What interesting distinction between Kosem and Hurrem is that while Hurrem's influence peaked as consort, Kosem acquired power during her long tenure as Valide Sultan and official regent. As her son Murad IV ascended the throne at the age of 11, Kosem was the ruler of the empire in effect, attending the Imperial Divan meetings from behind a curtain, overseeing administrative decisions, and issuing orders on behalf of her son's name. Kosem Sultan's rule can be compared to that of Hurrem, yet this juxtaposition must be made with one essential qualification: it did not merely mirror Hurrem's career, but in fact magnified it. Both Hurrem and Kosem bore a large number of children and became corresponding sultan's sole partners. Peirce quotes Venetian ambassador Cristoforo Valier, according to whom "she [Kosem] can do what she wishes with the King and possesses his heart absolutely, nor is anything ever denied to her."²⁹ Mindful of the destiny of Hurrem's reputation, Kosem exercised caution to avoid giving the impression that she was dominating as was noted by Contarini in *Imperial Harem*: Kosem "restrains herself with great wisdom from speaking [to the sultan Ahmed I] too frequently of serious matters and affairs of state."³⁰ However, as her son Murad IV became sultan and she acquired the position of Valide Sultan, her influence was unconcealed and institutionalized. Kosem is credited with stabilizing the state during the crisis. According to Ottoman chronicles, she managed to tackle a severe financial crisis and crash janissary revolt. This encourages to revise the role of the Valide Sultan and recognize her as a political stabilizer.

²⁹ Peirce, *Imperial harem*, 105.

³⁰ Ibid.

Architectural patronage

Constrained by social norms of seclusion, veiling and limited public mobility, elite women in the Islamic societies, thus in the Ottoman Empire as well, were thought to be socially invisible. That is, women supposedly had limited influence as they were segregated from men who possessed inheritance privileges and, more importantly, dominated governance. Restrictive social frameworks did not eliminate women's capacity to wield power; rather, despite these constraints, women were able to carve out powerful political and symbolic roles through ceremonial participation and architectural patronage. Symbolic expression of political power is intrinsic to it as symbolic acts are what gives legitimacy to authority. This can be clearly seen from the abundance of ceremonies, rituals, and political imagery "in places where monarchies, dictatorships, and military forms of government prevail."³¹ The magnificence of Versailles, for example, was harnessed by Louis XIV (1638 - 1715) to project absolutist authority; monumental architecture, mass parades, and personality cult were employed in Stalinist Russia to stage ideological supremacy; and even earlier in the Roman Empire monumental arches such as that of Titus inscribed emperor's authority into public space. In each of these cases, the regime relied heavily on symbolic performance to both cultivate political legitimacy and make authority visible and unquestionable, and so political power became tangible. Islamic court operated under the same logic; according to Thys-Şenocak, "recent scholarship has shown that many royal female members of Islamic courts undertook quite ambitious building projects and actively engaged in ceremonial activities as a way to represent themselves and to insure visibility among their subjects."³² This illustrates how symbolic expressions provided royal women with opportunities to assert influence in spite of the restrictive norms imposed on them. This is a

³¹ Ibid., 32.

³² Lucienne Thys-Şenocak, *Ottoman Women Builders: The Architectural Patronage of Hadice Turhan Sultan* (London: Routledge, 2016), 46 .

subject of research in Firuzan Melike Sümertaş's thesis that addresses architecture as a medium of communication - the spatial language - that serves to demonstrate political visibility of political women.

Philanthropic projects undertaken under Hurrem served as tools of sovereignty, presaging the formal political role later assumed by Valide Sultans. Hurrem was the first royal woman in the Ottoman Empire to commission complexes all around the empire and not only in Istanbul.³³ These projects - traditionally reserved for royal mothers who Hurrem was not - were acts of piety and generosity; and most importantly, they were unmistakable displays of power. In the section dedicated to Hurrem's sponsorship, she suggests that Hurrem's formal marriage to the sultan and ability to remain in the seat of power - in the palace - was what allowed her to make "herself visible through architectural patronage".³⁴ Sümertaş further traces continuity in orientation plan, and style and situates each female-sponsored complex within its urban geography to identify patterns in the practices of Ottoman Imperial women. Özgüleş offers a more nuanced perspective tying patronage to the political agendas of the ruling imperial women. He argues that Hurrem's "reign became a model for her successors".³⁵ According to him, what changed with the sultanate of women is women builders' motivations: unlike their predecessors, they - now active political agents - commissioned buildings not merely for philanthropic acts. Granted, Hurrem was not the first sultana to display sovereign prerogative through architectural patronage - long before Hurrem, Ottoman royal women undertook charitable efforts through commissioning the construction of *hayrat*, "pious deeds or establishments."³⁶ A striking departure from earlier practices was the location of these architectural foundations. As

³³ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 59.

³⁴ Sümertaş, *Female Patronage*, 91.

³⁵ Özgüleş, *Women Who Built the Ottoman World*, 11.

³⁶ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 198.

Thys-Şenocak observes, “prior to the mid-sixteenth century, the major architectural foundations built by imperial Ottoman women had been realized outside the capital of İstanbul.”³⁷ The underlying explanation for this discrepancy is the change in succession and dynastic politics under Hurrem. “Mehmed III (1595 – 1603) was the last *Şehzade* who was sent to a *sancak*,” which meant that heir mothers stayed in the palace with their sons too.³⁸ Sedentarization of the Sultanate defined imperial women’s decisions concerning patronage, skewing development efforts away from provinces in favor of the capital - Istanbul. This shift in the construction activity raises a valid question for further research: whether centralized construction offered a more effective means of asserting political visibility and influence. This hypothesis seems rational given that Istanbul, being the locus of power, was a symbolically potent public environment where architectural foundations reached larger audiences and carried greater political significance. Proximity to the imperial court might have amplified the communicative power of the architectural foundations they patronized. Therefore, legitimizing practices introduced by Hurrem Sultan became institutionalized mechanisms of authority for later valide sultans.

Female regency was further institutionalized under Turhan Sultan who was brought as a slave from Eastern Europe and became favorite consort of Sultan Ibrahim I, also known as “Ibrahim the Mad.” In 1648, Provoked by Ibrahim I’s mental instability and mismanagement of state affairs, court elites and the Janissaries deposed and executed him. His son Mehmed IV ascended at age 6, making Turhan Valide Sultan at age 21. Kosem assumed regency as Mehmed’s grandmother, but later was “overthrown by her daughter-in-law” Turhan whose plot to eliminate her successfully made her the sole Valide and regent for Mehmed IV. Her

³⁷ Thys-Şenocak, *Ottoman Women Builders*, 48.

³⁸ Sümertaş, *Female Patronage*, 29.

architectural patronage corroborates Özgüleş's arguments Hurrem's "reign became a model for her successors".³⁹ According to him, what changed with the sultanate of women is women builders' motivations: unlike their predecessors, they - now active political agents - commissioned buildings not merely for philanthropic acts. Indeed, Turhan Sultan completed the project begun by Safiye Sultan monumental Yeni Cami (New Mosque) of Istanbul which was a highly visible testament to her legitimacy and piety as Queen Mother. Institutionalization of the practices pioneered by Hurrem can also be observed by how Turhan took on the practice of diplomatic communications as is evident from the correspondences indicating that foreign ambassadors sought audiences or influence through Valide Sultan, acknowledging her stature.

Court Administration

Eunuch-Valide alliances

As was discussed earlier, the perception of harem as merely a domestic and politically marginal sphere has been reconsidered, with modern scholarship stressing its structural embeddedness within Ottoman governance. In *The Imperial Harem*, Peirce argues that the harem was a central site for dynastic politics in which women exercised authority through kinship, patronage, and proximity to the ruler.⁴⁰ Junne also challenges earlier narratives, though unlike Peirce, he does so examining formal partnership of the Valide Sultan with the Chief Black Eunuch - castrated slaves who served as trusted guardians and intermediaries in the Topkapi Palace. Castration was a controversial subject as Islamic law considers it *haram*, viewing it as a forbidden mutilation. Junne cites a prophetic tradition, "Whoever kills a slave, him will we kill...

³⁹ Özgüleş, *Women Who Built the Ottoman World*, 11.

⁴⁰ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, Preface.

and whoever castrates a slave, him also shall we castrate.”⁴¹ For this reason, castration was typically performed outside Ottoman territories, often by non-Muslim intermediaries such as Copts in Upper Egypt. The procedure was “not only a painful process, but also a deadly one,” and many boys died as a result.⁴² Yet despite its brutality, castration was justified, serving as a means of eliminating sexual threat and ensuring loyalty. The demand for it, therefore, persisted because eunuchs were uniquely suited to serve in gender-segregated environments. Deeply rooted in the Afro-Mediterranean system of enslavement, traditions of political eunuchism differed structurally as well demographically from the Atlantic slave system of Western empires. One of the key observations was that “a majority of the slaves crossing the Sahara were women and children, in contrast to the Atlantic pattern.”⁴³ Another striking departure from the Atlantic slave system, which overwhelmingly drew from West and Central Africa, was geographic diversity of Ottoman slaves who came from “the Eurasian steppe, Europe and Africa.”⁴⁴ The questions of gender, age, and geographic diversity are important to consider given that they, in fact, shaped how the Ottoman slavery functioned. In the Atlantic world, majority of enslaved people were men because plantation capitalism demanded intense physical labor. Apart from that, Atlantic slavery was racialized around Blackness, contributing to the formation of strict racial hierarchy: Blackness itself marked permanent slave status. Therefore, there were no structural incentives to integrate enslaved men into society. Unlike the Atlantic system centered on plantation economy, the Ottoman system functioned as a household and court centered institution that turned slavery into a “domestic” sphere as slaves “primarily worked in domestic settings.”⁴⁵ The rate of domestic integration was higher as proportionally there were more

⁴¹ Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 33.

⁴² Ibid., 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 6-7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

women who could become concubines, wives, or household servants. Enslaved children were raised within elite households, becoming part of family life rather than 'labor units'. These differences account for the inconsistencies in patterns of assimilation in North Africa as compared to North America. Greater assimilation of enslaved communities was made possible not because the Ottoman system was milder, but because it was structured differently due to different racial and social outcomes. This contributes to the explanation of why Black eunuchs could rise to enormous influence within the imperial court.

The eunuch institution under Islam was unlike that in other civilizations and proved indispensable to the functioning of the imperial household. One of its distinctive characteristics was that eunuchs were almost always slaves and foreigners who did not have local kinship networks, which made them dependent upon and loyal to their master. As was stressed in earlier sections, succession politics were central in the Ottoman Empire, which lacked a formal rule of primogeniture - the right of the firstborn legitimate son to ascend the throne; instead, succession in the Ottoman court was based on merit, leaving multiple sons of the sultan - and their mothers' factions - to compete for the throne. Constant palace rivalries and the potential for coups necessitated the formation of a trusted body who would stabilize the court amid the intense succession struggles. Eunuchs, perfectly filled in this role due to distinctive characteristics they possessed. Unable to form families as they were castrated, they posed no dynastic threat unlike other courtiers who might pursue their personal ambitions and create palace conspiracies. Eunuchs were thus entrusted to manage succession, guard the harem, and transmit messages.

There was a spatial as well as functional division between eunuchs, a division that would become crucial for the political evolution of the imperial harem. White eunuchs, primarily of Balkan and Caucasian descent, supervised the *Enderun* (the palace school for male pages) and

also participated in overseeing servants within the harem. Black Eunuchs, mostly from Africa, were likewise present in the palace but had not yet acquired exclusive control over the women's quarters. According to Jane Hathaway, this division was reinforced due to Topkapi's original architectural and functional organization, with initial division between harem eunuch and page-training eunuch becoming increasingly synonymous with the distinction between African eunuchs and white eunuchs.⁴⁶ The distinction, however, was not yet absolute. That is, as Hathaway reports "eunuchs from the Balkans and Anatolia still served in the harem" as these two principal courts were "linked by their shared responsibility for household slaves-in-training."⁴⁷ That is to prove that the division was neither absolute nor originally racialized.

Over the course of the sixteenth century - especially after the imperial women moved permanently into Topkapi following Hurrem's steps - the connection between these corps eroded, and the African eunuchs became increasingly identified with the inner, female sphere of the palace. As the women of the dynasty moved in close proximity to the sultan, so did their attendants and harem eunuchs. The more women the court contained, the more eunuchs were required, until "the eunuchs became an indispensable and most conspicuous element in the palatial court."⁴⁸ The implications of the relocation of imperial women into Topkapi catalyzed by Hurrem laid the groundwork for a political realignment, conferring guardianship over harem to African eunuchs who acquired exclusive control over physical and communicative access to the imperial women. In the Ottoman political system, access was authority. Junne explains the Chief Eunuch's - referred to as Kızlar Ağası - function "as a sort of liaison" linking the head of the

⁴⁶ Jane Hathaway, *The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 48.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 28.

Imperial Harem - the reigning mother - to the sultan and his male administrative circle.⁴⁹ Yet this description reduces the office's influence as in practice, by the late sixteenth century, the Kızlar Ağası's duties extended far beyond being a mere intermediary. He did not simply transmit messages; he regulated audiences, controlled petitions, oversaw appointments within the harem, and managed charitable endowments tied to the women of the dynasty. For example, Junne notes that from 1588 the Chief Black Eunuch saw a promotion in power. He acquired the right to "administer the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina and its vast resources," a responsibility previously held by the Chief White Eunuch.⁵⁰ He also administered the properties and estates of the valide sultan and the sultan's children. Control over the pious endowments (awqaf) of the Holy Cities provided the office with immense financial and symbolic capital, linking the harem directly to imperial religious authority. Equally important was the Chief Black Eunuch's privileged access to the sultan. According to Junne, he was "the only officer permitted at all times to ask for an audience with the sultan" and could influence state appointments.⁵¹ Later, messages to the sultan had to pass "through the hands of the Chief Black Eunuch."⁵² These developments demonstrate that the office had evolved from a supervisory role within the women's quarters into a bureaucratic bottleneck through which communication, patronage, and information flowed.

The structural partnership between the valide sultan and the Chief Black Eunuch thus was a natural product of the institutional structure of the harem where interests of two parties aligned. The valide sultan, as mother of the reigning sultan, occupied the apex of the dynastic household. The Chief Black Eunuch, as administrator of her estates and guardian of access to both the sultan

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 219.

⁵¹ Ibid., 121.

⁵² Ibid., 184.

and the sacred endowments, became her indispensable collaborator. The very features that defined eunuchs - enslavement, castration, lack of lineage, and physical proximity to the secluded women of the dynasty - made them uniquely suited to serve as brokers of power between the inner and outer courts.

In this sense, Hurrem Sultan's innovations - particularly the relocation of imperial women into Topkapı and centralizing dynastic politics within the harem - did not simply increase female influence but rebuilt the state's structure. As the harem became a permanent center of dynastic governance, the Chief Black Eunuch's office was simultaneously elevated, and through his formalized partnership with the valide sultan, the political authority of the imperial mother became embedded in enduring administrative structures.

Diplomacy

The mechanisms of sovereignty and international engagement were reshaped as the imperial harem moved into the heart of Ottoman governance. The structural changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shifted the locus of power from the battlefield to the palace's inner chambers. Transition from a frontier-focused warrior state to a sedentary, bureaucratic household model created a gap in leadership. Because the Sultan was now more isolated within the palace rather than on the battlefield, the empire needed a mediator between the sultan and the outside world - a role filled by the women of harem, particularly the *Haseki* and *Valide Sultan*. Women's engagement in diplomacy was not illegitimate "meddling" in state affairs or a sign of the empire's decline as claimed by historians like Ahmet Refik Altınay; rather, it was an institutional adaptation that emerged as a result of the practices pioneered by Hurrem. Her

unprecedented political role later turned into a permanent unofficial institution by Nurbanu and Safiye Sultan. Despite being unofficial, it was effective as it helped the empire navigate the gendered and religious complexities of early modern international relations in ways male officials could not.

Administrative re-spatialization of the Ottoman court was a predicate of the emergence of the Valide Sultan as a diplomatic actor. The move of the Imperial harem to Topkapi in 1541 catalyzed by Hurrem gave an advantage for those residing within harem, who could gain political influence by staying close to the sultan. What distinguishes royal women from all the other residents of the harem is that these women had both physical and symbolic proximity to sultan who as the most powerful man and sacred figure was bound by protocols of inaccessibility. They were not merely residing in the same building with the sultan, they were seen as extensions of the sultan whose blood or status they shared. They acted as the sultan's proxy who could communicate with foreign monarchs with a directness that the sultan could not adopt to maintain his imperial dignity. Creation of a parallel channel of diplomacy helped to navigate this difficulty and allowed the empire to communicate directly with European powers without compromising the Sultan's imperial dignity. This "second channel" conferred the court diplomatic flexibility and made communication more efficient. While official diplomats were bound by rigid protocols that required strict compliance, royal women - whose actions were perceived as sultan's will - could negotiate more flexibly bypassing bureaucracy. This was particularly valuable as it defined relations with European powers who were also moving toward centralized monarchies ruled by powerful women such as Catherine de Medici or Elizabeth I.

As is discussed earlier, Hurrem's rise to the status of legal wife and the creation of the *Haseki* title conferred her a unique, semi-official standing in the imperial hierarchy. She was the

first consort to hold this title and became the second most powerful woman in the harem after the Valide Sultan. This enabled the institutionalization of the consort's power in later years as with this new title *Haseki Sultan* the favorite consorts became highly involved in political matters. Inception of the practices such as direct correspondence of imperial women with foreign monarchs and, in general, political prominence of imperial women that would define the office of the Valide Sultan is marked by Hurrem Sultan's tenure as the first *Haseki Sultan*. Hurrem wielded her influence beyond the walls of the Ottoman court through formal correspondence with foreign monarchs. Her origins as Aleksandra from Ruthenia, which was then part of the Kingdom of Poland, allowed her to serve as a diplomatic bridge between the Ottoman and the Polish courts. Preserved in the Polish state archives, *Letter of Roxelane to Sigismund Auguste Complementing Him for His Accession to the Throne, 1549* is one of the earliest - if not the earliest - surviving evidence of direct correspondence between an Ottoman sultana and a European ruler. As the title of the letter suggests, in it, Hurrem Sultan congratulates King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland on his accession to the throne, invoking "will of God" to provide legitimacy to his enthronement.⁵³ It is a direct proof that Hurrem was an active participant in foreign diplomacy and that her influence extended into diplomacy. Her diplomatic role was, therefore, unprecedented as no female member of the Ottoman royal family was known to be involved in direct correspondence with foreign monarchs to build foreign alliances and goodwill independently of Sultan. Congratulating King of Poland on his accession and expressing her "joy and pleasure" at the news of his royalty was not a mere formality but a calculated move designed to reaffirm the friendship between these two dynasties: the House of Osman and the Jagiellon dynasty (family of monarchs of Poland-Lithuania, Bohemia, and

⁵³ Roxelane. *Letter of Roxelane to Sigismund Auguste Complementing Him for His Accession to the Throne*. 1549.

Hungary).⁵⁴ Later Valide sultans took on the practice of diplomatic communications pioneered by Hurrem as is evident from the correspondence exchanged between Nurbanu and Safiye Sultanas with Venice and England respectively.

Unprecedented practices of Hurrem did not vanish but became institutionalized. She provided valide sultans following her with a model of female political power. Admittedly, Hurrem died in 1558, 8 years before her son's - Selim II - ascension to the throne, never becoming Queen Mother herself. However, her precedents shaped this role. Showing that haseki sultan could wield influence, Hurrem transformed this once private status into a public political institution. Institutionalization of the power of the valide sultan can be vividly seen from the reign of Sultan Murad III (1574 -1595), more exactly from the reign of his mother Nurbanu Sultan who did not merely inherit Hurrem's practices but expanded upon them. She was a noble-born Venetian, which shaped her career as Valide Sultan and diplomatic role. Dispatches of a Venetian ambassador Gianfrancesco Morosini (1582-1585) who provides one of the most valuable eyewitness accounts of the reign of Murad III portray court hierarchy, etiquette, and political influence exercised by the imperial harem, commenting on Nurbanu Sultana's extraordinary access to state matters and close collaboration with Mehmed Pasha who served as a Grand Vizier under Murad III. They demonstrate that Western ambassadors both recognized and feared female participation in diplomacy by the 1580s. There is also a *Letter to the Doge and Senate of Venice written on 18 December 1582* preserved in Venetian archives. This letter was transmitted through Nurbanu Sultana's kira – a Jewish go-between – Chera who conveys gifts on behalf of the valide sultan and assures her goodwill and promise of continued mediation between her homeland, the Republic of Venice, and the Ottoman court. This primary source is a clear illustration of the mechanisms - trusted kiras serving as intermediaries - that Ottoman Sultanas

⁵⁴ Ibid.

used to engage in diplomacy notwithstanding the religious restrictions on direct public communication. Nurbanu's letter illustrates how such correspondence, once extraordinary, became part of the valide sultan's expected role. Had it not for the reputation that Hurrem long established, later sultanas would have found it difficult to claim their legitimacy in their dealings with Europe

It was clearly shown that one of Nurbanu Sultan's geopolitical objectives was to maintain pro-Venetian foreign policy. However, they were not restricted to Venice. She is also known for having led productive correspondence with the Queen Mother and regent of France Catherine de Medici. Both royal women shared the status of mothers protecting interests of their reigning sons. According to Peirce, Nurbanu Sultan invited the regent of France "to send an embassy to Istanbul for the purpose of strengthening relations between the two countries."⁵⁵ Relations in question were the matters regarding the renewal of the capitulations - the trading rights and safe-passage guarantees granted to French ships. This diplomatic correspondence undertaken by Nurbanu Sultan illustrates how royal women harnessed their roles as family members to intervene in state affairs.

Harem-based diplomacy reached its apex during the reign of Safiye Sultan, the *haseki* of Murad III and Valide to Mehmed III. She secured an alliance with the Kingdom of England which was at the time under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I excommunicated by the Pope in 1570. Concerned with Catholic hegemony, Elizabeth I sought an alliance with the Ottoman state to secure the Tudor Kingdom of England from the threat posed by Philip II of Spain. In her letters sent to Safiye, Elizabeth stressed that she was writing "queen to queen," which implies that she saw Ottoman Sultana as her equal.⁵⁶ The letters exchanged between queens were accompanied

⁵⁵ Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 226-227.

⁵⁶ Skilliter, Susan A., ed. Three Letters from the Sultana Safiye to Queen Elizabeth I, 1593-1599. In *Queen Elizabeth and the Levant Company*. London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1977.

by luxury items. Elizabeth I sent her first letter in 1593 with a visual representation of their alliance in the form of a jewel set with rubies and diamonds containing the Queen's portrait, which was only permissible as it was sent from woman-to-woman. This exchange of gifts would not have been possible had Elizabeth corresponded with the sultan himself. Safiye reciprocated by sending a Turkish gown of equal flamboyance that was intended to visualize the Sultanna who - constrained by the laws of Islam - could not share her portrait but navigated this complexity by choosing an attire that would 'portray' her.

Conclusion

The Evolution of the Valide Sultan's power during the period otherwise known as the Sultanate of Women signals a shift in the structure of the Ottoman court. Hurrem Sultan's innovations once considered extraordinary were 'normalized' and even expected from later Valide Sultan, serving as institutionalized mechanisms of authority. Her legal marriage to sultan which broke with established custom and the creation of the *Haseki* title provided a formal administrative rank that later sultanas harnessed to wield power and influence state-decisions, both indirectly and directly. Royal women would not be able to exercise this state influence accompanying their sons to provincial posts, which makes it logical to infer that "the sedentarization of the sultanate" was important in both accumulation and exercise of power by imperial women. The move of the harem to Topkapi Palace, initiated by Hurrem, physically merged reproductive and political hearts of the empire and allowed women to remain at the locus of power. Transition from succession based on merit to agnatic seniority resulted in the leadership crises that was successfully navigated as the Imperial Women stepped up and acted as official regents of underaged sultans without posing a threat to their rule. Kosem Sultan and

Turhan Sultan formalized the position of the Valide Sultan as an official regent de-facto ruling the state in the sultan's minority and preserving the House of Osman. Beyond the palace walls, royal women projected their power by patronizing the construction of architectural projects and creating unofficial but effective parallel channel of diplomacy , where they corresponded directly with European monarchs to form alliances and stabilize foreign affairs. Hurrem Sultan's innovations - particularly the relocation of imperial women into Topkapı and centralizing dynastic politics within the harem - did not simply increase female influence but rebuilt the state's structure. As the harem became a permanent center of dynastic governance, the Chief Black Eunuch's office was simultaneously elevated, and through his formalized partnership with the valide sultan, the political authority of the imperial mother became embedded in enduring administrative structures.

The aim of this research project was to show that unprecedented practices of Hurrem did not vanish but became institutionalized. She provided valide sultans following her with a model of female political power. While Hurrem herself did not rise to the status of the Valide Sultan, her precedents shaped this role. Showing that *haseki* sultan could wield influence, Hurrem transformed this once private status into a public political institution that stabilized the Ottoman Empire during its transition to a centralized bureaucratic world power.

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