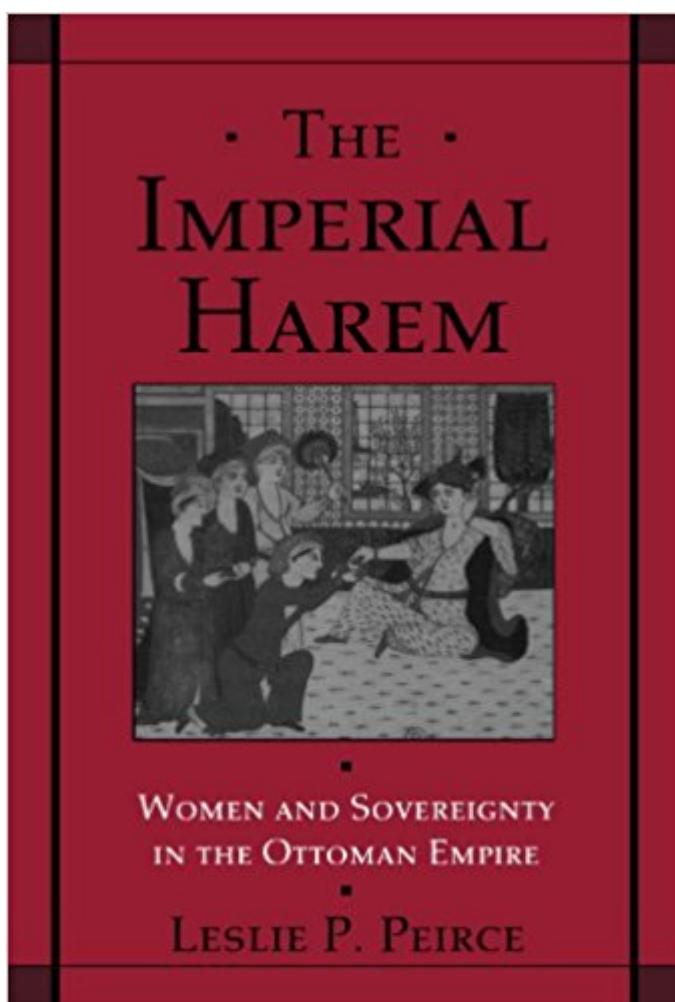


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# The Imperial Harem: Women And Sovereignty In The Ottoman Empire (Studies In Middle Eastern History)



## Synopsis

The unprecedented political power of the Ottoman imperial harem in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is widely viewed as illegitimate and corrupting. This book examines the sources of royal women's power and assesses the reactions of contemporaries, which ranged from loyal devotion to armed opposition. By examining political action in the context of household networks, Leslie Peirce demonstrates that female power was a logical, indeed an intended, consequence of political structures. Royal women were custodians of sovereign power, training their sons in its use and exercising it directly as regents when necessary. Furthermore, they played central roles in the public culture of sovereignty--royal ceremonial, monumental building, and patronage of artistic production. The Imperial Harem argues that the exercise of political power was tied to definitions of sexuality. Within the dynasty, the hierarchy of female power, like the hierarchy of male power, reflected the broader society's control for social control of the sexually active.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The harem described in Leslie P. Peirce's fascinating book is not the lascivious sexual playground conceived by the Western imagination but the locus of power in the Ottoman empire...The general thesis of this outstanding book--that the power wielded by the women of the imperial harem was real, and that it stood in an organic relation to broader Ottoman political traditions and practice--will be widely accepted."--American Historical Review"Peirce's work effectively reinforces recent work on the post-SÃƒÂ leymanic period, while at the same time revising scholarship about the imperial

harem and the dynastic family. In doing so, her book is a significant contribution to the field."--The Historian "The Imperial Harem is the definitive book on its subject. While it is excellent reading for students of women's studies, it is an important contribution to Ottoman history as well."--MESA Bulletin "A tour de force. Peirce has brought her detailed knowledge of Ottoman harem politics to revise a fundamental question of Ottoman historiography: how did the dynasty adjust to the transformation of imperial ideology necessary in light of the regime's change from aggressive expansion to stasis."--Carl F. Petry, Northwestern University "This is an excellent book, and a new departure in women's history within the Islamic field. Peirce discusses women not as a class apart, not as part of dynastic politics in the Ottoman Empire, thus shedding new light on political processes, and showing women to be an integral part of the dynasty."--Beatrice Manz, Tufts University

Leslie P. Peirce is Professor of History and Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley

First off the book explains WHY female harems existed in the first place. The simple answer is this. If the sovereign gets married to a Princess of another power that power could lay claim to the throne. BUT if he has offspring with a bunch of slaves, women who are not of the Muslim faith and are not linked to powerful families, than outsiders could not lay claim to the throne by right of blood. Yet don't think these concubines were powerless. In fact, through their sons and daughters, through networks based on retainers, son-in-laws and slaves, they gained great influence and wealth. Mothers of princes, wives and royal mothers to the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire, they were a big part of the inner workings and political events within the palace. They were eyes and ears of the Sultan when he was away, they were symbols of benevolence and powerful diplomats for the Empire, they were tutors and guardians for their sons. The book has a helpful glossary, a two page genealogical chart, two maps and is VERY detailed. I would suggest this book ONLY to people interested in the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East or women in history. It is also VERY dry.

This is a great book for anyone interested in learning about the imperial harem of the Ottoman Empire

its interesting on how the ottoman empire harems are different from other harems in the word. The way they lived for the sultan and how every woman was a rival for his affection and to bare his child

Perfect, exactly what I needed for my SCA research

If Ahmed was publishing at a time when there was a dearth of monographs dealing with women and various aspects of Islamic society and culture, the tide was turning. In 1993 Leslie Peirce published *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. Peirce attended Harvard University and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies where she received her M.A. and Princeton University from which she earned her Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies in 1988. Peirce taught at the University of California-Berkeley until 2006 after which she moved to NYU and is currently the Director of the Program in Ottoman Studies as well as the Director of the Program in the History of Women and Gender. In the years since she graduated from Princeton she has published two books and dozens of articles in professional peer-reviewed journals. *The Imperial Harem*, Peirce's first book, is a study not of the lascivious sexual fantasy land which so dominates the Western imaginary, but instead is the epicenter of politics and power in the Ottoman Empire. As Peirce notes, the Europeans have created a myth of oriental tyranny and located its essence in the sultan's harem. Orgiastic sex became a metaphor for power corrupted. In fact, her argument is that while sex and the act of sex were certainly present, it was not one of the animating forces within the harem. Power was the animating force, and because of the rules and structure that were necessarily in place, the women of the harem were able to control and shape the outcome of the Sultan's sexual activity and thus had agency in dynastic reproduction. It is interesting to note that whilst the previously discussed authors spent time analyzing women and the church as an institution, because of the lack of a similar religious institution in the Islamic world, historians specializing in the Middle East attack the question of women and religion from a different vantage point. The first section, titled "Politics of Reproduction" is composed of five chapters, respectively titled, "The House of Osman," "Wives and Concubines: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," "The Age of the Favorite: 1520-1566," "The Age of the Queen Mother: 1566-1656," and "The Imperial Harem Institution." In the first chapter she situates the Ottoman tradition of creating impenetrable barriers to surround the Sultan, be they physical or human barriers. Peirce states that these barriers were not an Ottoman creation, but were an inheritance from the ancient Near East tradition of splendid isolation enjoyed by rulers from both the Byzantine and Islamic Caliphate past. This represents just a portion of Peirce's book.

contribution to the historiography; her setting of the Sultan and his妃 is splendid isolation within its historical context, as the assertion of the power of the harem itself represents nothing new to specialists in the field. Part two, titled "Women and Sovereign Power" is composed of four chapters. "Shifting Images of Ottoman Sovereignty," "The Display of Sovereign Prerogative," "The Politics of Diplomacy," and "The Exercise of Political Power." In this section Peirce shows that, far from being the cause of Ottoman decline, the women (in this case the Queen Mother) was, in fact, the glue that held the whole system together. In the wake of the empire transforming from one which was a conquest empire to one which was slowly on the decline. Peirce uses a gendered analysis to build her argument, and while she is dealing with women at the height of imperial power she is crafting her work around such themes as gender and power, the latter of which is new amongst the author studied so far. Her sources are not only a vast amount of secondary sources but include numerous primary Ottoman documents as well, thus making this work more than a simple synthesis of the current literature on the topic. There are no major criticisms of this work, but it is one which would not be fit for most undergraduate courses, certainly not anything below the junior level, as the language is a bit academic and the analysis is quite deep. However, for graduate students and specialists in the field, this book is the most important look at Ottoman history in general, and the harem in particular, to appear in a long time. It will surely remain the gold standard study of the Ottoman harem for a long time to come.

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This is an excellent book. It is about the Harem, but not about fantasies or orientalist vision, its about power. It is an excellent investigation that worries about the structure and the vision of power in the Ottoman dynasty. The sexual reproduction and the administration of the royal household was not only a matter of the palace but a matter of the imperial structure itself. Working from inside the harem, sultanas, concubines and princes determinated the reproduction of power in the Ottoman imperial family, and also in the Empire as a whole. Bravo Aleik!

This book might be a disappointment to someone looking for gossip about life in the harem as envisioned by writers of fiction. But for anyone really interested in understanding the role of women and the domestic household in the royal court of a great Muslim Empire, this is the real thing, brilliantly researched and thoughtfully presented.

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