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BOOK REVIEWS

Life After the Harem: Female Palace Slaves, Patronage, and the Imperial Ottoman Court. Betül İpşirli Argıt (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Pp. 293. $99.99 cloth. ISBN: 9781108488365

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Throughout its long existence that spanned nearly six centuries, the Ottoman imperial harem housed, on average, several hundred enslaved women at a given time. Headed by the *valide sultan* (the mother of the reigning sultan), and with a rigid structure and strict hierarchy, the institution safeguarded the reproduction and the well-being of the Ottoman dynastic enterprise. Contrary to the common, largely Orientalist portrayals, only very few of these enslaved women were sexual partners of the sovereign. The remaining majority was employed in plain domestic—including menial—tasks and oversaw the day-to-day operations of the imperial household.

While we know a great deal about the prominent members of the Ottoman imperial harem, those who were fortunate enough to become consorts, wives, and *valide sultan*s, our knowledge of the low-ranking majority is scant at best. This is even more so for these women's post-manumission lives, upon which they left the imperial harem and simply disappeared into the larger Ottoman society. As with their unknown origins and untold stories of capture and sale into slavery, their lives after manumission fell into oblivion.

It is this gap that Betül İpşirli Argıt's diligently researched new book aims to fill. İpşirli Argıt first convincingly demonstrates that, while they are almost entirely absent in the literature, many of these manumitted palace slaves, known collectively as *sarayi*s, left behind ample amount of evidence that documented their post-palace lives. She then sets out to trace and explore different facets of these lives perusing a wide range of archival material, among them court registers, probate inventories, and endowment deeds.

The central argument of the book is rather straightforward. In a nutshell, it aims to show that contrary to the general assumption, enslaved palace servants not only did not break off their ties with their former owners after manumission, but they also built a different, in effect stronger, kind of a relationship that had broad significance for Ottoman court politics, the lives of the women themselves, as well as the Ottoman society as a whole. The implication here is clear. Enslaved servants of the imperial harem were always meant to be more than just servants, even when they were strictly employed in menial tasks. They were considered to be extensions to the imperial harem, as it was through them that the presence and the influence of the imperial household, its practices and values expanded and spread beyond the palace walls. Many of these women were strategically married off to men of various ranks within the Ottoman state organization (128–29) and continued to be, albeit indirectly, in the service of the court in years to come. Few others moved on with their post-manumission lives on their own, but they still did so as representatives of the institution that endowed them with unmatched refinement if not riches.

İpşirli Argıt attributes the post-manumission transformation (or, as she specifies it, deepening) of palace slaves' relationship with the imperial harem primarily to Islamic legal doctrine. In Islamic law, she contends, manumission did not signify a break in the master–slave relationship. Rather, it bolstered the bond between these two parties by recasting it as a legally recognized form of a fictive kinship known as *velâ*, or patronage. More than a voluntary arrangement, this system defined and regulated rights and obligations of each party and thus binding them together "in perpetuity" (6). İpşirli Argıt then explores, in six chapters, the nature of this bond by looking into a rich variety of case studies that demonstrate how this particular form of fictive kinship was built, used, and occasionally broken.

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İpşirli Argıt begins her survey with the imperial harem itself, for it was there that these patronage relationships were first hatched. Focusing on the institution's structure, its strict procedures, and the complex web of hierarchies among its inmates, the opening chapter places these relations within their broader context of court politics. In doing so, she not only offers a snapshot of the palace slaves' lives during their time in the imperial harem but also sheds new light on the true scope and scale of the institution's operations and wider influence. The core argument of the book is picked up and developed in the second chapter, which narrows down its focus to the manumitted slaves' actual departure from the imperial harem. The chapter explores the circumstances in which enslaved palace servants were granted manumission by their owners and, more importantly, the mechanisms that facilitated the recasting of the bond between the two parties as a form of patronage relationship. The following chapter brings to fore the most common one of these mechanisms and provides a detailed examination of the manumitted palace slaves' marriage patterns, shedding light not only on the process of the transformation of patronage relationships but also how these women acted as channels through which the imperial harem exerted power and influence over the Ottoman state organization and the broader Ottoman society.

While not labeled as such, the following three chapters constitute the second part of the book. Different from the first part in scope and tone, these chapters move the focus away from the women themselves to the world that surrounded them. Accordingly, chapter 4 trains the lens on the new living arrangements of the palace slaves after manumission. Through a close analysis of these women's residential patterns, İpşirli Argıt convincingly demonstrates that the spatial proximity (or, at times, distance) of their new dwellings to the palace pointed at continued close relations with the imperial harem, which in turn determined their status in their social relations with the remainder of the society. This detailed and highly sophisticated analysis is followed by a largely descriptive chapter that investigates the economic and material aspects of the manumitted palace slaves' lives, arguing that their affiliation and continued relationship with the imperial harem brought them high status if not always great material wealth. The chapter strives to demonstrate that even when they were not endowed with material wealth, these women's unbroken ties to the imperial harem gave them an elevated status within the larger Ottoman society. The sixth, and final, chapter moves on to explore another aspect of the *sarayi*s' material world and focuses on their charitable activities that effectively rendered them patrons of their own milieu, while pointing at the self-perpetuating nature of patronage relations and their significance for the broader Ottoman public.

İpşirli Argıt brings her narrative arc to a close by restressing the slave origins of the women whose lives she is tracing. "Thanks to their affiliation with the imperial court," she writes, "these slave-origin women attained material power, a network of relationships, and inheritance relations" (225) that ultimately contributed to their elevated status so much so that they themselves became dispensers of patronage in the end. For İpşirli Argıt, this progressive picture not only accurately captures the essence of the patronage system but also helps her recapture "the agency of lower-level Ottoman palace women" (226).

This line of argument, which defines the Ottoman practice of slavery as a form of patronage relationship with the aim of restoring agency to the enslaved, is not new. About a decade and a half ago, historian Ehud Toledano proposed and used this framework as an effective tool to bring in enslaved people's agency into the broader discussion of slavery and abolition in the Ottoman Empire. Yet, this tool is effective only insofar as it recognizes the unequalness or disparity of power between the slave owners and the enslaved, and it is precisely at this point that the book's shortcoming, a grave one at that, is to be found.

İpşirli Argıt almost entirely glosses over not only this power disparity but also the coercive, if not outright violent, nature of enslavement in general. In İpşirli Argıt's telling, these women were simply "brought" to the imperial harem (11); it is they who "effectively broke their ties with their own relatives" (6) or simply "lost contact" with their natal families (69), as though they were not captured in wars and raids, kidnapped, or at best sold off by a clan chief. That they lacked any kind of kin support made them exceedingly vulnerable and dependent on the fictive kinship they built with their owners. In fact, this was precisely how the establishment they were forced into was meant to operate—it coerced loyalty of its members by severing their ties to their natal families. A hint of this unequal, coercive dimension of the patronage relationships, which constitutes the core argument of the book, would yield a more accurate picture.

Writing to refute the Orientalist misconceptions of the harem, which had come to symbolize "despotism, sexuality, female slavery, intrigue, extravagance, and the seclusion of women" (226) at once, İpşirli Argıt's glossing over the enslaved palace servants' experiences is not entirely incomprehensible. Yet, this negligence brings forth further oversight that leaves us with an entirely distorted picture. For why else would the highly prevalent occurrence of mental illness among the manumitted palace slaves, which resulted in their removal from a household or their neighborhoods altogether, be left untreated in the book? Given the vast array of circumstances that women were historically specified as such, often as a basis to suppress any type of "unfitting" behavior, would these cases not deserve a more in-depth, critical look?

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Sultanic Saviors and Tolerant Turks—Writing Ottoman Jewish History, Denying the Armenian Genocide. Marc David Baer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020). Pp. 360. $95.00 cloth, $45.00 paper. ISBN: 9780253045416

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In a ground-breaking historiographical analysis of the Jewish community from the Ottoman Empire to the present day Turkish republic, Marc David Baer debunks the grand narratives of 500 years of Turkish–Jewish friendship and Ottoman and Turkish tolerance and protection for Jews, examining how these narratives have served to deny the Armenian genocide. Baer's central thesis is that, as bystanders and eyewitnesses to the Armenian genocide, Turkish Jews sided with the perpetrators to safeguard their own future and have since been trapped in a public performance of loyalty originating in their gratitude for refuge after they were expelled from Spain in 1492. The author puts forward the idea that everyday experiences of anti-Semitism and the historical memory of what befell their Armenian and Greek neighbors have contributed to an emotional mindset that motivated Jews in Turkey to be silent about their own experiences and promote the utopian image of 500 years of Jewish–Turkish harmony. In this masterly work, Baer sympathetically demonstrates why and how Jews in Turkey, and their historians—both within and outside Turkey—took on this position, making the compelling case that the denial of the Armenian genocide is an essential prong in Jewish–Turkish identity.

It is clear that this is a deeply personal book for the author, with a clear moral purpose. As a young man, Baer recounts how his grandfather, a first-generation Russian Jewish American, refused to visit him while he was in graduate school in Turkey "on account of what the Turks had done" (viii) to the Armenians. Baer's time in Istanbul also provided him with firsthand experience of "pervasive anti-Jewish sentiment" (xii) throughout Turkish society. "Despite facing daily discrimination and occasional deadly violence" (15), the official line he encountered time and time again from Jews was that no discrimination existed and that they were grateful and loyal Turkish citizens. They performed loyalty and gratitude, playing "the role of the 'good' minority promoting the republic's interest to a foreign audience" (15). This cognitive dissonance between the public and private has only recently been addressed by a handful of Jewish scholars and writers (chapters 7–8).

As a "historiographical study of approaches to Muslim–Jewish relations focusing on Turkophone regions from the early encounters of Muslims and Jews in the medieval period to the present" (6), the book examines early modern and modern primary sources, history writing, and other forms of literature in its analysis of the treatment of Jews by the Ottomans and Turks. Baer's focus is on "historical events, perceptions and motivations, and in particular how history is depicted by modern historians and what