



Ottoman Women
Myth and Reality

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III

Ottoman Women as Slaves in the Harem

Were I a man, and condemned to an existence of servitude, I would unhesitatingly choose that of slavery in a Turkish family; for if ever the "bitter drought" can indeed be rendered palatable, it is there. The slave of the Osmanli is the child of his adoption; he purchases with his gold a being to cherish, to protect, and to support; and in almost every case he secures to himself what all his gold could not command—a devoted and loving heart, ready to sacrifice its every hope and impulse in his service. One forgets that the smiling menial who hands you your coffee, or pours the rose-water from an urn of silver, has been purchased at a price, and you must look with admiration on the relative positions of the servant and his lord—the one so eager and so earnest in his services—the other so gentle and so unexacting in his commands.⁷⁷

Julia Pardoe, 1836



Female Slaves in the Household Harem

It was the consensus among European travelers that slavery under the Ottomans was similar to slavery in the West in name only. There were significant reasons for this.

To begin with, slavery under the Ottomans was not a system of forced hard labor on agricultural plantations as it was in the West. Male Ottoman slaves were basically military or domestic slaves, and females were mainly domestic slaves. African women usually worked as cooks and did menial tasks, while white female slaves performed more specialized tasks like making and serving coffee or spreading and attending the dinner trays or acting as a



nursemaid. European women who visited Ottoman harems reported that all of the slave women had an astonishingly abundant amount of leisure time and freedom of speech and action inside the harem. Moreover, they considered the slave girl's lot in Turkey to be "preferable to that of the domestic servant in the West."⁷⁸


Secondly, slavery was temporary. White women were obliged to serve as slaves for nine years, but black women, coming from Africa, only had to serve for seven years because their constitutions were less well suited to a colder climate. When a woman was freed from slavery, she would receive a legally valid certificate of emancipation. She could request either to remain for the rest of her life with her former master's family, in which case she would be well taken care of, or request to be married. When married, she received jewelry, a trousseau, furniture and, more than likely, a house of her own. The freed slave always received a pension for life from her former master. In addition, she kept strong ties with her former family and could depend on them in time of need. Many former slave women, particularly those trained in the harems of the elite, married men of high position. As a result, slavery can be seen as a vehicle of upper mobility in Ottoman society. In fact, according to Adolphus Slade, "slavery was to oriental women what India had been to English men: a social ladder."⁷⁹

Thirdly, there was no social stigma to slavery in Ottoman society. After the fourteenth century, when Ottoman sultans began to take slave concubines as mates rather than marrying free women as wives, most of the sultans themselves were the sons of former slave women. The *valide sultan* or queen mother, who had the most elevated position of any woman in the Ottoman Empire, was most likely a former slave. The military and administrative elite were drawn heavily from former male slaves who had been educated and trained in the schools of the Imperial Palace. Their wives were often former slave women who had been trained in refined Ottoman etiquette and accomplishments within the imperial harem or other great Ottoman harems. Consequently, slavery was not a badge of disdain for slave women; on the contrary, a woman's having been raised and groomed as a slave girl in one of the great harems was an important point of attraction for ambitious potential husbands, who would want to forge a strong connection to a family from the elite ruling strata of society.

As a result of these social circumstances, many young girls, themselves, volunteered to become slaves or their families sold them into slavery believing

PAGE 87: Ewer and basin,
18th century

Liotard, *Portrait of Maria
Adelaide of France in Turkish
Costume*, 1753



they would have a better future as slaves. This was particularly true for Circassian girls, who along with Georgian girls, made up most of the white female slave population beginning in the eighteenth century. According to Pardoe, almost all girls and boys in Circassia insisted upon being taken to Istanbul, “where the road to honour and advancement is open to everyone.”⁸⁰ Due to the feudal social system existent in the Caucasus at that time, which consisted of princes, nobles and slaves, children of slave families were customarily sold for the profit of their owners. Others might be captured during tribal raids and sold to slave dealers for profit as well. Regardless of whether slavery was voluntary or forced, it was definitely seen as a transitory phase leading to social advancement by both the children and their parents. An anecdote related by Fanny Davis shows how adamant Circassian mothers were to have their daughters become slaves in Ottoman harems:

“In 1856–1857 Lady Blunt’s brother and brother-in-law made a trip into the Caucasus with the aim of persuading parents to stop selling their children. They equipped themselves with presents of lokum [Turkish delight] and finery, only to have their gifts refused. Mothers were indignant at what they felt were attempts to keep their daughters from getting to Istanbul and advancing themselves. Each had a vision of her daughter entering the saray [palace] and becoming valide sultan.”⁸¹

Of course, the benign treatment of slaves in Ottoman harems was another important factor in the attraction of slavery under the Ottomans for the girls and their families as well. Young slave girls were raised as a part of the family in the true sense of the word. Strong bonds were forged between the slaves and members of their foster family. They were often bought at a young age, such as six or seven, or sometimes even as infants, in which case they were provided with wet nurses. Upon entering her new home, the young slave girl was given a new poetical name like “Dilshad (heart’s joy)” or “Dilruba” (captor of hearts) and assigned to one of the experienced slave women. She ate the same food as the family members did, and her clothing was similar in quality to theirs. The young slave girl was trained in the elaborate Ottoman etiquette and practiced it by waiting on the older slave women before directly serving family members. She was taught to speak and read Turkish, and she was also taught the basic beliefs and practices of Islam. In addition, she learned to sew and embroider. If she had musical talent, she would be taught how to play an instrument or to sing and dance, and if she had any other special talent, that would be cultivated as well. Some girls were bought as companions for the



Osman Hamdi, *Two Musician Girls*, 1880.

young girls in the family, and they were given the same education as family members. Some learned to read Persian and Arabic and, in later centuries, English and French. Some slave girls were trained to be nursemaids for the children of the family. In general, they were taught all the accomplishments and manners that a free Ottoman girl would know. Commenting on the fate of the slave girl, Ferriman wrote, "*Slavery under the conditions above described can scarcely be called a misfortune. The ... child exchanges the hardships of barbarism for comfort, often for luxury and refinement; her duties are light... In short, she steps from savagery into civilization.*"⁸²

Once the slave girls had completed their term of servitude, they were married to Ottoman men. Sometimes they were freed before their term was completed because the emancipation of slaves is considered to be an act of great moral value in Islam. In either case, these women usually made very favorable marriages. Because of their beauty, charm and cultivation, they were highly sought after as brides. Many were married to the sons of the families they grew up in. Others were married to male members of the Ottoman ruling class, many of whom were also former slaves. Some men preferred to marry slaves or former slaves because the expense was considerably less than if they were to marry free Ottoman women of the ruling class. In fact, there were female slave traders, many of them former slaves themselves, who bought very young girls, raised and trained them until the girls were of marriageable age, and then sold them at lucrative prices. The duty of finding a husband for the slave girls fell to the mistress of the house, who fulfilled this obligation conscientiously because it was a point of honor for her to marry her slaves well. The slave's foster family also provided her trousseau, home furnishings and often a house as well. Emine Fuat Tugay mentions a freed slave who had been given two houses upon her marriage by Tugay's grandmother.⁸³ Leyla Saz describes a typical dowry of a nineteenth century slave woman as follows:

"Other than the small presents that she had received during her servitude, she then received some jewelry, earrings, a diamond ring, a watch in gold along with silver saucers and a coffee set. She also was given delicate little spoons made of rhinoceros horns, of ivory or even of tortoise shells, along with all the necessary furnishings for a household. The richness of the trousseau matched the wealth of the mistress and the rank which she herself had occupied as a slave in the household. There were many masters who even bought them a little house while marrying them off and even in our day there are many young ladies of fine circumstances who

would not be embarrassed at all to have a trousseau and furnishings of one of these kalfas who had left a 'konak' with the blessings of their mistresses and masters."⁸⁴

The slave's ties to her foster family continued throughout her lifetime and even beyond in many cases, as the foster family often helped the children of their former slaves as well. In some cases, the slaves requested to remain in their foster family rather than marry, in which case they were taken care of for the rest of their lives. For example, the nurse of Leyla Saz's sister refused to leave the family and tore up with her own hands the certificate of freedom which they had tried to give her. She raised the sister's children and died in their house at the age of sixty.⁸⁵

Slavery was strictly regulated in the Ottoman Empire by Islamic law. The slave girl's rights and her master's or mistress's responsibilities towards her were clearly defined. Once purchased, no slave girl could be turned out onto the streets. Her owner either had to sell her, free her, give her to someone else or provide for her himself. If a concubine bore her master a child, she gained the legal status of *ümm-ül veled* (mother of a child), and, as a consequence, she could not be sold or given away and she became free when her master died, if not freed beforehand. When the father acknowledged the child, as he almost always did, it was considered legitimate and free and would inherit the same as any child from a legal marriage. The mother was often married to her master or married to an outsider and provided with a dowry.⁸⁶ If slaves were unhappy, they could ask to be resold and they had the legal support of the law. If their owners refused, the slaves could run away. However, they could not obtain freedom by running away before their term of servitude was complete. If they ran away, they had to apply to a slave dealer, who would sell them to a new owner and inform their former master.

Many Europeans mentioned the indulgence shown to Ottoman slaves by their masters and mistresses. Tugay gives an example of indulgent treatment in regard to one of the female slaves of her grandfather, the Khedive of Egypt. The slave woman frequently complained of illness, upon which the palace physician, a *pasha* (general) would be called in. An older slave woman noticed that the younger woman was exaggerating her condition and that the doctor was holding her wrist longer than usual. When the young slave woman and doctor were questioned, they admitted a mutual attachment. They were subsequently married and the former slave woman was given five hundred *feddans* of farmland in addition to the customary

jewels and trousseau. They drove to her husband's house in the ex-slave woman's own carriage, another gift from her former master.⁸⁷

There are two recorded instances in which slave girls even refused a sultan's attentions. The first incident was related by Julia Pardoe. She actually met the slave girl named Nazip, who refused an offer to become a part of Sultan Mahmud II's harem. She described the incident as follows:

"Asme Sultane (sister of Mahmud II) is celebrated throughout the capital for the beauty of her slaves; and his Sublime Highness has thrice demanded Nazip Hanoum, but has been thrice refused; an occurrence so unprecedented in the East, that he has finished by persuading himself that he is actually attached to the lively girl who has dared to play the part of a modern Roxalana, and defy his power.

"His first rejection was treated by the Sultan as the wayward whim of a spoiled beauty, and even he condescended to expostulate with Nazip Hanoum; but his advice had no more effect upon her than his preference; and, for the first time in his life, the 'Brother of the Sun' and 'Emperor of the Earth' found himself slighted by a mere girl."⁸⁸

The second incident was related by Ayşe Sultan, the daughter of Sultan Abdülhamid II. According to Ayşe Sultan, her father was very much taken by a beautiful Georgian slave girl in the palace. He paid the lovely slave many compliments and showered attention upon her, but the Georgian beauty refused the Sultan's entreaties for five years. When she went to pay her respects to Sultan Abdülhamid II on one of the religious holy days, he first told her how beautiful she looked and then asked if she was persisting in her stubbornness. She replied,

"My Master, as long as I am alive I will be ready to sacrifice my life for



Sultan
Abdülhamid II
(1842–1918)

you. I will not desert you. But if you grant me the whole world, I will not become your concubine... because the man who will become my husband must have only one wife; that is, I wish him to belong only to me. Otherwise, I will not marry anyone." Unsuccessful in fulfilling his desire for the Georgian beauty, the Sultan acquiesced to her refusal. He bought and furnished a house for her and married the beautiful slave girl to a devout man forty-five years of age. However, Sultan Abdülhamid II called the groom to his presence on the wedding night and kept him at the palace until dawn. The Sultan repeated this procedure for five consecutive nights after the wedding.⁸⁹

Female Slaves in the Imperial Harem

It appears that in Ottoman household harems female slaves were used primarily as servants to the family, although some were used as concubines as well. In the imperial harem, however, the role of concubines was much greater. By the end of the fourteenth century concubinage played a major role in royal reproduction.⁹⁰ Previous Muslim dynasties like the Abbasids had practiced royal concubinage, but the Ottomans gave greater importance to it as a dynastic policy of reproduction. There were a number of benefits to the Ottoman dynasty deriving from royal concubinage. First of all, it was seen as preferable to have female consorts whose allegiance was exclusive to the sultan rather than having wives from a pool of hereditary nobility who might challenge the sultan's power. This was a policy pursued in regard to the military and administrative elite as well, many of whom were chosen from a pool of highly trained, loyal, male slaves or former slaves. Secondly, there was the practice of a royal consort usually having only one son because, as the mentor as well as mother of a prince, she needed



Ayşe Sultan, daughter of Abdülhamid II, with her mother, Müşfika Hanımefendi.

to devote herself completely to his training and protection. It would not have been legally possible to force a free Muslim wife to restrict herself to one son. Thirdly, with the high rate of infant mortality, disease and death on the battlefield, it was more logical not to rely on only one woman's ability to produce sons for the continuation of the dynasty.⁹¹

Although concubines played a very important role in the Ottoman dynasty's policy of reproduction, it would be erroneous to think that most slave girls in the imperial harem were concubines of the sultan. In fact, only approximately ten percent⁹² of female slaves were concubines. This figure included concubines of the Ottoman princes, as well, who also lived in the royal palace. Only very select slave women at the top of the palace training system, who excelled in intelligence, character and accomplishments, as well as beauty, were eligible as concubine candidates. These women were often trained by the sultan's mother, herself, or were gifts from other royal family members or highly placed officials. Other slave women in the imperial harem could aspire to rise in the administrative ranks to a permanent career within the harem institution or hope to be manumitted and married to a husband in the Ottoman military or administrative elite. After such a marriage, they would head their own harem which might be quite large, depending upon their husband's status.

In addition to being a residence for the royal family, the imperial harem was, more than anything else, a training institution for women who would become a part of the royal family, for female attendants to the royal family, for servants in the daily administration of the imperial harem and for women who would become wives of the Ottoman elite. There was a very strict and elaborate etiquette observed in the imperial harem at all times. All activities were conducted in accordance with it. Even the sultan was bound by it; for example, he had to receive his consorts in a strict order so that none of the women's turn was missed unless she, herself, was indisposed. A rule of silence was strictly enforced near the sultan's private premises, prompting some Westerners to compare the imperial harem with a monastery. Commenting on the solemnity of the imperial harem in 1695, François Petis de la Croix stated:

"I can, my dear brother, more easily than any other, satisfy your curiosity about the Seraglio of the Ottoman Emperors, for, having been confined in it more than twenty years, I have had the time to observe its beauties, its way of life, its discipline. If one believed the many fantastical descriptions of various foreign travelers, some of which have been translated into our language, it would be difficult not to imagine that this Palace was an enchanted





Lewis. *In the Bey's Garden*, 1865



Jeweled cup, 16th century

*place...But its principal beauty lies in the order which one observes within it and the education of those who are destined for the service of the powerful who inhabit it.*⁵³

There were many similarities between the organization of the imperial harem and the third courtyard, the home of the male slaves, eunuchs and pages, who were in the personal service of the sultan. There were similarities both in their rank and in the institutional career paths of the female and male slaves-in-training. The daily stipends the male and female slaves received were also similar. For example, the average stipend of the female slaves in the New Palace in 1652, except for the highest ranking group, was 8.7 aspers per day. The average daily stipend of the male pages in training was 8.5 aspers in 1664.⁵⁴

When new slave girls were brought to the imperial palace, they were thoroughly trained by the older slave women or by special teachers brought to the palace. The girls were taught the basic tenets and practices of Islam and they learned to read the Qur'an, as well. They were also instructed in the Turkish language. They all learned to speak and read Turkish, and some slave girls were taught to write as well. In particular, all the wives of the sultans could write and they usually had a bookcase in their room.⁵⁵ The novices were taught to sew and embroider also, and when they were not busy with other work, the women in the palace spent much time embroidering. Those musically inclined were trained to sing, play musical instruments and dance. The girls were also instructed in the ceremonies, customs and refined etiquette of the royal residence. In general, an air of discipline and industriousness pervaded the halls of the imperial harem. In a sense, it could be called the royal finishing school because it was there that young slave girls learned the arts and skills necessary for the roles they were destined to play as a part of the royal family and the Ottoman elite.



Painter unknown, *Enjoying Coffee*, 18th century



Hilair, *Ladies of the harem taking a walk*, 1797



IV

Ottoman Women in the Imperial Harem

From the time of Süleyman, the inner palace was increasingly the central arena of government. Its inhabitants—the sultan’s favorites and eunuchs, his mother and his ‘hasekis,’ and the harem’s officers and black eunuch guards—acquired both formal and informal influence over the sultan’s decisions. Far from being isolated from public events, the high-ranking women of the harem lived at the very heart of political life.⁹⁶

Leslie Pierce, author of *The Imperial Harem*



Wall recess, Sultan
Ahmed I Privy
Chamber

A strict hierarchy of rank and power existed among the women living in the imperial harem. The sultan's mother, the *valide sultan*, stood alone at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. Her authority was absolute in the harem, and she was respected and deferred to by all those living in the imperial palace and the general populace as well. The royal concubines stood next in the hierarchy, but they were not all on an equal footing. There was a hierarchy of rank among them according to the order in which they had been favored by the sultan. The first chosen was called *baş kadın efendi* or chief lady. The others were designated as *kadın efendi II, III* and *IV*. Although they usually had slave status and were therefore not legal wives, they had the social status of royal wife and their number was usually limited to four; the maximum number of wives legally permitted in Islam. Following the *kadıns* were other consorts of the sultan called *ikbals*, who also were numbered according to the order in which they were elevated to that position. Whenever one of the women died, all of the subsequent concubines moved up in status. Next in rank came the daughters of the sultan, who were also given the title of sultan, followed by the *daye hatun*, the sultan's wet nurse, and the *kethüda hatun*, the senior administrative official in the imperial harem. The household staff followed and, at the base of the hierarchy, came the slave women who performed menial tasks. Approximately ninety percent of the slave women in the imperial harem worked as servants only and had no intimate relationship with the sultan.⁹⁷

Valide Sultan

Upon a new sultan's ascension to the throne, he would call his mother from the Old Palace, where most retired royal consorts lived. She would proceed in state to the Topkapı Palace, where her son was awaiting her arrival. All echelons of the Ottoman military and administrative elite were present at this event, which indicates the high status of the *valide sultan*. The great respect in which the queen mother was held by her son is obvious in the following passage, where the sultan meets her on foot at the palace and bows before her, an honor that no one else in the Ottoman Empire received. This passage describes the *valide sultan* procession of Sultan Selim III's mother, Mihrişah, which included between eighty to one hundred carriages:



Twin Pavilions, Topkapı Palace

"The Divan heralds with plaited turbans fell in front; then walked, also with plaited turbans, those who were connected with the Holy Cities, either as appointees or as administrators; after them came the 'valide's kethüda,' Mahmut Bey, with his [turban], and wide-sleeved sable fur and a scepter in his hand; after him 'baltacı' [halberdiers] on both sides, and then the Ağa [of the House of Felicity] with plaited turban, and after him passed the 'valide sultan,' in a six-horse carriage with drawn curtains, and behind her another official scattering bright money on both sides. Behind the 'valide's' carriage were the slaves and 'sultanas' being transported to the New Palace.

"The 'valide's' procession entered through the Bab-ı Hümayun [Imperial Gate], and when it came to the imperial bakery Sultan Selim came to meet his mother and gave her the oriental salute [temenna] three times and kissed his mother's hand through the window of the carriage, which was open on the right side, and fell in front of her and took her to the imperial harem."⁹⁸

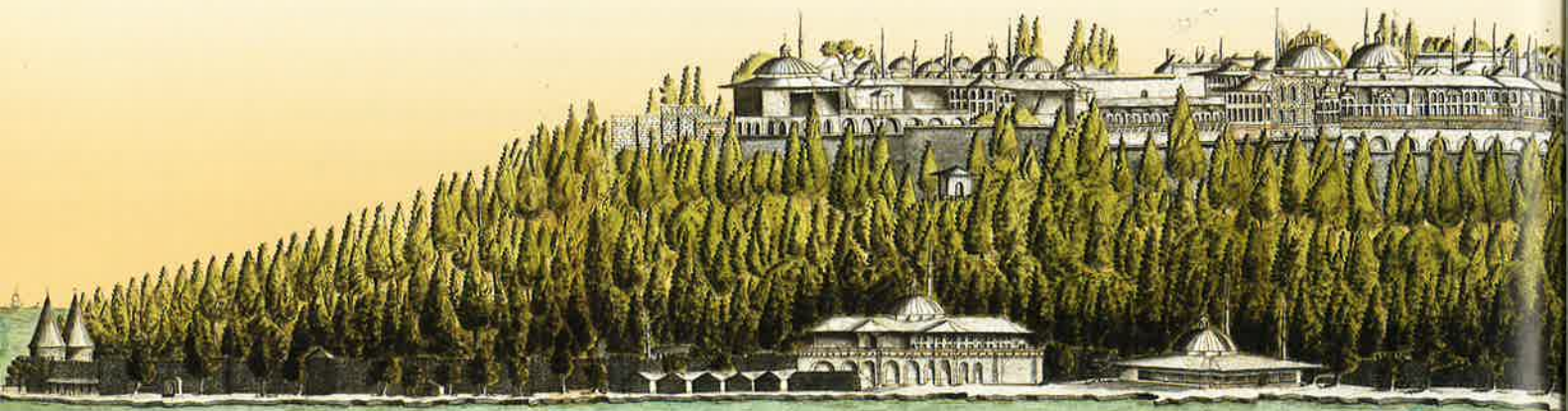
The mother of the sultan was much more than just a mother to her son. She was also his teacher, his mentor, his confidant, his strongest ally, his protector and, if need be, his regent. Thus, it was only natural for a prince to show strong devotion to his mother when he became sultan. There are many examples of *valide sultans* who exerted strong influence on their sons. Gülbahar Sultan (mother of Beyazid II), Hafsa Sultan (mother of Süleyman), Nurbanu Sultan (mother of Murad III), Safiye Sultan (mother of Mehmed III), Gülnuş Sultan (mother of Mustafa II and Ahmed III), Mihrişah Sultan (mother of Selim III), and Bezm-i Alem Sultan (mother of Abdülmecid) are all queen mothers who exerted their wills in affairs of state.⁹⁹ One of the most powerful *valide sultans* was Kösem Sultan (d. 1651), mother of Murad IV, who became sultan at the young age of twelve, and Ibrahim, who was emotionally disturbed. Kösem Sultan was the daughter of a Greek priest. After being orphaned, she fell into the hands of the Ottoman governor general of Bosnia who presented her to the imperial palace. For decades, the control of Ottoman affairs lay in the hands of this queen mother, who has been criticized by some for her heavy-handed tactics. Her rule came to a violent end when she refused to turn over the power to her daughter-in-law Turhan Sultan upon the ascension of Kösem Sultan's grandson and Turhan Sultan's son, the seven-year-old Mehmed IV. Kösem Sultan intended to have Mehmed dethroned in place of another young grandson with a more compatible mother, but Turhan Sultan learned of her plot and informed the head black eunuch, who murdered Kösem Sultan in a pre-emptive strike.¹⁰⁰

The natural closeness of the mother-son relationship in the Ottoman dynasty continued until death parted them. The depth of this bond is beautifully exemplified by the following account of the funeral ceremony of Nurbanu Sultan, mother of Sultan Murad III:

*“Contrary to the custom whereby the sultan remained in the palace during a funeral, Murad accompanied his mother’s coffin on foot, weeping as he walked, to the mosque of Mehmed the Conqueror, where funeral prayers were said. The choice of the Conqueror’s mosque, the most distant of the sultanic mosques from the imperial palace, ensured both a maximum number of bystanders’ prayers for Nurbanu’s soul and maximum appreciation by the capital’s residents of this display of royal piety and respect for the valide sultan. According to the historian Selanki, the ‘whole world’ crowded into the mosque for the funeral prayers. For forty days, high-ranking statesmen and religious officials were required to pay their respects at the valide sultan’s tomb, while the Qur’an was read continuously.”*¹⁰¹

Head of the Imperial Harem

All of the women residents in the imperial harem were paid a daily stipend from the imperial treasury. The *valide sultan*’s stipend was the highest in the Ottoman Empire, frequently several times greater than the sultan’s, thus reflecting her extraordinary status.¹⁰² Her living quarters were magnificent as well. The largest of any in the harem except for the sultan’s, the *valide sultan*’s suite of rooms included a sitting room, a dining room, a bedroom, a bath, a kitchen and a pantry. The rooms of higher ranking harem women, especially the queen mother, were elegantly decorated with costly furnishings often containing valuable jewels and the most luxurious material available. The floors were covered with Egyptian rush mats in the summer and Persian carpets in the winter. There were crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceilings and gold and silver candle holders on the walls. Cushions covered with costly material rested on the divans placed against the walls. Velvet curtains in striking colors hung at the windows and doors. There were bowls made from crystal, gold and silver that had come from all over the world. Beautiful ceramic vases containing flowers were placed throughout the rooms and halls. Doors, bookcases and shelves were hand-carved in intricate designs and often ornamented with mother-of-pearl.¹⁰³ Since Topkapı Palace, Dolmabahçe Palace and Çırağan Palace were



all located on the Bosphorus Straits, many of the rooms had beautiful sea views. Situated between the apartments of the sultan and princes, on one side, and the slave women, on the other, the *valide sultan*'s suite enabled her to watch over both the family wing and the service wing.

All of the activities in the harem were under the command of the *valide sultan*. She had a large staff to assist her in the administrative work, and she ran the harem by means of the *kethüda usta* (head stewardess) and her assistant the *haznedâr usta*. The *valide sultan* assumed the lead female role at all royal ceremonies and celebrations, and she usually participated in the public Friday prayers. She also planned the seasonal moves of the harem from one palace to another and supervised other harem outings. Her outside business and property were overseen by a male steward, who received a fur coat and a dagger from the queen mother signifying the honor of the position he held. All residents of the harem greatly respected the *valide sultan* and none dared to cross her.

Royal Ottoman Matriarch

The duties of the queen mother were not limited to overseeing the imperial harem. At the same time she was the matriarch of the Ottoman dynasty, and she represented the royal family in public functions and ceremonies such as royal weddings and circumcisions. She was also the paramount female figure in palace events like royal births, the annual visit to



Loos, *Topkapı Palace*, 1710

the holy relics, religious celebrations, and so on. For example, it was custom for the imperial family to visit the holy mantle of the Prophet Muhammad in Topkapı Palace every year on the fifteenth of the month of Ramadan. When the doors of the room containing the Prophet's mantle were opened, the *valide sultan* would head the line of royal women as they filed past the holy relic. Amidst the scent of burning incense and the recitation of the Holy Qur'an, each woman would touch the mantle to her face and then salute the sultan before leaving. As a gift from the sultan, she would receive a handkerchief embroidered with a verse of poetry or a verse from the Qur'an which had been rubbed against the holy relic.¹⁰⁴



Pasini, *A Corner of the Harem*, 1877



Another example of the queen mother's role as matriarch of the royal Ottoman family is the attendance of Valide Sultan Nurbanu at the circumcision of the son of Sultan Murad III, Mehmed. Taking place in 1582, the royal ceremonies and celebration continued for thirty-eight days. In order for the royal women to be able to observe events while still being concealed from the public eye, stations for viewing the spectacle were set up at a palace in the Hippodrome, where the festivities took place. On the day of the circumcision, the knife used on her grandson was presented to the *Valide Sultan*, who in turn bestowed three thousand gold coins, among other valuable gifts, upon the surgeon who performed the circumcision.¹⁰⁵

The powerful position of *valide sultan* in her role as royal matriarch is obvious in the size and splendor of Valide Sultan Gülnuş's retinue as she re-entered Istanbul after having traveled to a royal palace in Edirne, a former Ottoman capital, in 1668. The details were described by a French jewel merchant who witnessed the three-hour long imperial procession:

"First to enter the city were two hundred mounted men of the Silahdar's [sword bearer] retinue, followed by the retinue of the lieutenant grand vezir. Behind them rode four hundred men of the imperial cavalry, each wearing plaited armor and a short robe of taffeta and carrying a quiver covered in green velvet embroidered with gold wire and a bow in a matching case; their horses' trappings were of rich materials of yellow, red, or purple, worked with silver thread. Behind them rode their leader, with a helmet plume three feet high; followed by six attendants. Next marched a group of Janissaries and their commander, who wearing bells on their clothing and caps with donkey ears on their heads, carried silver staffs. Then came the lieutenant grand vezir, who was proceeded by one hundred guards, each carrying a spear with a banner attached, and three hundred fancily clad heralds. The vezir's party was followed by five to six hundred imperial gardeners. Next came representatives of the religious institution; two hundred judges in plain dress, wearing black boots of Morrocan leather and huge turbans, marched in strict discipline (in contrast to the disorganization of several of the groups). They were followed by sixty descendants of the Prophet, each wearing a turban of green, the color of the Prophet, and two officials dressed in white representing the müfti.

At the end of the procession, leading the valide sultan's retinue, was the Silahdar himself, riding a horse whose harness was of gold studded with pearls. He was followed by fifty riderless horses with sumptuous trappings, each led by a groom. Escorting the carriages of the women was a group of colorfully dressed black eunuchs. Turhan Sultan's carriage was drawn by

six horses and surrounded by six guards who carried spears with red horse tails, symbols of sovereign power. The second carriage, presumably carrying the haseki [the sultan's consort] sultan *Gülnuş*, was escorted by a number of pashas [generals]. Despite the fact that each carriage door was masked by a small screen and the body of a black eunuch, enabling the women to look out but not to be seen, the crowd was instructed to look away. These two carriages were followed by twelve more carrying the female servants of the harem, and many litters and four wagons filled with ice and provisions for the women."¹⁰⁶

Philanthropist

Philanthropy and patronage of monumental public works were other aspects of the *valide sultan's* role. Queen mothers played an important role in the construction of public buildings like mosque complexes, hospitals, public baths, soup kitchens for the poor, schools, libraries, fountains, and so on. They also set up endowments to cover the maintenance expenses and salaries of personnel to run the public works. All of these, of course, required huge expenditures. There were several sources of income the *valide sultan* could count upon. The most important were land grants and tax income from royal domains assigned to the queen mother by the sultan or by her son when he became sultan. The immensity of this income can be easily understood when the endowments these women made are examined. They bequeathed whole villages, extensive agricultural land, orchards, vineyards, lemon and olive groves, islands, mines, forts, factories, buildings, *hans* [business center], shops and other business enterprises. The following endowment deed, just one among fourteen trusts set up by the Queen Mother Bezm-i Alem (d. 1852), gives an example of the vast wealth at the command of the *valide sultans*. These properties were to be used to secure income for the hospital, bath and mosque the queen mother had built:

- one garden and nine shops in Istanbul
- 25,240 olive trees in Edremid and Kemer Edremid
- sixty-three olive oil factories in Edremid and Kemer Edremid
- land called *Avcı Koru* in the sanjak of Kocaeli
- a pasture called *Alacık*, a lake, a grocer's shop, and a lot called *Balaban Burnu* in the town of *Terkos*
- a meadow called *Silahdar* and a few fields

- four inns and seven shops in Istanbul
- thirty-seven shares in Ağa Han and one lot in Istanbul
- an island called Hürşidler near Rhodes
- a farm in Varna
- four mulberry orchards and one water mill in Gemlik
- one meadow, two farms and forty-three fields in Istanbul
- the farm called Katip Efendi in Istanbul
- one *han*, four shops, six *donums* of vineyards, and a half share of one lot in Istanbul
- a field measuring twenty-seven-and-a-half *donums*, five vineyards, and a half share of one lot in Istanbul
- a coal cellar in Istanbul¹⁰⁷

In addition to the enormous revenues from land grants and taxes available to the *valide sultan*, she also received other monies and valuable personal goods such as jewelry, objects decorated with precious stones and luxurious material. The queen mother's stipend alone, if calculated at 3,000 aspers a day, amounts to 1,095,000 aspers a year. She also received gifts from the sultan or others on important days like religious holidays, royal celebrations, and other important occasions, and from foreign powers as well.¹⁰⁸ Their great wealth combined with a desire to patronize pious works resulted in significant monument building by the *valide sultans*. The following are the major examples of *valide sultans* sponsoring imperial building:

Hafsa Sultan (d. 1534), consort to Sultan Selim I and mother of Sultan Süleyman, built a mosque complex near Manisa, which had been the provincial post her son had been assigned to as a prince. The complex consisted of a mosque (Sultaniye), a religious college, a primary school, a soup kitchen and a dervish hostel. Later a public bath and hospital were added by Sultan Süleyman in his mother's name.¹⁰⁹ Hafsa Sultan was the first *valide sultan* to build an imperial mosque. She was buried next to Sultan Selim's tomb.

Nurbanu Sultan, chief consort to Selim II and mother of Murad III, is thought to be of either Jewish or Italian origin. She constructed another important mosque complex, which was completed in 1583. The mosque was endowed with a library, the first to be established in Istanbul by a woman. This complex included a mosque, a religious college, a school for

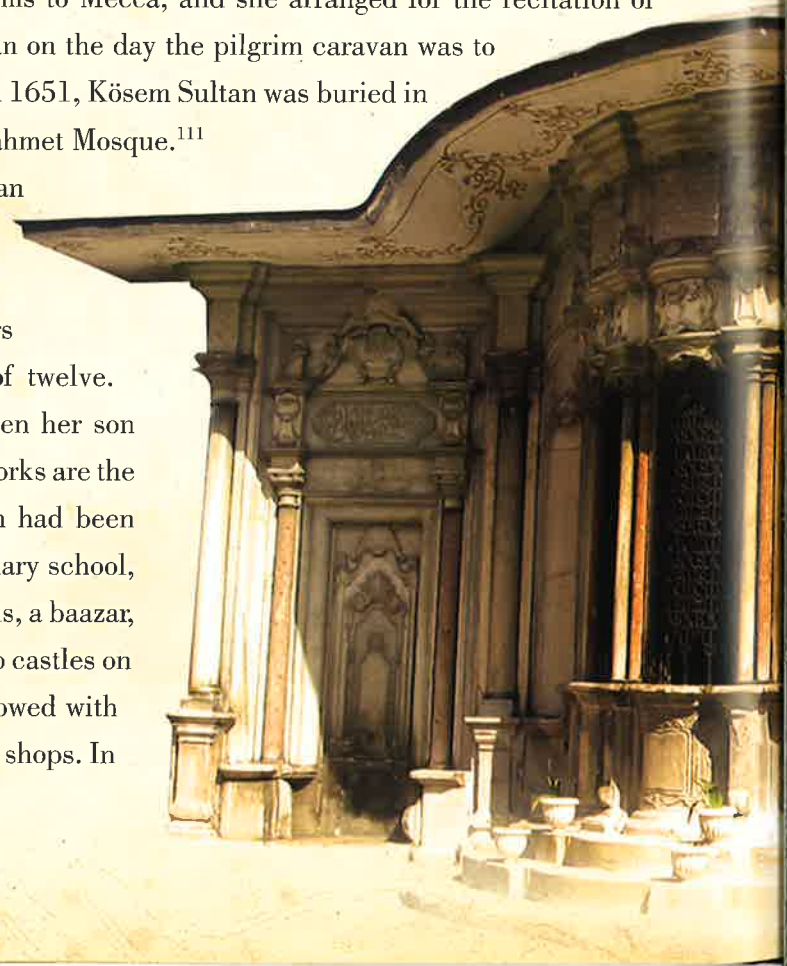


Gülnuş Sultan
(1647-1715)

the study of prophetic tradition, an asylum, a primary school, a school to teach reading to the illiterate, and a hospital. There was also a hostel for travelers and a soup kitchen. Nurbanu Sultan also endowed the library with a number of books including Qur'ans with beautiful calligraphy and gilding. She died in 1583 and was buried in the tomb of Selim II in the yard of Ayasofya Mosque [Hagia Sophia].¹¹⁰

Mahpeyker Sultan (Kösem Sultan) was consort to Ahmet I and mother of Murad IV and Ibrahim. She built the Çinili Mosque complex in Üsküdar, which included a primary school, fountain, a school for the study of prophetic tradition and a public bath. She also built the Valide Han, a large commercial building, as an endowment for the mosque complex and a *masjid* [a small place of worship] in Anadolu Kavağı. In addition to these, Kösem Sultan endowed a number of other pious works such as helping the poor and providing dowries for orphaned girls. Every year during the holy month of Rajab, this queen mother would dress in disguise, go to the prisons and pay off the debts of imprisoned debtors or pay recompense for crimes other than murder, thus enabling the prisoners to go free. She also had water and sherbet provided to Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, and she arranged for the recitation of the Qur'an in the presence of the Sultan on the day the pilgrim caravan was to depart from Istanbul. Upon her death in 1651, Kösem Sultan was buried in the tomb of Ahmet I next to the Sultanahmet Mosque.¹¹¹

Turhan Sultan, consort to Sultan Ibrahim and mother of Mehmed IV, was born in Russia in 1627. She was captured in a raid made by Tatars and brought to Istanbul at the age of twelve. She became *valide sultan* in 1648 when her son became sultan. Among her charitable works are the completion of the New Mosque, which had been begun in 1598 by Safiye Sultan, a primary school, a school for teaching prophetic traditions, a bazaar, a fountain and a tomb. She also built two castles on the Çanakkale Straits, which were endowed with mosques, schools, houses, shelters, and shops. In

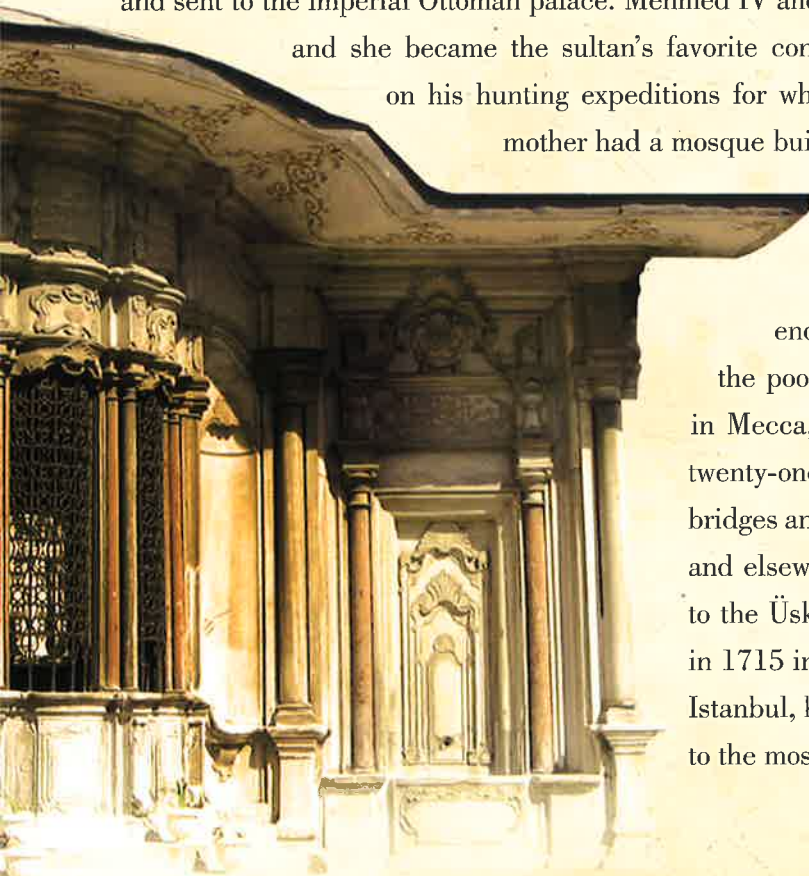


order to finance her good works, Turhan Sultan bequeathed three bakeries, four shops and large mortars for grinding coffee and some lots of land in Istanbul and forty villages and five farms in Rumelia. In addition, she bequeathed 5,200 piasters for the purchase of land, farms and other property in Anatolia. In addition to stipulating how much money should be paid in salaries to the many employees of these works, the queen mother also stipulated that 3,000 aspers be spent for wood and coal for the students in the winter and 3,000 for taking the students on trips in the summer, 20,000 for the purchase of snow for the fountain house in summer, and 12,000 for rice, onions and firewood for the poor during the holy month of Ramadan. Turhan Sultan designated 7,500 piasters for renting camels to carry pilgrims' belongings and water on the way to the holy pilgrimage and other monies for candles, lamps and olive oil for mosques and for the salaries of those who lit the lamps on holy nights.¹¹² She died in 1682 and was buried in the tomb she had built next to the mosque.

Gülnuş Sultan, consort to Sultan Mehmed IV and mother of Mustafa II and Ahmed III, was born in Girit of Greek origin. She was captured as a slave girl during the conquest of Girit and sent to the imperial Ottoman palace. Mehmed IV and Gülnuş were mutually captivated and she became the sultan's favorite consort. She often accompanied him on his hunting expeditions for which he was famous.¹¹³ The queen mother had a mosque built in Galata during the reign of her

elder son Mustafa II and another mosque built in Üsküdar during the reign of Ahmed III. She also endowed a hospital, a kitchen for the poor, warehouses, a bakery, and mills in Mecca, ships and boats for use at Suez, twenty-one villages in Egypt, and numerous bridges and fountains on the pilgrimage route and elsewhere. She bequeathed some books to the Üsküdar mosque. Gülnuş Sultan died in 1715 in Edirne and after being brought to Istanbul, her body was buried in a tomb next to the mosque she had built in Üsküdar.¹¹⁴

◀ Mihrîşah Sultan Fountain,
1801



Mihrişah Sultan, consort to Mustafa III and mother of Selim III, is said to be of Georgian origin. She had many fountains built and repaired, and she built the Mihrişah Sultan Mosque and a tomb, primary school and fountain in the district of Eyup. This queen mother also bequeathed some books to the mosque library and extensive property to serve as income for the good works she established. She died in 1805 and was buried in the tomb she had built in Eyup.¹¹⁵

Nakşidil Sultan, consort to Abdülhamid I and mother of Mahmud II, built several fountains and a tomb, which is one of the best architectural examples of that period. She became ill while her son was still sultan. She died in 1817 and is buried in the tomb she had built in the Fatih district.¹¹⁶

Ayşe Sineperver Sultan, consort to Abdülhamit I and mother of Mustafa IV, reigned as queen mother for only one year before her son was removed from the throne. She endowed a primary school, a fountain, a spring of fresh water and spigots. As income to these endowments, Ayşe Sineperver Sultan bequeathed “four shops, three stone troughs, truck gardens, fields, houses, barns and a big farm together with all its outbuildings and livestock in Istanbul; and in the district of Eyüp, a *han*, a big inn and four farms.”¹¹⁷ She died in 1828 and is buried in Eyup.

Bezm-i Alem Sultan, consort to Mahmud II and mother of Sultan Abdülmecid, is a *valide sultan* who sponsored the construction of many public works. Among her extensive philanthropic works are the Gureba Hospital (1843), a mosque, including a library, and fountain near the hospital (1845), a school that is today’s Istanbul Girls High School (1850)

and a bequest of four-hundred and thirty-one books to the school; the

Dolmabahçe Mosque (1853), the Valide Fountain (1839) and a number of other fountains, and the Galata Bridge (1845).¹¹⁸

She bequeathed extensive property and income to the works she had constructed. She died in 1852 and was buried in the tomb of Sultan Mahmud II.

Pertevniyal Sultan, consort to Mahmud II and mother of Sultan Abdülaziz, reigned as *valide sultan* from 1861 to 1876. She had a mosque (Valide Sultan Mosque), a library, a primary school, a clock room (*muvakkithane*), a tomb, a mosque in Konya and several fountains built. She bequeathed three hundred and twenty-nine hand-written books and five hundred and fifty-

Pertevniyal Valide
Mosque, 1871



seven printed books to the library in Aksaray. She died in 1882 and was buried in the tomb she had constructed in the district of Aksaray.¹¹⁹

Royal Wives and Concubines

Ottoman sultans took both legal wives and slave concubines until the middle of the fifteenth century. From that time forward, with a few notable exceptions, the sultans chose only slave concubines as mates. Although these women did not have noble lineage and were not legal spouses, they had the social status of wife and were called *kadın* or *kadın efendi*. Once a sultan chose a slave woman for his harem, she would be assigned a private room or suite of rooms and personal servants. She was taught palace etiquette by a *kalfa* (a senior female palace official) and new clothing would be ordered for her. A *kadın*'s rank was determined by the order in which she was chosen by the sultan, and it did not change unless a vacancy occurred among the royal consorts due to death or divorce. The first *kadın* or *başkadın* as she was called had a larger retinue and stipend than the other women. The number of royal wives was usually, but not always, limited to the canonical number of four; however, because they were not legally wives, this restriction was not always respected.

Beginning in the latter part of the seventeenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century, in addition to the *kadıns*, the sultans also took concubines called *ikbals*, who were ranked below the *kadıns* and who were also ranked according to the order in which they were chosen by the sultan. If a vacancy arose among the *kadıns*, the first *ikbal* was moved up to *kadın* status.¹²⁰ The *ikbals* had personal servants as well and were allowed to wear fur-lined clothing during the winter season, indicative of their high status. The number of official consorts a sultan had ranged from eighteen in the case of Ahmed III to none in the case of Mustafa I.¹²¹ However, some sultans also had consorts called *odalıks*, who were not

Melkon, *Beşiktaş Palace*





raised to an official rank. Murad III, for example, had only four wives listed,¹²² but at the time of his death he had twenty sons and twenty-seven daughters.¹²³

Haseki was a title used for favorite concubines of the sultans. The high status of the *haseki* in the harem is indicated by the exceptionally large daily stipend she received in comparison to non-*haseki* concubines. For example, at the end of her career, Hürrem, *haseki* of Sultan Süleyman, received the highest stipend any royal concubine ever received—2,000 aspers a day. The customary amount received by a royal consort who was a mother of a prince at that time was thirty or forty aspers. Nurbanu, *haseki* of Selim II, received one thousand aspers per day (the customary *haseki* stipend), while Selim's other consorts, who were also mothers of sons, received only forty aspers. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the high status of the *haseki* began to diminish and the extreme stipend differences among royal concubines decreased to a more equitable level.¹²⁴

In addition to a daily stipend, the royal concubines also received daily food allowances. For example, in the year 1126 (Hijri calendar) the *kadins* each received “five *okkas* of meat,

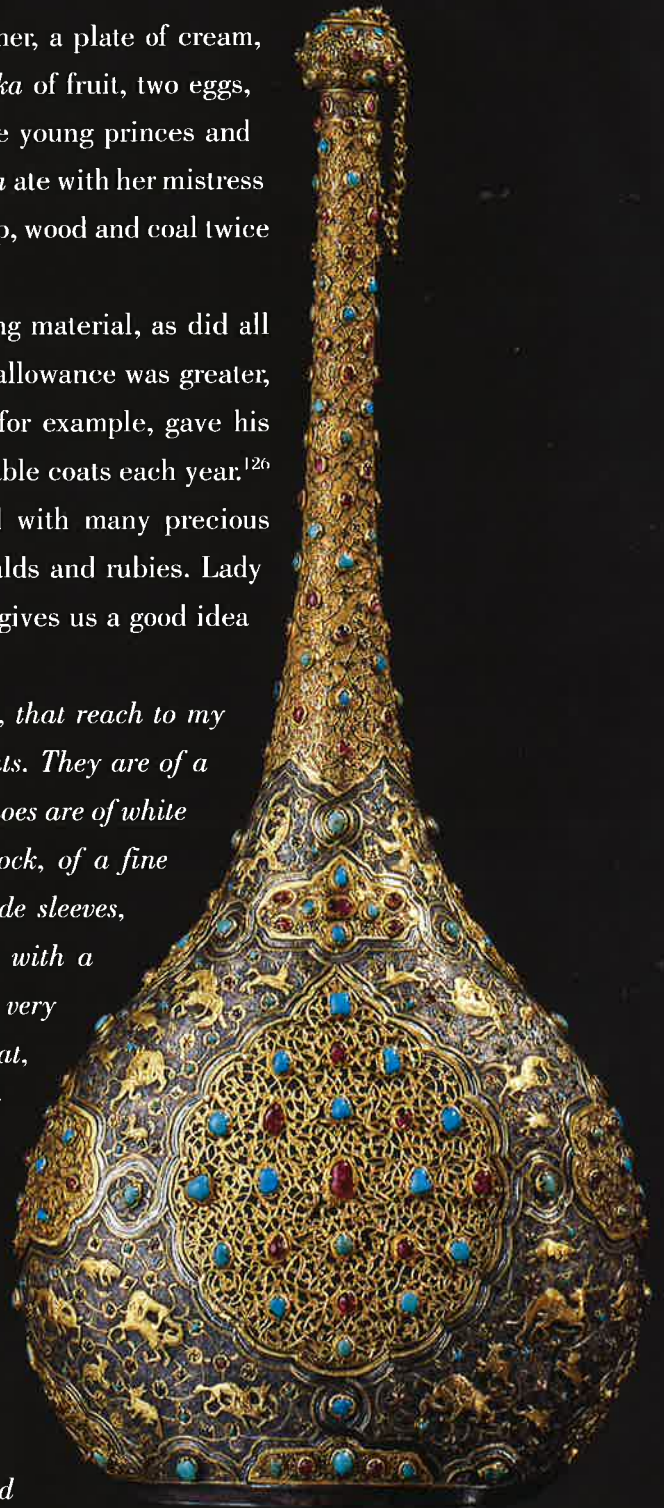
Mirror detail. ▲
Topkapı Palace

Rosewater flask ▶
Topkapı Palace

three chickens, two *okkas* of oil, a *denk* of snow in the summer, a plate of cream, four loaves of bread, 200 *dirhems* of honey, compote, one *okka* of fruit, two eggs, four *piliç* (young chickens) and vegetables in season.”¹²⁵ The young princes and princesses ate with their mothers and sometimes the head *kalfa* ate with her mistress as well. The royal wives also received a supply of candles, soap, wood and coal twice a year and a supply of sugar and coffee.

The royal consorts received annual allowances of clothing material, as did all the residents of the harem. The quality and quantity of their allowance was greater, of course, than that of the common slave girls. Beyazid II, for example, gave his wives 15,000 akçes, nine pieces of European cloth and two sable coats each year.¹²⁶ The royal women all dressed in elegant costumes adorned with many precious stones, and they wore valuable jewelry like diamonds, emeralds and rubies. Lady Montague’s detailed description of her own Turkish costume gives us a good idea of courtly Ottoman female dress:

“The first part of my dress is a pair of drawers, very full, that reach to my shoes, and conceal the legs more modestly than your petticoats. They are of a thin rose-coloured damask, brocaded with silver flowers. My shoes are of white kid leather, embroidered with gold. Over this hangs my smock, of a fine white silk gauze, edged with embroidery. This smock has wide sleeves, hanging half-way down the arm, and is closed at the neck with a diamond button; but the shape and colour of the bosom are very well to be distinguished through it. The ‘antery’ is a waistcoat, made close to the shape, of white and gold damask, with very long sleeves falling back, and fringed with deep gold fringe, and should have diamond or pearl buttons. My ‘caftan,’ of the same stuff with my drawers, is a robe exactly fitted to my shape, and reaching to my feet, with very long strait falling sleeves. Over this is my girdle, of about four fingers broad, which all that can afford it have entirely of diamonds or other precious stones; those who will not be at that expense have it of exquisite embroidery on satin; but it must be fastened





before with a clasp of diamonds. The 'curdee' is a loose robe they throw off or put on according to the weather, being of a rich brocade (mine is green and gold,)¹²⁷ either lined with ermine or sables; the sleeves reach very little below the shoulders. The headdress is composed of a cap, called 'talpock,' which is in winter of fine velvet, embroidered with pearls or diamonds, and in summer of a light shining silver stuff. This is fixed on one side of the head, hanging a little way down with a gold tassel, and bound on, either with a circle of diamonds (as I have seen several) or a rich embroidered handkerchief. On the other side of the head, the hair is laid flat; and here the ladies are at liberty to show their fancies; some putting flowers, others a plume of heron's feathers, and, in short, what they please; but the most general fashion is a large bouquet of jewels, made like natural flowers; that is, the buds, of pearl; the roses, of different coloured rubies; the jessamines, of diamonds; the jonquils, of topazes, etc. so well set and enameled, it is hard to imagine anything of that kind so beautiful. The hair hangs at its full length behind, divided into tress braided with pearl or ribbon, which is always in great quantity."

In addition to allowances of food, clothing and fuel and daily stipends, the royal concubines also received significant gifts. One type of gift was revenue from crown lands, similar to but usually much less than income received by the *valide sultan*. Another type of gift was that received on special occasions like weddings of the sultan's daughters, circumcisions of his sons, holy days, returns from conquest, and so on. These gifts might be made by the sultan, by other members of the royal family, by high-level



military men or by foreign officials. Sometimes the gift was in the form of money, but it might also be jewelry, rich material, furs or valuable ornaments.

Although the apartments of the royal concubines were not as large and as splendid as the queen mother's, they were, nevertheless, luxuriously and comfortably furnished. According to Leyla Saz, who spent long periods of time at Çırağan Imperial Palace, the *kadıns* and *ikbals* had two rooms each on the second floor of the palace, one facing the Bosphorus Straits and serving as a salon and one facing the palace gardens and serving as a bedroom. The rooms on the first floor underneath the bedrooms of the royal consorts were occupied by their *kalfas*. There were stairs built into cupboards in these rooms that enabled the *kalfas* to attend their mistresses without using the main staircase in the palace. In addition, there were auxiliary rooms that supported these apartments such as bathrooms, and dressing rooms, which were sometimes private and sometimes shared in common by the women.¹²⁸

The royal wives spent much time carefully supervising the education and training of their children and their finances. In their spare time they read the Qur'an and literary works and busied themselves with handicrafts and music.¹²⁹ There were also indoor palace activities like musical and dance performances once or twice a week. The musically talented slave girls were trained by the best musicians available, and they would give regular performances for the royal family and harem residents. In the nineteenth century the all-female harem orchestra played both Turkish and Western music. There were also promenades in the extensive palace gardens during the spring and summer. Leyla Saz describes such an outing:

"When the Sultan authorised a promenade in the gardens of the Mabeyin, the gardeners and the watchmen withdrew and soldiers were placed outside at intervals along the walls, then the eunuchs shouted: 'Halvette! Halvette! Halvette!' or 'Withdraw! Silence!' in order to chase away anyone still present. At that point, the gates of the bridge with the grills were simultaneously opened along with the gates of a corridor which led from the Serail [Palace] to the garden of the Harem. Then everyone entered the park.

"First, the little princes and the little princesses, sometimes even the Sultan himself, slowly crossed the bridge followed by their Great Kalfas and the girls of the service which were directly attached to them; then came all the other girls of the Serail with the exception of those who were on duty. They poured in like a torrent and spread throughout this immense park where

they frolicked about freely, running from flower to flower like butterflies, climbing the trees, leaping and dashing about, and having no idea of the passage of time."¹³⁰

Another kind of favorite outing was an excursion to Kağthane or the Sweet Waters of Europe. The sultan would authorize all the ladies of the imperial harem to participate in these promenades a number of times during the spring and summer seasons. A long line of imperial carriages carrying the *kadins* and princesses would be formed according to protocol. This would be followed by an even longer line of regular carriages carrying the *kalfas* and attendant slave girls. The procession would proceed to pavilions at the Sweet Waters where the ladies would stop and perform their midday prayer. They would be served fruit and yogurt by the watchmen of the pavilions and the eunuchs. The royal women would sometimes sit among their attendants and watch the waterfalls.¹³¹

The royal consorts also participated in many palace celebrations on both holy days and royal occasions like births, weddings of the princesses and circumcisions. The following is a description of the Ramadan palace ceremony at which all the women of the imperial harem paid their respects to the sultan:

"The music [played by the harem orchestra consisting of eighty female musicians] played the air of salute while the Sultan made his entry having on his left the haznedar usta and followed by those women who were in his particular service and all wearing the uniform of their rank.

"His Majesty arrived in front of the door and Valide Sultan placed herself at his side; the music then struck up the Imperial March.

"The sultanes, the hanım sultanes or the daughters of sultanes then arrived in order of age, advancing slowly with a manner both majestic and respectful, letting their skirts trail behind them on the parquet. They approached His Majesty and made a grand reverence to the floor and then arranged themselves on his right, while keeping their hands crossed on their chest in the traditional attitude of respect. Then came the consorts recognised by the Sultan, the kadins and ikbals who placed themselves on his left in the same fashion. The old kalfas or haznedars, who the sultanes had taken with them, then approached in their turn, kissed the floor and then arranged themselves far off in a corner. The music never stopped playing during the whole ceremony.

“At this point, two young girls carried in a silk napkin woven with gold and containing small brand new coins, which the haznedar usta took in handfuls and threw around the hall. The kalfas of a medium rank who watched from afar this whole ceremony, only picked up those coins which rolled near them but the little ones darted around on all sides like the pigeons around the mosques, which fall upon the seeds which are thrown to them. Among these little girls, there would sometimes be one bold enough to approach close to the Sultan, who would only smile at her with indulgence.”¹³²

Hürrem Sultan

One of the most famous royal concubines is Hürrem Sultan, who was a *haseki* (favorite) of Sultan Süleyman. She was the daughter of a Polish priest and is known in Western sources as Roxelana. Süleyman greatly loved Hürrem and eventually made her his legal wife, in contradiction to the custom of royal concubinage at the time. So great was the Sultan’s dedication to Hürrem that he forewent all other sexual partners. Hürrem bore him five sons, also in contradiction to the custom of one mother-one prince. Prince Mustafa, son to Süleyman and his first consort, Mahidevran Hatun, was the only rival to Hürrem’s sons. Mustafa, greatly loved by the people, was eventually executed by his father on charges of treason, allegedly at the instigation of Hürrem, her daughter Mihrimah and son-in-law Rüstem Paşa. Hürrem’s suspected involvement in Mustafa’s execution made her unpopular with the people. However, she sponsored a number of significant public works:

“Major philanthropic institutions existed in her name in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, the holiest cities of the Islamic world, and in Istanbul and Edirne, the principal seats of the Ottoman sultanate after 1453. The earliest of these, the Istanbul complex, constructed between 1537 and 1539, consisted of a mosque, a religious college, a soup kitchen, a hospital, and a primary school. The well-endowed complex in Jerusalem, completed in the early 1550s, contained a mosque, a fifty-five room dwelling for religious pilgrims, an area devoted to charitable services for the poor (including a bakery, soup kitchen, storeroom, and public toilets), and an inn and stable for travelers. The Edirne complex consisted of a mosque, soup kitchen, and inn.”¹³³



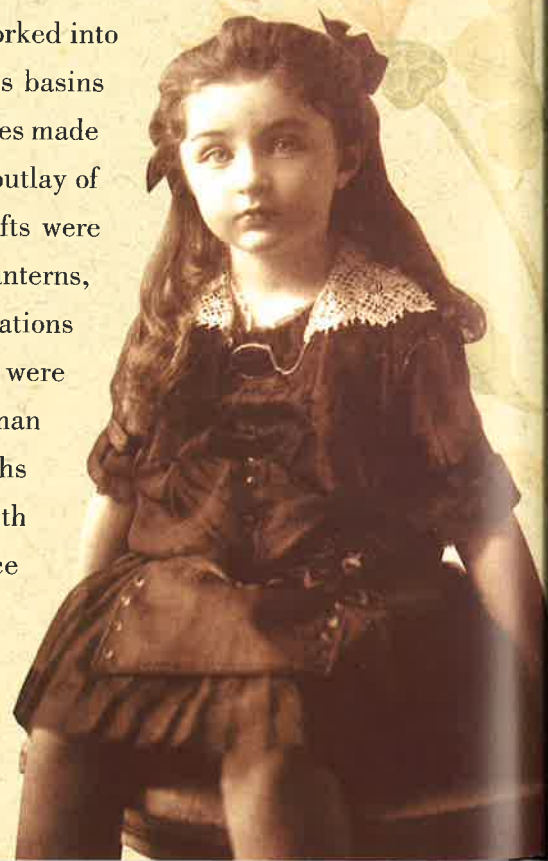


Hürrem Sultan (1506-1558)

Upon the succession of a new sultan to the throne, the royal concubines, together with their children, were removed to the older palaces, which were places of retirement for royal concubines and places of training for new slave girls. If the royal consort was the mother of a prince, she might at a later date return to the New Palace as the *valide sultan*. If not, she spent the rest of her days in the Old Palace. Childless *ikbals* or *odaliks* were usually married off to men of the ruling elite.

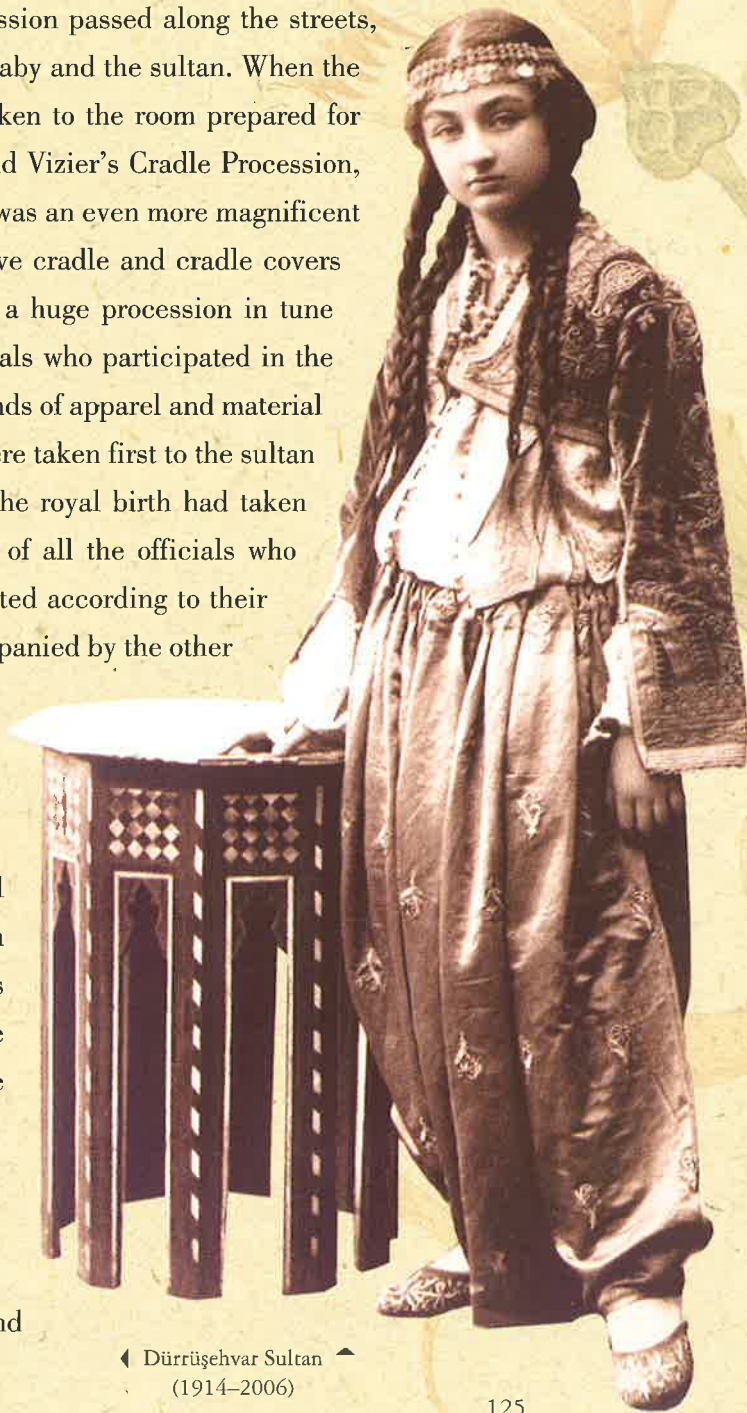
Princesses

Ottoman princesses were also called sultan, but their title was put after their first name. These women were born into a world of majesty and magnificence. From the moment a princess opened her eyes, she was surrounded by splendor. The royal family ceremonially celebrated the births of both princes and princesses. A large room in the imperial harem would be set aside for the royal birth and decorated in a manner that clearly reflected the magnificence of the Ottoman court. The cradle and the mother's bed were furnished with new luxurious covers decorated with pearls, jewels and gold and silver thread. Curtains, divan covers and their cushions were made from the best material and decorated with sequins and gold and silver embroidery worked into beautiful designs. There were also silver and gilded brass basins and ewers to be used during the birth. The cradle, sometimes made from gold, would be decorated with valuable jewels. The outlay of money for royal births was often huge. Many valuable gifts were given, and the palace was illuminated with oil lamps and lanterns, as were the mansions of high state officials. Public celebrations sometimes lasted seven days during which the people were entertained with fireworks, tumblers and acrobats. Ottoman state officials and the people were informed of royal births by cannon fire. The birth of a princess was announced with the firing of five cannon balls and the birth of a prince with seven. Edicts were also sent throughout the Empire announcing the royal birth.¹³⁴



There were two important cradle processions, the first of which was the *valide sultan* procession. The queen mother would have the cradle and covers for the new prince or princess made and sent to the Old Palace. They would be brought to Topkapı Palace by means of a procession of palace officials. As the procession passed along the streets, the people would pray for blessings for the new baby and the sultan. When the cradle arrived at Topkapı Palace, it would be taken to the room prepared for the royal birth. The second procession, the Grand Vizier's Cradle Procession, took place on the sixth day after the birth, and it was an even more magnificent event. The Grand Vizier would have an expensive cradle and cradle covers made, which were carried to Topkapı Palace in a huge procession in tune to music played by the military band. The officials who participated in the procession were given caftans, fur coats, other kinds of apparel and material according to their rank. The cradle and covers were taken first to the sultan for his inspection and then to the room where the royal birth had taken place. The *kadın efendis*, *ikbals* and the wives of all the officials who had been invited to the procession would be seated according to their rank, while the *valide sultan* sat on a chair accompanied by the other princesses. The midwife who had delivered the baby would put it in the cradle, rock it three times, and make special prayers for the infant. After she took it to her lap again, the guests put valuable material and jewels into the cradle, all of which went to the midwife. The women then presented valuable gifts to the new baby and its mother. Music and dancing would begin and the guests would be entertained for three days in the imperial harem.¹³⁵

The new princess was assigned a separate apartment and provided with a wet nurse, a governess, a *kalfa* and attendants. Her mother, governess and *kalfa* trained the princess and



◀ Dürrüşehvar Sultan ▶
(1914–2006)

oversaw her activities. Often small slave girls were assigned to play with her and, under the auspices of her governess or *kalfa*, the princess and her little friends would play in the palace gardens. When she became of school age, teachers were assigned to teach the young princess. According to Ayşe Sultan, daughter of Abdülhamit II, two teachers were assigned to her and her sister, Şadiye Sultan. One taught the Qur'an, Arabic and Persian, and the other taught the princesses Turkish reading and writing, Ottoman rules and regulations, mathematics, history and geography. Ayşe Sultan wrote that all the palace residents met them at the door of the harem and wished them success. After their first lesson, the princesses went to kiss the hand of their father, who, after kissing them on the forehead, encouraged the girls to study hard.¹³⁶ Leyla Saz wrote that all the princesses were excellent musicians.¹³⁷

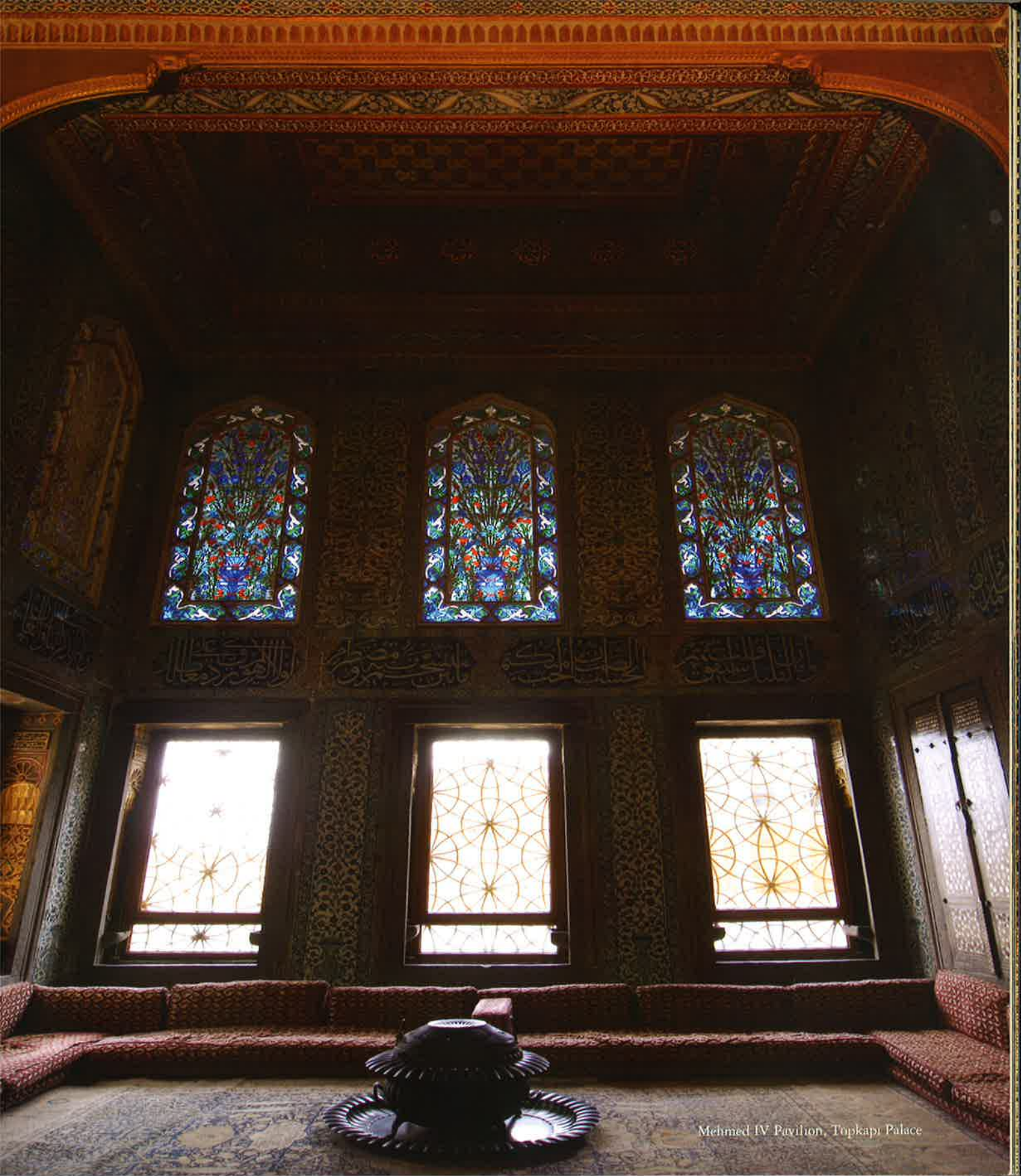
Although the princesses received smaller stipends than the royal consorts when they were young, which suggests a lower status in the harem, their position in protocol was higher than that of the *kadın efendis* and *ikbals*. At the Ramadan holiday ceremony in the imperial harem, the princesses preceded the royal consorts in paying respects to the sultan, and they stood on the sultan's right side while the concubines stood to his left.¹³⁸ Also, when they married, their stipends were greatly increased and they were given ample household allowances and their own palace or mansion.¹³⁹ The

princesses also had more freedom than did other palace women. They were allowed to make calls on the wives of viziers and to shop and promenade. Saz describes the shopping event as follows:

"In those days the main street of the Bazaar was accessible to carriages. The princesses and the ladies of the Imperial Harem were allowed to go there and they did go from time to time, but it was not considered suitable to stop in front of the shops, much less to enter them. They would install themselves in the mosque of Nuruosmaniye, in a part of the building especially reserved for the Sultan and the Imperial Family, just as there is in every one of the Grand Mosques of Istanbul. The shopkeepers, advised by the people of the suite of the princess, would bring their merchandise to them and, in turn, these would be presented



Bowl (*şifa tasi*).
18th century



Mehmed IV Pavilion, Topkapı Palace

to the princesses by the eunuchs. The princess would then make her choice, the material would be cut into the appropriate sizes and other articles desired would be put to one side and then the eunuch would settle accounts with the merchant.”¹⁴⁰

The weddings of the princesses were usually very lavish affairs. Until the mid-fifteenth century, Ottoman sultans married their daughters and sisters to Muslim rulers and their sons or to members of the Ottoman ruling class. After that, princesses were married only to members of the elite ruling class or in some cases to cousins. Frequently they were married to viziers or other important men such as the chief of the Admiralty, alliances that greatly enhanced their influence. Men who were chosen as royal sons-in-law had to divorce any previous wives they might have. They also gave up their right to divorce. A princess could divorce her husband (with the sultan’s consent), but a princess’ husband could not initiate divorce. Marrying a princess was a very expensive affair because of the many valuable gifts that had to be given to the royal family and because of the princess’ palace, which was sometimes provided by the son-in-law. On the other hand, the husband of a princess benefited greatly by such a marriage. He was almost certain to be promoted to a higher office, and his power and wealth increased considerably through his association with the royal family. The following list of engagement gifts presented to Fatma Sultan, daughter of Ahmed III, by the Sultan’s Sword Bearer, Ali Paşa, gives an idea of the great expense incurred by a royal son-in-law and the value placed on marriage to a princess:

- a Qur’an with a jeweled binding and jeweled cloth case
- a ring in a jeweled box
- a gold tray
- a jeweled crown
- a jeweled *istefan*
- a jeweled silver belt
- a jeweled bracelet
- a jeweled aigrette
- a jeweled veil
- jeweled bath thongs
- a pair of shoes adorned with pearls
- a sable coat
- a pair of diamond earrings
- 15 bags of new coins and *akças*
- 2 silver *nahils*
- 120 trays of candy
- 2 ‘flower gardens’
- 5 bundles containing miscellaneous items
- brocade cloth
- 7 silver trays

On the day of the engagement, members of the imperial council were invited to Sofa Mansion by Sultan Ahmed III to view Fatma Sultan's trousseau, which was later taken to her new home in a grand procession. The large baskets and trunks were loaded on fifty-five mules and a number of closed carriages. The more valuable objects were carried by hand in a large procession of palace officers and halberdiers. On the day of the engagement the groom-to-be gave the following gifts:

- Grand Vizier—a new jeweled girdle and a jeweled aigrette
- SheikhuIslam—a Qur'an and a jeweled watch
- General—a pair of diamond bracelets
- High Admiral—a jeweled girdle
- General—a jeweled girdle
- Rumelia Chief Military Judge—20 gold pieces
- Anatolia Chief Military Judge—watch set with rubies
- Janissary Agha—a jeweled girdle
- Minister of Finance—a pair of jeweled bracelets

In addition, Ali Paşa had sent other valuable gifts to the bride, the Sultan, his wives and the Chief Eunuch that included horses, jewels, jeweled girdles, valuable books, prayer rugs, rosaries and fur skins. The Sultan, on the other hand, made Ali Paşa a vizier and appointed him as the Deputy Grand Vizier.

On the day of the wedding, Fatma Sultan went to her new home in a silver carriage in a huge, colorful procession that included all the ministers, scholars and state officials as well as the hundreds of halberdiers and palace officials that had been in the trousseau procession. There were thirty-one carriages of palace women as well. The officials all wore magnificent caftans and uniforms, and the horses were decked out exquisitely. Colorful pieces of cloth were tied around the necks of animals pulling the carriages, and splendid wreaths were carried by halberdiers. Ten bags of gold coins were thrown to the crowds as the procession slowly moved through the streets of Istanbul. The people prayed for the Sultan and gave good wishes to the bride. After the procession reached its destination, feasting and entertainment began. There were games, contests, music, dancing, acrobatic displays and fireworks.

Interestingly, all these lavish celebrations were only symbolic because Fatma Sultan was only five years old at the time of her engagement. Ali Paşa waited eight years for Fatma



Jewelry chest.
Dolmabahçe Palace

Sultan to reach puberty, but he died on the battlefield before consummating the marriage.¹⁴¹

A number of Ottoman princesses built monumental works, the most famous of whom is Mihrimah Sultan, daughter of Süleyman the Magnificent. Mihrimah Sultan had a mosque complex built by the famous Ottoman architect Sinan on the Üsküdar shore. Included in the complex were a theological college, a primary school, a soup kitchen, a public bath and a guest house. There is also a fountain under the wall of the mosque courtyard. Another mosque complex was built in her name in the Edirnekapı district, which included a theological college, a primary school and a double public bath. Sinan was also the architect of this mosque. This princess was dearly loved by her father, and she was buried in his tomb at the Süleymaniye Mosque when she died in 1556.¹⁴² Ismihan Sultan, granddaughter of Sultan Süleyman and daughter of Sultan Selim II and Nurbanu Sultan, had a theological college built by Sinan in 1569–70. It included a library containing four hundred and thirty volumes. She also had a church rebuilt into a mosque in the Sultanahmed Square. Her husband Sokullu Mehmed Paşa added a theological college, a fountain and a dervish lodge to the mosque. This princess died two days after childbirth in 1585, and she is buried in her father's tomb at the Ayasofya Mosque.¹⁴³ Zeyneb Sultan, daughter of Sultan Selim III, had a small mosque complex constructed in 1769 across from the gate of Gülhane Park. It included a primary school, a fountain and a tomb in addition to the mosque. Dying in 1774, this princess was buried in the tomb she had built.¹⁴⁴

Daye Hatun (Sultan's Wet Nurse)

It was the custom for Ottoman princes and princesses to be nursed by wet nurses, whose own children would be considered as *sütkardeşleri* (milk brothers or sisters) to the royal children. These women had a high status in the imperial harem and would fulfill the ceremonial role of the sultan's mother if his natural mother died before he did. The wet nurses were shown great respect by the sultans and were given generous grants. They frequently used these endowments to construct public buildings like mosques and masjids. These women were often married to statesmen. For example, Sultan Mehmet III married his wet nurse Halime Hatun to his former mentor and Grand Vizier, Lala Mehmed Paşa.¹⁴⁵

Kethüda Hatun (Harem Stewardess)

The harem stewardess was the senior administrative officer in the imperial harem, and she would be chosen by the sultan for this position because of her experience, knowledge and refinement. She directed all the ceremonies in the harem and trained women as to how to behave towards the sultan and the royal family. Her high status is reflected by the fact that only she, the sultan and the grand vizier carried the imperial seal and by the fur coat that was bestowed upon her at her appointment. Both she and the sultan's wet nurse are included as members of the royal family in the privy registers. Apparently, the harem stewardess also had the means to undertake public works. For example, Canfeda Hatun, harem stewardess under Murad III, built a mosque and a fountain in Istanbul and another mosque and public bath in a nearby village.¹⁴⁶

Administrative Staff

After the royal women, the *kalfas* were next in rank in the imperial harem. They were in the personal service of the sultan. The following are examples of their positions:¹⁴⁷

- *Haznedar Usta* (Treasurer). The Head Treasurer would attend the sultan when he was in the harem. The other four *haznedar ustas* and their assistants would guard the door to the sultan's room day and night. They also looked after the sultan's clothing and jewels and the general harem economy. They had a staff of approximately twenty assistant *kalfas*.

- *Çeşnigir Usta* (Lady Butler). She and her staff of *kalfas* and assistants oversaw the sultan's food and table service. She would taste the food first to make sure it was not poisoned, and then present it to the sultan.



Turkish woman. Levni's collage (*murakka*)



- *Çamaşırcı Usta* (Head Laundress). She would supervise the laundering of the sultan's clothing in the basement of the palace. During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, the clothing was washed in seven silver basins, hung to dry on lines in the garden used only for the Sultan's laundry and then ironed by the laundry staff.

- *İbriktâr Usta* (Mistress of the Sultan's Ewer). She and her staff were in charge of the sultan's water pitcher, basin and towels. They would also pour water for the sultan's ablutions and for washing his face and hands.

- *Berber Usta* (Mistress of the Sultan's Shaving Equipment). She and her staff oversaw the sultan's shaving equipment.

- *Kahveci Usta* (Coffee Mistress). She and her staff made and served coffee to the sultan. On ceremonial occasions they served coffee to the *kadins* and female guests who came to pay their respects to the sultan.

- *Kilerci Usta* (Mistress of the Sultan's Pantry). Fresh and dried fruit and sherbets made for the sultan were stored in the pantry. This *kalfa* and her staff oversaw the pantry and served pantry items to the sultan. She also served the sultan during his meals.

- *Kutucu Usta* (Mistress of Headdresses). She and her staff assisted the sultans, *kadinefendis* and *ikbals* in their bathing and dressing. They also assisted in hairdressing and oversaw headdresses.

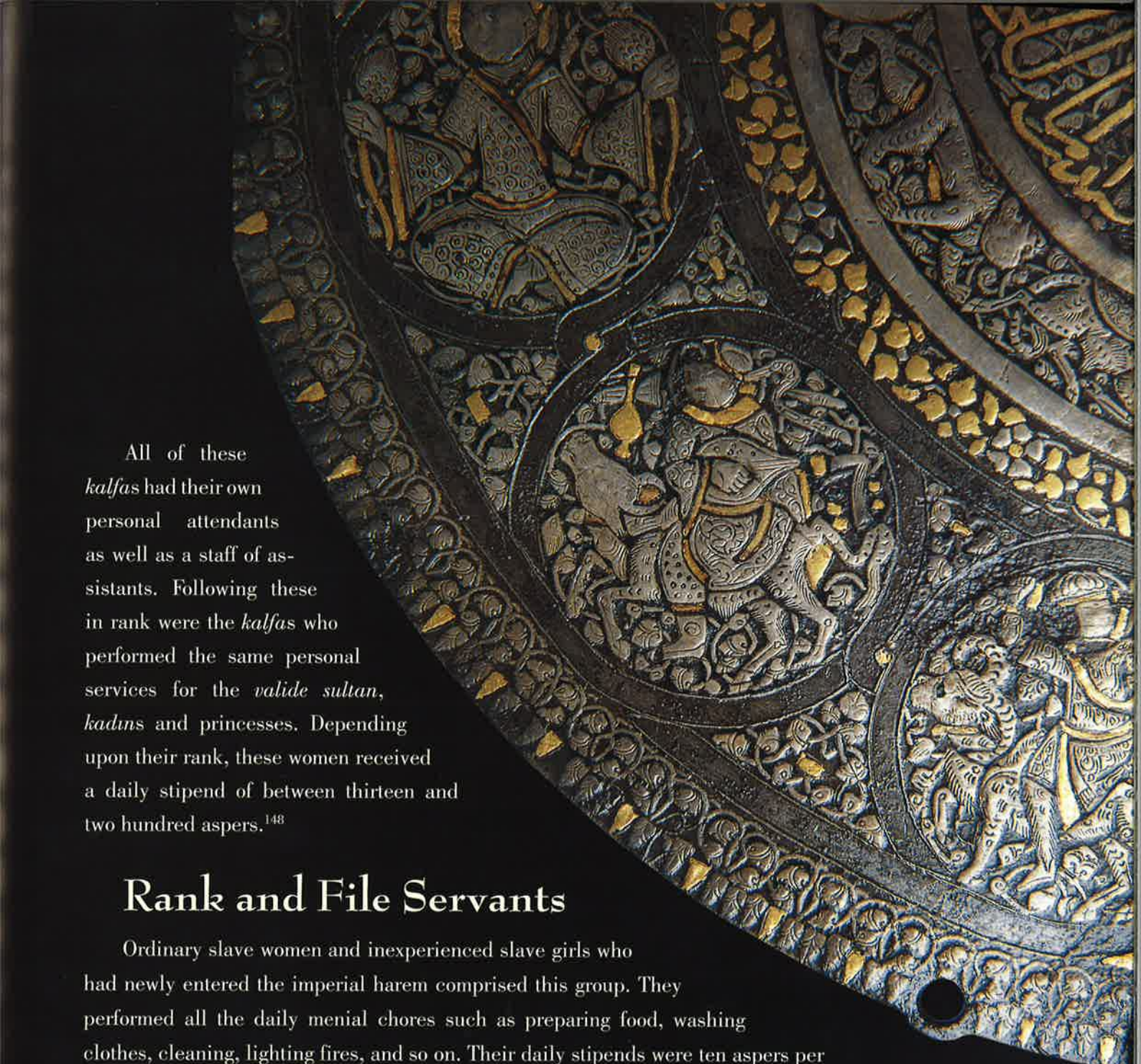
- *Külhane Usta* (Mistress of the Baths). She and her staff lit the stoves in the baths and washed the sultan's odalisques.

- *Katibe Usta* (Head Scribe). She and her staff were responsible for maintaining discipline in the imperial harem. They would control who entered and left the harem and they would monitor all activities in the harem.

- *Hastalar Ustası* (Chief Health Officer). She was the head of the health care staff in the harem.

- *Ebe* (Midwife). There were a number of midwives in the imperial harem who assisted with births and abortions.

- *Dadı* (Governess). A governess and a head *kalfa* were assigned to each of the sultan's children. They raised the child together with its natural mother. The governesses were highly respected in the harem and were often later married to important state officials.



All of these *kalfas* had their own personal attendants as well as a staff of assistants. Following these in rank were the *kalfas* who performed the same personal services for the *valide sultan*, *kadins* and princesses. Depending upon their rank, these women received a daily stipend of between thirteen and two hundred aspers.¹⁴⁸

Rank and File Servants

Ordinary slave women and inexperienced slave girls who had newly entered the imperial harem comprised this group. They performed all the daily menial chores such as preparing food, washing clothes, cleaning, lighting fires, and so on. Their daily stipends were ten aspers per day or less.¹⁴⁹ These slave women slept in large rooms (sometimes large enough to hold a hundred people) that had a view of the Marmara Sea and the Golden Horn. Girls close in age were put in the same room. They slept on individual wooden divans with firm woolen

▲ Mirror detail.
Topkapı Palace

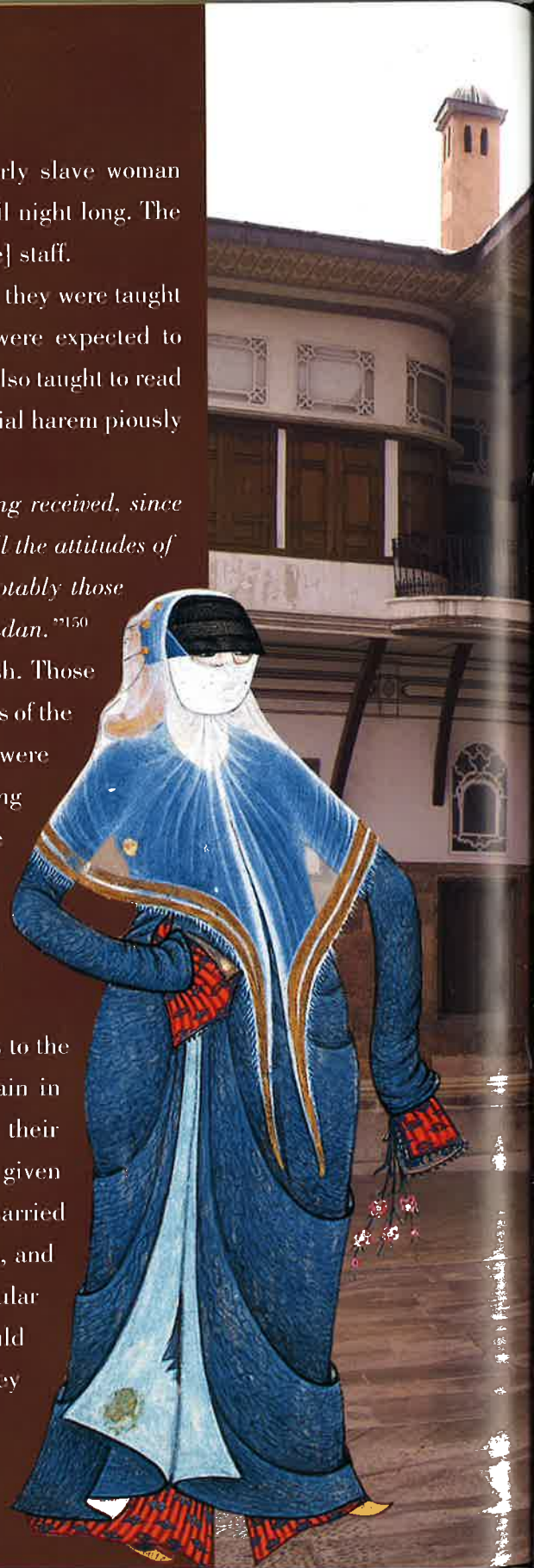
mattresses. To prevent any kind of trouble, an elderly slave woman slept between every ten girls, and oil lamps burned all night long. The rooms were also patrolled by the *katibe* [female scribe] staff.

As soon as slave girls were brought to the palace, they were taught the basic tenets and practices of Islam, and they were expected to perform the five mandatory prayers a day. They were also taught to read the Qur'an. According to Saz, the women in the imperial harem piously performed their worship:

*"The princesses and the ladies of the Serail having received, since their infancy, good religious instruction and having all the attitudes of piety, closely observed all the demands of religion, notably those concerning the five daily prayers and the fast of Ramadan."*¹⁵⁰

All of the slave girls were taught to speak Turkish. Those with the beauty and charm to become potential consorts of the sultan were taught to read and write as well. Those who were musically talented were taught to play instruments, sing and/or dance. The slave girls learned to sew, make lace and knit. In addition, great importance was given to teaching them refined manners. Potential concubines were trained to behave in a way that would become a sultan's wife.

Those slave women who did not become consorts to the sultan or to a prince and who did not want to remain in the administrative staff of the harem could ask for their freedom after nine years of service. They would be given a certificate of manumission, which they usually carried on their person. A husband would be found for them, and they would be given a dowry, often a house and a regular income. They kept their ties with the palace and could expect support from the royal family whenever they needed it for the rest of their lives.





Favorites' Courtyard, Ladies' apartments, Topkapı Palace