


# The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire (Studies in Middle Eastern History)

*By Leslie P. Peirce*

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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.

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Review

"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-Süleymanic 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*

About the Author

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

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