

5-17-2013

Comparing harems: Abbasid and Ottoman Harem Organization

Linda Webber

The College at Brockport, lwebb9222@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/honors>

 Part of the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Webber, Linda, "Comparing Harems: Abbasid and Ottoman Harem Organization" (2013). *Senior Honors Theses*. 149.
<http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/honors/149>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Honors Projects at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

Comparing Harems: Abbasid and Ottoman Harem Organization

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the College Honors Program

By
Linda Webber
History Major Adolescence Social Studies Inclusive Certification

The College at Brockport
May 17, 2013

Thesis Director: Dr. Carl Davila, History

Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.

“Comparing Harems: Abbasid and Ottoman Harem Organization”
By: Linda Webber

The *Book of Songs* by Abú I-Faraj al-Isfahānī (d.967) has an anecdote that deals with the poet and singer Ibrahim al- Mawsili (d.804) and his contact with the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid’s (d. 809) harem. In Hugh Kennedy’s version of the story, “One day the caliph Harun told the poet he intended to spend the morning with his harem and the evening drinking with the men. The poet was to keep himself in readiness, not seeing anyone or drinking... or be punished by death.” The poet followed these requirements the caliph had stated until he came upon some women who coaxed him into a basket that lifted him into a courtyard within the palace filled with slave girls and other women. The poet spent a week with these girls and missed his summons with the caliph.

When the poet came before the caliph, he convinced the caliph through storytelling of the amazing place he had been and to visit the place with the poet. Kennedy further states, “When the time came Ibrahim and Harun set off together in disguise... Ibrahim said later, ‘God sent me a warning’- he had told the girls to keep themselves hidden and not to let his companion hear a word from them until he said so and... the songs and poems they chose were decent.” The caliph warned Ibrahim not to call him by his title, but after drinking too much, Ibrahim slipped up and addressed him “O Commander of the Faithful.” The girls scattered when they heard the man with Ibrahim was the caliph. Kennedy continued, “Harun turned to the poet and said, ‘you have escaped from a terrible fate. If one of them had shown herself to you I would have had your head cut off!’”¹

¹ Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: the Rise and Fall of Islam’s Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2004), 161-163.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (d. 1762) described in a letter to her sister an example of the extravagance of an Ottoman harem.

I was met at the door by two black eunuchs, who led me through a long gallery between two ranks of beautiful young girls, with their hair finely plaited, almost hanging to their feet, all dressed in fine light damasks brocaded with silver...my entrance into a large room, or rather a pavilion, built round with gilded sashes, which were most of them thrown up, and the trees planted near them... on a sofa, raised three steps, and covered with fine Persian carpets, sat the *kiyâya*'s lady, leaning on cushions of white satin, embroidered; and at her feet sat two young girls... dressed perfectly rich almost covered with jewels... her maids were ranged below the sofa, to the number of twenty... She made them a sign to play and dance. Four of them immediately began to play some soft airs on instruments, between a lute and a guitar, which they accompanied with their voices, while the others danced by turns... four fair slaves came into the room with silver censers in their hands and perfumed the air with amber, aloes-wood, and other scents... they served me coffee upon their knees in the fines Japan china, with *soucoupes* of silver, gilt... When I took my leave, two maids brought in a fine silver basket of embroidered handkerchiefs; she begged I would wear the richest for her sake... I retired... and could not help fancying I had been some time in Mahomet's paradise.²

Throughout the Islamic world, the separate living quarters of women lay hidden under a veil of seclusion known as the harem. During the Abbasid dynasty from 750-1258, the caliph's harem functioned as the epitome of extravagance of how a harem could be and might be run. This imperial extravagance continued in the harems of the Ottoman Sultans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The organization of the imperial harem developed out of a hierarchical structure that defined how women lived within both the caliph's or sultan's harem. This hierarchical structure first created to separate branches within the harem which included a social branch and an administrative branch. These two branches fashioned specific social roles for women that affected their lives within and outside the harem. Within this tiered structure based on the social norms of the harems, economic and political spheres defined the women's social roles. The highest roles created for the social branch included the Abbasid Queen-mother, the

² Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, "Letters During Mr. Wortley's Embassy to Constantinople [1716-1718]," *Letters from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: 1709 to 1762*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1906), 131-134.

mother of the caliph, and the Ottoman Valide Sultan, the mother of the sultan. The roles created in the administrative branch included the Qahramâna, the woman in charge of the Abbasid harem.

The basic structures of both the Abbasid and Ottoman harems influenced the social and administrative roles of women. The political and economic spheres of each role worked interdependently of one another within the overarching social structure that defined life within the harems. The roles or positions within both the Abbasid and Ottoman harems reflected the three spheres within the harem. Key figures such as Khayzurân (d.789), the mother of the caliph Harun al-Rashid, and Shaghab (d. before 932), the mother of the later caliph al-Muqtadir d. 932, demonstrated how the three spheres influenced the role of the Queen-mother of the Abbasid harem. The influential role of the queen mother persisted under a different guise in the Ottoman harem that held many similarities created by the influence of the three spheres within the harem. The administrative branches of both the Abbasid and Ottoman harems experienced similar influences shaped by the economic, political, and social spheres. The three different branches of organization within both imperial harems held close connections to one another. Although these groups differ in ethnicity, the Abbasids being Arab and the Ottomans being Turks, the established idea of the harem throughout Islamic history created a historical continuity within the interdependent economic, political and social spheres of the Abbasid and Ottoman harems.

Structure of the Harem

The royal harem had roots in the Jahiliyya when the tribal ethos (tradition Arab customs) demanded protection of the family honor. The men's role in the tribal ethos included protecting the women of their family from men outside the tribe. With the introduction of Islam, the same tribal ethos transferred into the new culture through the word of the Prophet in the Quran.

Women protected the family honor through gender segregation customs. Such customs protected women from strangers or men they had no relation to. The establishment of the harem allowed women to follow Arab customs.

The harem existed in the Middle East before the advent of Islam in areas such as Egypt, Persia, and Assyria in the large royal courts. Within the harems of Egypt, Persia, and Assyria the wives, concubines, female attendants and other court officials of the current rulers lived. According to John L. Esposito, “as the new Muslim community conquered these older societies, the new rulers adopted the concept of harem.”³ The harem that the new Muslim community adopted fulfilled the role of protecting women’s honor by providing a separate living space for them. According to the historian Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “A harem is a sanctuary or a sacred precinct. By implication, it is a space to which general access is forbidden or controlled.”⁴ The historian Maaïke Van Berkel further describes a harem as the private residences or apartments of the home in which women resided; a space in which the only male contact occurred between close relatives.⁵ Furthermore, the historian Fadwa El Guindi states that “the concept of sanctuary that connects sacred places, like mosques... also applies to women, women’s quarters, and family- a connection that brings out the significance of the idea of sanctity.”⁶ Within Islamic society, a harem represented a place of sanctity. Also, having a harem served as a sign of status, and the larger the harem the higher the status a family had.⁷

³ John L. Esposito ed. *The Islamic World: Past and Present* Vol.1. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. s.v. "Harem." 188.

⁴ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “The Qahramâna in the Abbasid Court: Position and Functions,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 97 (2003): 41.

⁵ Maaïke Van Berkel, “The Young Caliph and His Wicked Advisors; Women and Power Politics under Caliph Al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932,” *al-Masaq* 19, no. 1 (2007): 7.

⁶ Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 96.

⁷ Esposito, 189.

During the Abbasid period, the caliph's harem acted as the most extravagant example of the forbidden space women lived in. As seen in the anecdote of Ibrahim al-Mawsili, men not closely related to the caliph did not enter and meet with the women in the harem. The courtly life of the caliph allowed his harem to work under different conventions from the harem of the common Muslim. Three institutions formed the idea of the caliph's harem: polygamy, concubinage, and the seclusion of women.⁸ The caliph's harem formed its own hierarchical structure based on family members and administrative staff.⁹

The organization of the Abbasid harem consisted of two branches: the social hierarchy of the women living within the harem, and the administrative hierarchy of those who took care of the harem. Van Berkel notes that the caliph's harem comprised "his lawful wives and concubines, his daughters and younger sons, the slave girls and women of his household, his mother and also his unmarried and widowed aunts, sisters, nieces, and female cousins."¹⁰ The Qur'an allowed a man to have four lawful wives within his household, a common practice in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies. This practice played a role in the relationships among those closest to the caliph, including his four legal wives and his countless concubines.¹¹ According to Kennedy, stories of great friendships and bitter jealousies surround harem life. Some of the relationships sprang from the types of women living within the harem.¹² Some of the relationships sprang from the types of women living within the harem. The caliph's concubines, multiple wives, and free-born Arab women lived among one another and according to Abbott, "vied among

⁸ Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: the mother of Harun al-Rashid* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1986), 8.

⁹ El Cheikh, 43.

¹⁰ Van Berkel, 7.

¹¹ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Revisiting the Abbasid Harem," *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies* 1, no. 3 (2005): 9.

¹² Kennedy, 177.

themselves and strove to match the scale set them by the royal master.”¹³ The “royal master” being the caliph, these women worked hard to be the apple of his eye to better their situation and the situation of their children. By being close to the caliph, women strove to be near the top of the social structure in the harem.

The role of a mother in Arab society represented a significant role a woman undertook in her life time. Women within the caliph’s harem who became his sexual partner had a better chance of becoming the mother of his children. The social institutions of Islamic society greatly influenced the social structures within the harem. The most important thing a woman could do within this social arrangement was to give birth to a child, especially a son. A woman who bore a son and became an *umm walad* could achieve the status of queen-mother.¹⁴ Held in high regard among the caliph’s concubines and wives, the status of the queen-mother gained the most respect in the harem.¹⁵ The position of queen-mother placed that particular woman at the head of the social organization of the harem. Before a caliph would pass, he would name one of the son’s of his favorite wife or concubine to be his heir apparent; making the son’s mother the new Queen-mother of the harem.¹⁶ The remaining family members and slave girls descended into lower categories in the hierarchical structure. Their relation to the caliph or how they pleased the caliph as his concubines determined their place within the harem.

One main group in the social network of the harem included the caliph’s slave women. Slave women could be categorized as singers and musicians or domestic servants. All of whom were potentially sexually available to the caliph, and thus potential concubines. Singers and musicians appealed to the caliph through their knowledge of music, poetry, and wit. A slave

¹³ Abbott,4.

¹⁴ Kennedy, 181.

¹⁵ El-Cheikh, 9.

¹⁶ El-Cheikh, 9.

trader would send his women away to get a proper training if they demonstrated musical talent. The women with musical talents studied in the leading musical institutions of the Hijaz found in Mecca and Medina. Slave traders saved the exceptional women for the luxury trade business in which caliphs and other nobles purchased them.¹⁷ When among their masters or other men, a good knowledge of poetry assisted slave women.¹⁸ According to Kennedy, “a good singing woman could have a repertoire of 10,000 lines and be sexually available to the caliph.”¹⁹ These women used their exceptional talents as either great artist or effective prostitutes to please the caliph.²⁰ According to Abbot, the caliph’s concubines had a “readiness with verse or skill of voice and fingers” that charmed their masters.²¹ Within the social organization of the harem, musicians and singers ranked based on their skills, sexual availability to the caliph, and how well they pleased him. If the caliph favored a certain slave woman or concubine, she would have a higher place within the social framework.

According to Nadia El Cheikh, the administrative hierarchy of the harem consisted of “high-ranking administrative officers of the harem, the female servants who performed the housekeeping tasks of the harem, female slaves... and the eunuchs.”²² The chief administrative position in the harem was the *qahramâna*, who according to El-Cheikh, “was the harem stewardess”²³ who held the main task of running the caliphial household.²⁴ One of her unique privileges included going in and out of the harem. This allowed her to execute any executive and

¹⁷ Abbott, 9-10.

¹⁸ Abbott, 41.

¹⁹ Kennedy, 174.

²⁰ Kennedy, 174.

²¹ Abbott, 8.

²² Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of al-Muqtadir,” *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 48, no.2 (2005): 236.

²³ El Cheikh, 41.

²⁴ Van Berkel, 9.

managerial decisions needed to run the harem efficiently.²⁵ The caliph had many slave women that he purchased from different lands within and outside the empire; some of whom included prestigious female slave singers.²⁶ Arab women's seclusion within the harem led to the use of eunuchs who acted as the servants and guardians of the harem. According to El Cheikh, the duties of the eunuchs "embraced the whole compound of the court, serving as intermediaries between their master and their wives, concubines and female relatives."²⁷ The two hierarchical structures of the harem interacted with one another and affected the inhabitants politically and economically within a larger social environment.

The harem of the later empire of the Ottoman Turks also consisted of a similar two-branch structural hierarchy within the harem. The Ottoman Sultans maintained traditional Middle Eastern social divisions between the ruling class and subject classes of the empire; furthermore, they maintained the use of the imperial harem to preserve Middle Eastern traditions concerning women. Such traditions included the seclusion of women from men within the separate space of the harem and the importance of motherhood. The Ottomans' moved the capital of their empire to Constantinople, renamed Istanbul, where the Sultan maintained his court and harem at the *Topkapi* palace.²⁸ Esposito states that within the imperial palace, "the Inner Service (*enderûn*) often called the Harem, was charged with producing, maintaining, training and entertaining sultans, and as such comprised the sultans themselves, their wives, concubines, children and slaves."²⁹ According to Christine Isom-Verhaaren, the Ottoman harem characterized itself by the seclusion of the women who resided there and limited contact with the women had with

²⁵ El Cheikh, 10.

²⁶ Abbott, 36.

²⁷ El Cheikh, 236-237.

²⁸ John L. Esposito ed. *The Islamic World: Past and Present* Vol.1. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. s.v. "Ottomans." 209.

²⁹ John L. Esposito ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. s.v. "Ottomans." 271.

outsiders.³⁰ Like the Abbasid harem, the Ottoman harem provided a separate living place for the Sultan's family and his women.

A large portion of the women living in the harem included concubines, slaves, and women of defeated dynasties. Many Christian women of conquered areas within the Ottoman Empire became either concubines or wives of the conquering sultan. Isom-Verhaaren argued that "marriages usually symbolized the submission of the state from which a princess came to the Ottomans."³¹ Since many of the women living within the harem did not always have blood relations to the royal family, they gained their status from their relationships to the sultans or their sons, not from their own lineage.³² The importance of relationships for the women of the Ottoman harem greatly influenced the harem's social organization, as was the case with the Abbasid harem.

The physical surrounding of the harem also influenced its social organization. According to Ruth Barzilai-Lumbroso, the physical surroundings of the harem maintained inner gardens and apartments that had heavy curtains; which represented women's seclusion.³³ Furthermore, according to Cushman, "all access to the inner palace, the sultan, and the women's quarters was through her (valide sultan) apartments."³⁴ The physical space of the harem created a separate atmosphere between those living within the harem and those outside of the harem.

European travelers to the Ottoman Empire experienced the separate atmosphere created by the physical structure of the harem. The European travelers described how the physical

³⁰ Christine Isom-Verhaaren, "Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem: The Political Uses of Fabricated Accounts from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-first Century," *Journal of World History*, 17, no. 2 (2006), 159.

³¹ Isom-Verhaaren, 172-173.

³² Isom-Verhaaren, 169.

³³ Ruth Barzilai-Lumbroso, "Turkish men and the History of Ottoman Women: Studying the History of the Ottoman Dynast'ys Private Sphere Through Women's Writings," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 5, no. 2 (2009), 68-69.

³⁴ Beverly W Cushman, "The Politics of the Royal Harem and the Ccase of Bat-Sheba," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 30, no. 3 (2006), 332.

separation influenced the women within. Giuseppe Donizetti, an Italian musician who became Instructor General of the Imperial Ottoman Music at the court of Sultan Mahmud II (d. 1839), experienced the physical structure of the harem during performances. During one performance of the Italian troupe of Pera, in order for the ladies of the imperial harem to view it, the sultan had a theater in the inner court of the harem constructed. The theater's construction leaned against the apartment windows of the ladies quarters of the harem.³⁵ The construction of the theater however did not enter the confines of the inner apartments, further maintaining the idea of seclusion. Other male Europeans had similar descriptions of the physical separation based on their experiences. As foreign men, they could not access the inner apartments of the harem.

However, other Europeans such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who did enter the harem saw further use of the physical structure of the harem in its social organization. According to Judith Still, "she herself (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu) travels and is received in the harem (as in many other places) which becomes not a prison but simply the women's domain; she also presents Turkish women as far more mobile than male travelers would have their readers believe."³⁶ The physical structure and barriers of the inner apartments of the harem influenced societal views of women from a European perspective. The apartments being heavily curtain influenced the societal view of keeping women separated from unknown men. While the women's quarters had been designed to promote separation within the inner apartments and the rest of the palace, the social role played by the valide sultan created the social environment within the physical space of the harem.

³⁵ Emre Araci, "Giuseppe Donizetti at the Ottoman Court: A Levantine Life," *The Musical Times*, 143, no. 1880 (2002), 49-54.

³⁶ Judith Still, "Hospitable Harems? A European Woman and Oriental Spaces in the Enlightenment," *Paragraph*, 32, no. 1 (2009), 96.

As in the Abbasid Harem, an administrative structure existed in the Imperial Ottoman Harem. The main position of the administrative structure belonged to the chief administrative/supervisory officers of the harem. These roles included the mistresses of the palace, laundry, pantry, head scribe, second treasure, coffee mistress, “great mute coiffeur mistress,” and the mistress of the ablutions ewer.³⁷ These positions acted together to keep the harem running smoothly. Their economic and political interests interacted with the larger social hierarchy of the administrative branch of the harem. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s correspondences from Turkey discussed the Ottoman harem having several female slaves and attendants. While visiting the Sultana Hafitén, Montagu stated “her slaves were in the number of thirty, besides ten little ones, the eldest not above seven.”³⁸ The women of the harem had their own female attendants and slaves. According to historian, Ehud R Toledano, white female harem-slaves hoped to rise prominently in the Imperial and upper-harems; the harems of court officials. Toledano further states that by the end of the nineteenth century, the Imperial harem had 400-500 female slaves, spread throughout several palaces and divided among the main harem compound and suites of the royal family.³⁹ In addition to female attendants and slaves, the Ottoman harem also had a large population of eunuchs.

The use of eunuchs in the harem had been a constant practice throughout the Islamic history of the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire continued this practice with the administrative branch of its harem. Toledano argues that harem slavery differed greatly from the Western idea of slavery, being the use of eunuchs within the private sphere over the use of normal male

³⁷ Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 134.

³⁸ Montagu, 156.

³⁹ Ehud R. Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Heart of Islam," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 20, no. 3 (1984), 380-381.

slaves.⁴⁰ The use of eunuchs within the harem allowed a male presence such as providing security that a normal male slave could not provide within the confines of the harem. Harem slaves, both eunuchs and slave women received extensive training in court etiquette, their duties, and Turkish.⁴¹ According to the daughter of Sultan Abdulhamit II (1876-1908) the eunuchs' duties were: "to lock and unlock the doors of the Imperial Harem every evening and morning, to take shifts guarding the doors, to watch those entering and leaving, and not to allow in anybody from the outside."⁴²

The Ottoman Empire preserved several traditions of the previous empires which had been based on Arab society. However, the Ottomans being Turks also maintained Turkish custom as well within the harem. Before 1595, authority given to the sultan derived from the Sultan's family line. However according to Esposito, "Turkish custom did not specify who would assume power if more than one male heir survived the sultan."⁴³ Such customs led to conflict among the sultan's sons which culminated in either tests of military strength or murder. It also led to favoritism for certain sons over others that gave the favorite an opportunity to test his military or administrative abilities. After 1595, the male relatives of the Sultan took up residence within the imperial harem, which "had deprived them of experience in military or state affairs, and rendered them unfit for the task of maintaining the empire." This resulted in a rise in conspiracy succession and a decline in the effectiveness of the Sultan.⁴⁴ The structure that developed within the imperial Ottoman harem affected the sultans and those who worked outside the harem, similar to that of the Abbasid harem.

⁴⁰ Toledano, 379.

⁴¹ Toledano, 384.

⁴² Toledano, 382

⁴³ Esposito, 209.

⁴⁴ Esposito, 209-211.

The Economic, Political, and Social Spheres

The Abbasid and Ottoman harems worked under a specific organization that intertwined the three main spheres of interaction for the women living within the harem. These spheres included the economic, political, and social sphere. The two branches of the harem, social and administrative, determined how each sphere influenced the lives of the women living within each specific branch. The political and economic spheres interacted with one another and affected women in the larger, overarching social sphere. These spheres defined how women interacted with each other within the harem and society outside the harem.

The predominant social sphere of the harem encompassed both the political and economic spheres. These two spheres interacted within the confines of the social environment of the harem. Social organization depended on the delicate and diverse community of different ages and social standing that created a complex network of female relationships within the harem. In both the Abbasid and Ottoman harems' social branch, the social roles of women relied on motherhood and relationship. Women derived their social standing, political influence, and wealth from motherhood. Middle Eastern society highly valued motherhood and the role of a mother. The relationships established within both harems depended on the personalities of the people involved in the harem including the caliph or sultan, the women's standing, and their relation to the caliph or sultan. The administrative branch of both harems influenced how the social branch lived. They maintained the physical space of the harem that greatly influenced the social environment women lived in.

The political sphere of the Abbasid and Ottoman harems were similarly organized. The political sphere influenced women based on the inner and outer politics of the harem. The inner politics of the harem were based on social standing of the women and administrators of the

harem. Furthermore, relationships played an important role in defining inner politics. Women within the harem made political relationships with the caliph or sultan and their advisors. The political comings and goings of the caliph's or sultan's court influenced the political life within the harem. The politics of the court defined the outer politics of the harem. Certain women within both harems worked within the inner politics to gain political influences outside of the harem. As described in the social organizations of the harems, women competed for the attention of the caliph or sultan. Those who achieved it became his favorite or even the queen-mother or *valide sultan*; who controlled the inner politics of the harem.

The economic spheres of both harems revolved around the ideas of personal wealth and charity. The personal wealth and charity of the women living within both harems depended on the overarching social hierarchy of the harem. Based on their social position within the harem, the amount of wealth the women had varied. At the head of the Abbasid economic sphere of the administrative branch of the harem, the *qahramâna* had the most say in the economic goings of the harem. The economic sphere relied heavily on the political and social spheres in which women lived. The social domain of the harem defined women's political influence and economic wealth.

Women's actions revolved around their roles that developed within the social and administrative branches. These roles developed based on the interaction of the social, political and economic spheres. The main social role within the Abbasid harem included the role of the Queen-mother, or mother of the caliph. The Abbasid administrative roles included the *qahramâna*. The Ottoman role however, combined the social and administrative roles which included the role of the Valide Sultan, or the mother of the sultan.

The Abbasid Queen-mother

Motherhood represented a significant time in a woman's life that defined her place in Middle Eastern society. Women within the caliph's harem who became his sexual partner had a better chance of becoming the mother of his children. The most important thing a woman could do within this social arrangement was to give birth to a child, especially a son. Those who gave birth to a son who was named the heir of the caliph became the queen-mother, who gained the most respect in the harem.⁴⁵ The position of queen-mother placed that particular woman at the head of the social branch of the harem. Furthermore, certain political privileges that were extended to the queen-mother depended heavily on what the caliph allowed. Their influence and certain political rights in the outer politics of the harem came from the power and influence of their sons. Mothers within the harem groomed their sons in order for them to be chosen as the next caliph. The inner politics of the harem reflected this competition for the caliphate, in which mothers based their own socio-political standing in the harem on. Additionally, once a queen-mother of the Abbasid dynasty, the women lived an opulent lifestyle based upon their sons' position. As the head of the harem, the queen-mother held the highest economic position within the economic organization of the social branch of the harem. They received an income from landed estates and subsidies from the public purse.⁴⁶

To maintain the economic status of the queen-mother within the Abbasid harem, the state allotted a huge sum of money to the caliph's harem. According to Hugh Kennedy, the expenses of the harem strained the state finances during times of crisis.⁴⁷ However, the financial resources of the queen-mothers that resulted from the economic institution of the harem, also acted as a

⁴⁵ El-Cheikh, 9.

⁴⁶ Kennedy, 194.

⁴⁷ Kennedy, 194.

financial reserve for the caliphs in such times of crisis.⁴⁸ One such time occurred in 927, when the Carmathians marched on Baghdad and the state didn't have enough money to fund the army. Shaghab transferred half a million dinars to the treasury. Her contribution enabled the military to repel the Carmathians.⁴⁹ The economic contributions of the queen-mothers came from their granted incomes as being the mother of the caliph.

The queen-mother Khayzuran served as an excellent example of the status of the role of a mother. As the mother of both the caliphs Musa al-Hādī (d.786) and Harun al-Rashid, she sought to “command and forbid” her sons in order to gain the power of queen-mother.⁵⁰ One way she commanded the lives of her sons included the planning of their harems.⁵¹ Hypothetically, the other women of the harem acted graciously to the queen-mother to get in her good graces, because of her control, to better their own situation within the harem. All other women within the harem's social organization fell in line under the queen-mother and those who did not stay in her good graces fell lower in the web of the harem.

In the harem of the caliph al-Mahdi (d.785), his favorite slave Khayzuran assumed all the skills necessary to be the top slave woman. According to Abbott, al-Mahdi's father al-Mansur (d.775) interviewed her, and she portrayed an important quality needed of a slave woman in the caliphal harem, that is, having no outside familial attachments.⁵² After a slave woman or concubine became a favorite of the caliph, she took part in constant competition with her fellow entertainers who vied for the caliph's attention. Once situated as al-Mahdi's favorite, Khayzuran competed with al-Mahdi's other songstresses who posed the biggest threat. According to Abbott, in the end Khayzuran held her own against the songstresses and other noble Arab women in

⁴⁸ Kennedy, 198.

⁴⁹ El-Cheikh, 10.

⁵⁰ Abbott, 59.

⁵¹ Abbott, 66.

⁵² Abbott, 26.

various harem situations.⁵³ By staying al-Mahdi's favorite, Khayzuran endured the strain and competition that existed in the within the social space of the harem.

The role of the queen-mother remained in constant flux whenever a new caliph took power. Each time a new caliph came to power; his mother would come to power within the harem. During the reign of the caliph al-Mahdi, Khayzuran gained more power within the social structure of the harem. According to al-Tabari, in the year 159/775 "al-Mahdi freed his concubine Khayzuran, mother of his sons, and married her."⁵⁴ Further explained by Abbott, al-Mahdi's intentions to liberate and marry Khayzuran occurred after she made the hajj.⁵⁵ Al-Mahdi favored all of Khayzuran's four children, three sons and one daughter. He held Khayzuran in high esteem above the other women in his harem. He favored her children, married her, and eventually she became queen-mother of her sons' harems.

Al-Mahdi named Khayzuran's sons, Musa and Harun, his heirs apparent, which eventually made Khayzuran a queen-mother.⁵⁶ Both of her sons provided Khayzuran more social and political standing than her husband provided by marrying her. Al-Madhi's mother remained the queen-mother of his harem while he was still alive. However, once he died, the harem established Khayzuran as queen-mother. As queen-mother, Khayzuran greatly influenced the lives of the other women living in the harem. It was important for these women to remain in Khayzuran's good graces. Women strived to remain in the good grace of the queen-mother to better their own situations. One example of the vital relationship included the marriage of two of

⁵³ Abbott, 40.

⁵⁴ Al-Tabari, *The Early 'Abbasid Empire Vol.2*, trans. John Alden Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 65.

⁵⁵ Abbott, 38.

⁵⁶ Abbott, 32-33.

Khayzuran's nieces to her sons Musa and Harun; the nieces became her daughters-in-laws.⁵⁷ As Khayzuran's nieces, these women came from a lower birth, but married well within the harem.

Khayzuran, the wife of the caliph al-Mahdi, served as one example of where the queen mother stood within the branches of the political organization of the harem. In al-Mahdi's reign as caliph, Khayzuran had a great influence in the affairs of the palace and the harem.⁵⁸ One incident that demonstrated the influence Khayzuran held over al-Mahdi included, the moment when al-Mahdi imprisoned his vizier Yahya (d.806), son of Khalid the Barmakid (d 782), for the misuse of power in the province of Fars. Khayzuran pleaded with al-Mahdi for Yahya's release based on the foster-brotherhood that developed between Yahya's son al-Fadl and Harun. Al-Mahdi gave in to his wife's pleas and released Yahya.⁵⁹ Khayzuran's influence over al-Mahdi allowed her to exercise political power outside of the harem. Women experienced several other incidents within the caliphal harem, such as the example above, that allowed them to exercise power in the political organization of the harem.

When al-Mahdi died, his son Musa al-Hādī became caliph. His mother Khayzuran sought to exercise the same political power she had during her husband's reign. However, al-Hādī did not give his mother as much political freedom as his father did. According to Abbott, "Khayzuran in the first part of al-Hadi's reign settled his affairs and dealt with him as she had dealt with his father (al-Mahdi) before him in assuming absolute power to command and forbid."⁶⁰ When al-Mahdi died, al-Tabari tells us, Khayzuran sent for Rabi ibn Yunus and Yahya

⁵⁷ Abbott, 68.

⁵⁸ Abbott, 59.

⁵⁹ Abbott, 55.

⁶⁰ Abbott, 54.

b. Khalid to discuss the problem of reimbursing the soldiers and who would become the next caliph; al-Hādī or Harun al-Rashid.⁶¹ Al-Tabari also states that,

Rabi went to her, but Yahya, knowing how intensely jealous al-Hādī was, did not. Money was then collected and the troops were given two years pay, and were quiet. The news of all this came to al-Hādī, and he wrote Rabi threatening him with death, while to Yahya he wrote with favor, ordering him to assist Harun as he had always done, and to administer his affairs as he had always administered them.⁶²

The initiative Khayzuran took to better Harun's chances for the caliphate validated the power of the queen-mothers. The outer politics created an opportunity for the queen-mother to direct political decisions and had men come to her for counsel. As the queen-mother, Khayzuran had the ability to call together advisors without a second thought. However, al-Hādī did not appreciate Rabi ibn Yunus going to his mother and removed him from his position as vizier, which he previously held under the caliph al-Mahdi.⁶³ When al-Hādī became caliph, the power Khayzuran had quickly diminished.

A queen-mother maintained the reverence of her children, even the caliph, which played a role in the inner politics of the harem. The role of a mother gave women personal political power over the family in the sense of bearing and raising the children. In return, the children were expected to show their mother filial obedience. As queen-mother, Khayzuran overlooked the privileges and respect her son gave her and operated under the same conditions her late husband allowed. Al-Tabari tells us that Khayzuran "wanted to dominate in his (al-Hādī) reign as she had dominated in that of al-Mahdi."⁶⁴ In addition, Al-Tabari tells us that Yahya b. Hasan stated, "Khayzuran would act in his affairs without consulting him, following procedures used by

⁶¹ Al-Tabari, 138.

⁶² Al-Tabari, 138.

⁶³ Abbott, 87.

⁶⁴ Al-Tabari, 159.

his father before him, and arrogating to herself power to command and to prohibit.”⁶⁵ As queen-mother, Khayzuran exercised her political privileges beyond the extent to which a woman should have in the outer political arena of the harem during the first months of her son’s reign.

In the first months of al-Hādī’s short reign as caliph, he allowed his mother to implement the same political freedoms his father allowed. The historian Richard Kimbar notes from al-Tabari’s *Tarikh*, at the beginning of al-Hādī’s reign he forbade his mother “from interfering in the affairs of state but assured her of his filial obedience in all her legitimate requirements.”⁶⁶ However, Khayzuran took advantage of the fact that al-Hādī never rejected his mother’s personal request, and disguised “her friend’s desires as her own in order to obtain what they wanted.”⁶⁷ It eventually came to the point in which petitioners lined up at Khayzuran’s gate in order to attain their own goals. According to al-Tabari, “al-Hādī heard of how his officers used to go to his mother Khayzuran in hopes that what they wanted from him would be done through her words.”⁶⁸ However, over time he retaliated against his mother’s political power.

Al-Hādī disliked the extent of his mother’s political influence; thus he decided to remove her from the public picture. One instance of al-Hādī’s retaliation against his mother included the time she wanted her brother to be appointed the governor of Yemen. Al-Hādī tricked his mother into deciding between her brother’s position and the divorce of her niece, Ubaidah. Khayzuran, not knowing of the ploy, chose the governorship and al-Hādī immediately divorced Ubaidah to Khayzuran’s alarm.⁶⁹ Al-Hādī further limited his mother’s political influence when he threatened

⁶⁵ Al-Tabari, 157.

⁶⁶ Richard Kimbar, “The Succession to the Caliph Musa al-Hadi,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no.3 (2001), 433.

⁶⁷ Kimbar, 433.

⁶⁸ Al-Tabari, 159.

⁶⁹ Abbott, 88-89.

death to anyone who further pursued to call on her.⁷⁰ The harem only had as much political privilege as the caliph allowed.

The death of Musa al-Hadi permitted Khayzuran to take part in the inner politics of the harem to raise her favorite son Harun al-Rashid to the caliphate. According to Al-Tabari, al-Hadi removed his brother, Harun, from the line of succession and replaced him with his son Jafar. This threatened the future Khayzuran envisioned for Harun.⁷¹ Eventually, Al-Hadi became sick to the point of death, at that time Khalisa, Khayzuran's personal stewardess, convinced Khayzuran to meet with her dying son. Khayzuran took the opportunity to contact Yahya the Barmakid in prison to prepare the necessary paper work to bring Harun to the throne.⁷² According to al-Tabari, different opinions existed on how al-Hadi died, which included an internal ulcer or being smothered by some of Khayzuran's slave girls.⁷³ In either case, al-Hadi died, and Khayzuran used the political influence of the queen-mother to acquire the caliphate for her son, Harun, instead of al-Hadi's son Jafar. This example depicted the inner politics of the harem and the lengths a mother would go to put her son on the throne.

The death of the caliph Musa al-Hādī died in 786, allowed Khayzuran to maintain control of the harem as queen mother after. When he died, she broke the news to four of the leading princesses in the harem. Since Khayzuran welcomed the news, the group celebrated for Harun, Khayzuran's favored son, and drank to the success of his reign.⁷⁴ This demonstrated that even though al-Hādī had a son, whose mother should have become the queen-mother; Khyzuran still maintained control because of her second son Harun, who had also been named an heir. According to Nabia Abbot that once he became caliph, Harun "allowed her (Khayzuran) a free

⁷⁰ Kimbar, 433.

⁷¹ Al-Tabari, 107.

⁷² Abbott, 107.

⁷³ Al-Tabari, 107.

⁷⁴ Abbott, 111.

hand and, at times, restrained his own desires out of deference to her expressed wishes.”⁷⁵ In al-Tabari, “Khayzuran acted as an overseer of affairs, and Yahya deferred to her and acted on her advice.”⁷⁶ As queen-mother, Khayzuran gained political influence in the politics outside the harem. However when she died, al-Rashid annulled all his mother’s policies and disregarded her expressed wishes.⁷⁷ In the end, the political organization in the inner and outer politics of the harem affected the political influence permitted by the caliph for the queen-mother depended on what the caliph allowed.

As the head of the harem, the queen-mother held the highest economic position within the harem. The mother of Harun al-Rashid, Khayzuran, received an annual income of around 160,000,000 silver *dirhams*, a silver coin used throughout the Islamic world. About one-half of the entire land tax supported her income.⁷⁸ The social branch of the harem specifically addressed the women within the harem and how they interacted with one another. Also, women within this branch had a religious duty to fulfill. That duty included participating in the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, as well as charitable giving. Their religious duty helped shape the economic body within the social division of the harem. Khayzuran spent her vast income on philanthropic activities when she performed the *hajj*.⁷⁹ Khayzuran performed the *hajj* several times; each trip she gave a lot to charity. She used her extensive resources to purchase the property of the birthplace of the Prophet and on it constructed the Mosque of the Nativity.⁸⁰ Also on one of her pilgrimages, Khayzuran paid for the construction of several drinking fountains in Mecca.

⁷⁵ Abbott, 114.

⁷⁶ Al-Tabari, 186.

⁷⁷ Abbott, 126.

⁷⁸ Abbott, 124.

⁷⁹ Kennedy, 185.

⁸⁰ Abbott, 117-119.

Later in the Abbasid dynasty, another instance of the importance of the role of the queen-mother occurred during the caliphate of al-Muqtadir. When al-Muqtadir took the throne, his mother, Shaghab, acted as the young caliph's regent. According to Van Berkel, Shaghab did not retain any official regent status, but as her son's trusted advisor and guardian she played a part in the political decision making process. She functioned from within the harem in her son's place and commanded her own staff of secretaries.⁸¹ By remaining within the harem, Shaghab worked within the societal expectations of women remaining separate in public affairs. Several instances occurred in which Shaghab's influence over her son became visible. One instance included the time, "Shaghab actively campaigned in favor of one of her clients, the clearest example being her support of the nomination of her private secretary, Ahmad al-Khasibi, to the vizierate."⁸² Shaghab also had an indirect influence on her son's affairs. According to Van Berkel,

One of al-Muqtadir's main supporters ... was a certain Gharib, an important military leader, who happened to be al-Muqtadir's maternal uncle. Hence Lady Shaghab was able to defend her son's and her own interests through the intervention of her brother, whom she most probably had nominated to this post herself.⁸³

Shaghab's personal appointees to the caliph's advisors allowed her a steady control over the decisions her son made. Shaghab used her influence from within the harem to run state affairs. Khayzuran thus was not alone in finding ways to influence politics outside of the harem.

As queen-mother, Shaghab also had economic standing similar to that of Khayzuran. As queen-mother within the economic organization, Shaghab also earned a large income from her son's caliphate. Several land grants funded her agricultural estate based income.⁸⁴ Also similar to Khayzuran, Shaghab undertook many financial contributions and philanthropic activities.

⁸¹ Van Berkel, 7.

⁸² Van Berkel, 13.

⁸³ Van Berkel, 12.

⁸⁴ El-Cheikh, 10.

According to El-Cheikh, Shaghab donated one million gold *dinars* from her estate every year to the pilgrimage. Her money provided the pilgrims with doctors, and maintained the water reservoirs and tanks.⁸⁵ Through philanthropy, the queen-mothers gave back to the Islamic community through charity during the *hajj*.

The Ottoman Valide Sultan

The overall determining factor in the social, political and economic spheres in the Ottoman harem included the role of the sultan's favoritism, and the role the women's children played in bettering their mothers' position. Favoritism occurred constantly within the harem, as women vied for the attention of the sultan. The concubines, wives, and other women who sexually entertained the sultan often gave birth to a son. Once this occurred, the political career of the mother and her son began. It was the mother's responsibility to arrange their son's harem, court, and any other item needed for his ascension to the throne.⁸⁶ The personal correspondence between Sultan Selim the Grim (r. 1512-1520) and his favorite Hafsa Sultan (d. 1534), demonstrates how a favorite of a sultan might benefit both socially and politically from the birth of a son. According to Barzilai-Lumbroso, "as Selim's wife, Hafsa Sultan was merely one among many, even if she was the favorite, but as the mother of the sultan, she climbed to the very top of the harem hierarchy, and became incredibly powerful."⁸⁷ Aside from relying on sons to better their political positions, women of the harem relied on the marriages of their daughters to important men outside of the harem. Daughters could be married to important royal officials in the capital and throughout the provinces. Cushman argues that "these married princesses often

⁸⁵ El-Cheikh, 10.

⁸⁶ Isom-Verhaaren, 173.

⁸⁷ Barzilai-Lumbroso, 71.

served their mothers as confidants, informants and couriers.”⁸⁸ After Hafsa Hutan’s, son Süleyman, became sultan, she became the *valide sultan*, or queen-mother, of his harem. Her elevated position demonstrated Ottoman women’s reliance on their children to better their political, economic, and social situation.

By using motherhood to shape their social, political and economic environments, women of the Ottoman harem created all-encompassing position. This position resembled the roles of the queen-mother and *qahramâna* of the Abbasid Harem. Historian Beverly W. Cushman argues that the Hebrew Bible’s description of the queen or queen-mother aligns with descriptions of the Ottoman Empire’s queen-mother. Cushman further argues that the title given to the queen or queen-mother included *g^ehîrâ*, “who was notable for her strong character, personal influence and ambitions.”⁸⁹ Aside from the title of *g^ehîrâ*, the queen-mother of the Ottoman harem also held the title of *valide sultan*. The wife or a sultan’s favorite or the mother of the reigning sultan often received the role of *valide sultan* and became the most powerful woman in the empire.⁹⁰ An important similarity between the Abbasid and Ottoman harems included the importance of a mother’s role in advancing her child in the order of succession for either the caliphate or sultanate. Such similarities existed within the story of Khayzuran and her son al-Hādī, in which she struggled to claim the caliphate for her son Harun al-Rashid instead of al-Hādī’s son Jafar.

During the late sixteenth century, the institution of the *valide sultan* began to emerge. The Ottoman harem structure began to change from multiple households to one. Pierce argues that, “with the integration of the harem into the sultanic household, the mother once again became preeminent as the senior member of the royal household, with claim to certain generational

⁸⁸ Cushman, 330.

⁸⁹ Cushman, 328.

⁹⁰ Isom-Verhaaren, 169.

prerogatives over her son.”⁹¹ The sultan’s favorite gained more power over the sixteenth century, especially becoming the *valide sultan*. Such favorites of the sultans included Hurrem, Nurbanu, Safiye, and Kösem. These women became the *valide sultan* after giving the sultan a son. Pierce states that these women

Marshaled many resources that enabled them, first, to work toward achieving their son’s enthronement, and second to maintain her son in power once enthroned and thus to perpetuate her own role. These resources included material ones (wealth, children, servants)... as well as intangible ones (status, political experience, from close exposure to the problems of government, and sometimes direct political power.)⁹²

The resources the *valide sultan* received from her son’s enthronement set a precedent for her role within the social, economic, and political environment of the sultan’s harem. The utmost position of the *valide sultan* invested in raising and protecting the royal family and held administrative control of the everyday functions of the harem.⁹³ The *valide sultan* of the Ottoman harem, like the queen-mother of the Abbasid harem, held the most important role in the harem.

The social and political environments in the Ottoman harem revolved around ensuring a son’s ascendancy to the throne. According to Cushman, there were “a number of cases where a woman of the harem, either concubine, queen, or queen mother, used her position within the harem to assure her son’s accession to the throne.”⁹⁴ Ottoman women’s empowerment did not stem from being the wife of a sultan, but rather from old age and the rearing of sons.⁹⁵ As a wife of the sultan a woman may be situated highly in the social organization of the harem. However, the *valide sultan* of her husband still holds the highest regard within the harem.

⁹¹ Pierce, 110.

⁹² Pierce, 110.

⁹³ Pierce, 126.

⁹⁴ Cushman, 331.

⁹⁵ Barzilai-Lumbroso, 71.

As the current *valide sultan*, the queen-mother held the highest social and political position within the harem. According to Cushman, the *valide sultan* role included “control of access to the inner palace; apart from the king, the one person who had access to both the inner and the outer palace precincts was the Great Lady of the harem.”⁹⁶ The *vailde sultan* also preserved the public and private boundaries of the court. Within the harem, she manipulated the status and power of the royal women especially concerning childbearing and motherhood.

Motherhood played an important role in the social organization of the harem. Women who produced sons held a higher place in the social fabric of the harem than those who produced daughters or had no children at all. During the fifteenth century, slave women and concubines produced the majority of children for the sultans. Some of these women had been captured from war. They acted as a symbol of superiority for the Ottoman Empire. Concubinage to the Ottomans represented a means for childbirth, while marriage acted as a diplomatic tool.⁹⁷ According to Isom-Verhaaren, “Ottoman reproductive practices for the dynasty during the fifteenth century mandated that slave concubines produce one son only.”⁹⁸ The *current valide sultan* of a sultan’s harem maintained the highest rank among those women who vied for the sultan’s attention. The *valide sultan* managed the inner and outer affairs of the harem, including the sultan’s contact with his wives and concubines. She also maintained the policy that after one son to the sultan had been born, the royal woman changed her life’s focus to that of her son’s future and success within the royal household.⁹⁹ The one son policy enforced by the *valide sultan*, allowed women to focus on their son’s enthronement and achieve a higher place within the social, political and economic spheres of the harem.

⁹⁶ Cushman, 330.

⁹⁷ Isom-Verhaaren, 172-173.

⁹⁸ Isom-Verhaaren, 173.

⁹⁹ Cushman, 332.

Like the *valide sultan*, a sultan's favorite also maintained an important position within the social environment of the harem, as well. The *valide sultan* could easily have been the sultan's favorite; however that was not always the case. After the reign of Süleyman, the sultan's favorite began to bear him more than one child. Her influence in the social fabric of the harem increased as she maintained ties to the sultan for long periods of time, whereas previously after the birth of a son a concubine no longer entertained the sultan, but instead focused on the future of the child.

¹⁰⁰ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu documented the honors given to a favorite of a sultan,

I went to the see the Sultana Hafise, favourite of the last Emperor Mustafa . . . I did not omit this opportunity of learning all that I possibly could of the seraglio, which is so entirely unknown amongst us. She assured me that the story of the Sultan's throwing a handkerchief is altogether fabulous and the manner upon that occasion no other but that he send the Kuslir Aga to signify to the lady the honour he intends her. She is immediately complimented upon it by the others and led to the bath where she is perfumed and dressed in the most magnificent and becoming manner. The Emperor precedes his visit by a royal present and then comes into her apartment. Neither is there any such thing as her creeping in at the bed's feet.¹⁰¹

The favorite of the sultan received honors and respect from the sultan. The favorite did not sneak around or play the typical role of a concubine. The favorite of the sultan, like the *valide sultan* maintained a level of honor and respect that reflected her place within the social organization of the Ottoman harem. However, the *valide sultan* still held the most important role.

The role of the *g^ehîrâ*, or *valide sultan*, equally reflected the queen-mother's role in both the social and political environments of the harem. According to Cushman, "she [*valide sultan*] alone had the required status and authority to cross the sacred boundary between the inner and outer courts of the palace."¹⁰² The personal influence and ambitions of the *g^ehîrâ* influenced the

¹⁰⁰ Isom- Verhaaren, 173.

¹⁰¹ Isom-Verhaaren, 180-181.

¹⁰² Cushman, 334.

sensitive relationships between the private and public sectors of politics in society. Personal relationships greatly influenced governmental administration within and outside the harem.¹⁰³ In regards to the inner political organization of the harem, the *valide sultan* managed the status of the royal women and the political power for the benefit of the empire.¹⁰⁴ When a sultan became unseated, his removal depended heavily on the permission and cooperation of the *valide sultan* to enter his quarters of the inner palace. The *valide sultan* held an important role within the harem, but as queen-mother she also played an important role in the politics of her son's ascension to the sultanate.

The politics of the Ottoman court greatly shaped the internal political environment of the imperial Ottoman harem. Reproductive practice in the Ottoman Empire directed women who were sexually available to the sultan to only have one son. When she did it allowed her to focus all of her attention on her son's possible rule in the competition with his brothers.¹⁰⁵ The *valide sultan's* career outside of the harem began with her son's career and the establishment of his own palace. According to Cushman, "within the prince's household, the mother of the prince was the *valide sultan* of her son's court, providing the authoritative link between the dynastic generations."¹⁰⁶ As the *valide sultan* of her son's court, she took on several responsibilities in regard to political, military, economic, and social concerns of her son. When the prince's political career began, his reproductive career also began. Cushman stated that "it was the task of the *valide sultan* of the prince's court to choose and prepare his sexual partners for their role in the preservation of the dynasty."¹⁰⁷ The preparation of a prince's sexual partners demonstrated

¹⁰³ Cushman, 329.

¹⁰⁴ Cushman, 332.

¹⁰⁵ Isom- Verhaaren, 173.

¹⁰⁶ Cushman, 333.

¹⁰⁷ Cushman, 333.

one of the roles of the *valide sultan* that overlapped both the social and political organization of the harem.

Valide sultan played an active political role in their sons' political careers. The *valide sultan* managed the household and the prince's succession to the sultanate. In the process of becoming sultan, if the prince was too young to rule, the *valide sultan* became an active participant in her sons political, military, economic, and social concerns, even going so far as to becoming regent while her son was absent. Furthermore, the *valide sultan* had royal power and authority to fill in where her son seemed unfit to rule.¹⁰⁸ Pierce states that during the first half of the seventeenth century, six sultans were deemed incapable of ruling by themselves, four of whom were fourteen years old or younger.¹⁰⁹ During the reign of Mustafa (d.1640), his mother made the political decisions for her son. According to Pierce, she controlled the appointments to high office.¹¹⁰ Cushman argues that "she served as the principal intermediary among the viziers of the court, family members, and the sultan."¹¹¹ The political connections the *valide sultan* gained outside of the harem depended to a large extent on their son's own political power.

The *valide sultan's* place within the economic environment of the harem worked similarly to that of the Abbasid harem, but also differed in how the wealth was dispersed. The economics of the harem did not reflect the social and administrative hierarchy established in the harems of the Abbasid caliphs. Instead, the Ottoman harem's economic environment reflected a social structure based on wealth and ownership of the women within the harem and those seeking a higher status. Positions within the harem and other institutions had "certain sources of revenue, either taxes of varied sorts, fees levied in return for the performance of official duties,

¹⁰⁸ Cushman, 333.

¹⁰⁹ Pierce, 248.

¹¹⁰ Pierce, 248.

¹¹¹ Cushman, 334.

or salaries paid by the treasury.”¹¹² The revenue generated from taxes, fees, and salaries also appeared in the material and charitable wealth of the women of the harem.

The material wealth of the women of the Ottoman harem reflected their social status, which was closely connected to their economic status. One example of material wealth included the number of slaves and female attendants that the women of the harem possessed. The Imperial Ottoman harem maintained a large female slave population throughout the suites of the royal family and the main compound of the harem.¹¹³ Female attendants and slaves appeared in several descriptions of the Ottoman harem by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in her travels through the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century. In one letter to her sister, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu stated,

I was met at the court door by her (wife of the grand vizier) black eunuch, who helped me out of the coach with great respect and conducted me through several rooms, where her she-slaves, finely dressed, were ranged on each side...but the Greek lady with me earnestly solicited me to visit the kiyàya’s lady...I was met at the door by two black eunuchs, who led me through a long gallery between two ranks of beautiful young girls, with their hair finely plaited, almost hanging to their feet, all dressed in fine light damasks, brocaded with silver.¹¹⁴

Of the three elaborate harems she describes, a common theme of large numbers of beautiful young female slaves and attendants by the tens and twenties are present in each instance. Another type of slave that demonstrated the wealth of the harem included the ownership of eunuchs in the later Ottoman Empire of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Slavery during this time period had diminished, based on the changing perceptions of slavery in Europe and later in the United States. Eunuchs had become a luxury commodity, yet could still be found in the Imperial courts and upper classes of the Ottoman Empire. According to Toledano, officials

¹¹² Esposito, 272.

¹¹³ Toledano, 381.

¹¹⁴ Montagu, 131.

outside the harem presented eunuchs as a gift to the royal family.¹¹⁵ The ownership of rare slaves such as eunuchs and the extravagant number of female slaves and attendants demonstrated one aspect of the material wealth of the imperial harem.

Other forms of material wealth appeared in the architectural design of the inner apartments of the harem, as well as the luxury items owned by the women of the harem. Such luxury items included jewelry, hair pieces, clothes, furniture, rugs, mosaics, china, and cutlery; all of affluent quality. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu describes several instances of the luxurious material wealth owned by the women of the Ottoman harem. In one letter to her sister of a visit with the Sultana Hafitén, Lady Wortley Montagu stated,

Her dress was something so surprisingly rich... she wore a vest called a donalma... it was of purple cloth, straight to her shape, and thick set, on each side, down to her feet, and round the sleeves, with pearls of the best water, of the same size as buttons commonly are... and to these buttons large loops of diamonds.. This habit was tied, at the waist, with two large tassels of smaller pearl, and round the arms embroidered with large diamonds: her shift fastened at the bottom with a great diamond... around her neck she wore three chains, which reached to her knees: one of large pearl, at the bottom of which hung a fine coloured emerald, as big as a turkey-egg; another consisting of two hundred emeralds, close joined together, of the most lively green, perfectly matched, every one as large as a half- crown piece, and as thick as three crown pieces; and another of small emeralds, perfectly rounded.¹¹⁶

The description went on to describe her earrings and hairpiece which if believed was more luxurious. The Sultana's wealth did not stop at her dress, throughout the evening her wealth echoed in the dinner and architecture of the harem. Such extravagance demonstrated just a portion of the material wealth of the women of the Ottoman harem.

The other defining structure of the economic organization of the Ottoman harem included the charitable wealth of the women within the harem. Christine Isom-Verhaaren states that "the

¹¹⁵ Toledano, 386.

¹¹⁶ Montagu, 153-154.

women of the dynasty became more noticeable to the public through their public works, constructing mosques and other public buildings in Istanbul as well as in provincial cities throughout the empire.”¹¹⁷ The most notable women who committed such acts of kindness included the valide sultans, similar to the queen-mothers of the Abbasid caliphate. Further charitable works included contributing to the royal purse that accompanied the procession from Istanbul to Mecca on the hajj. The daughter of sultan Abdülhamid recalled,

A special feature of the Berat Kandili was the arrival and departure of the camel litter carrying the annual gifts in gold and kind from the Sultan to Mecca and Medina... the camel litter (would be brought) into the garden of the Harem with devotional songs ... All the ladies of the harem would visit the litter and contribute cloth for the covering of the litter, which was prepared by a couple of women skilled in sewing and embroidery. The next day the Surre Alayl, or Procession of the Royal Purse, would be organized. The womenfolk of the palace also contributed money and presents in leather pouches to be sent to families in Mecca and Medina as charity. These pouches would be sealed with a special seal bearing the inscription 'come and go in safety'... The Surre Emini.¹¹⁸

The contributions made by the women of the harem to the hajj, as well as public works projects, demonstrated the amount of their charitable wealth. The Ottoman imperial harem had a thoughtful organization to economics of the harem that the women experienced. The main difference from that of the Abbasid harem included the emphasis on the material and charitable wealth of the social branch and the lack of economic importance of the administrative branch of the harem.

The Abbasid Qahramâna

As the head of the Abbasid harem’s administrative branch, the *qahramâna* played an important political and economic role in the overarching social environment all the women lived

¹¹⁷ Isom- Verhaaren, 174.

¹¹⁸ Syed Tanvir Wasti, "The Ottoman Ceremony of the Royal Purse," Middle Eastern Studies, 41, no. 2 (2005), 194.

within. Economically, the *qahramâna*, or the harem stewardess, ran the caliph's household. According to Van Berkel, the *qahramâna* "had to endeavor to procure their portion of state revenues." Some of the state revenue went toward the maintenance of the harem.¹¹⁹ Politically, the *qahramâna* often participated in the functions of state in an indirect manner. The *qahramânas* took a prominent role in the court politics that took place outside of the harem via acting as the messengers of the harem and the court.¹²⁰ They carried confidential documents and notes between the caliph and the caliph's mother. They also acted as intermediaries between viziers and other high-ranking officials. According to Van Berkel, four notable *qahramânas* included Fatima, Umm Musa l-Hashimiyya, Thumal, and Zaydan of al-Muqtadir's harem. These women used their role as the *qahramâna* to influence the political and economic spheres of the harem.

As one of al-Muqtadir's *qahramâna*, Umm Musa, took part in several political affairs based on the functions of her position. One instance included delivering a list of wants from the queen-mother, Shaghab, to the vizier. She acted as intermediary for Shaghab and the officials of the court.¹²¹ According to El-Cheikh, Umm Musa interfered in high-stake political affairs of the caliph and "acquired enough power to stand up against viziers... when she quarreled with them, she managed at times to have them dismissed, imprisoned, tortured and their property confiscated."¹²² This type of influence created an unspoken respect for the women within the harem from the men of the court.

¹¹⁹ Van Berkel, 9.

¹²⁰ El-Cheikh, 10.

¹²¹ El-Cheikh, 47.

¹²² El-Cheikh, 49.

Economically, according to El-Cheikh, Umm Musa “held the purse of the harem and was, generally, in charge of paying the servants in the palace.”¹²³ As the head of the administrative branch of the harem, Umm Musa worked very hard to defend or increase the budget prearranged for her palace staff.

One amusing story is the way in which she burst into a top priority meeting on the defense of the state borders attended by some of the highest officials (the vizier Ali b. Isa, commander-in-chief, Munis, and the chamberlain Nasr), demanding trivial domestic necessities and small pay rises on behalf of her staff. That her requests had to be taken seriously is made explicit in another story recounting how she succeeded in having Ali b. Isa dismissed from the vizierate after he had offended her. One day, she had visited the vizier to discuss the extra allowances for the harem women and the court attendants on the Feast of the Immolation with him. The vizier was not receiving visitors at that hour and his chamberlain politely sent Umm Musa away. When Ali b. Isa later heard of her visit, he immediately sent a messenger to make his apologies. Unfortunately for him, it was already too late. Umm Musa was furious and she lodged her complaints with the caliph and his mother. A few days later Ali b. Isa was discharged.¹²⁴

Instances such as this demonstrates both the economic and political power created from the roles defined by the organization of the harem and where the *qahramâna* fell within it. It also demonstrates the lengths these women went to, to procure funds for the harem. A result of Umm Musa’s efforts “established an endowment for the benefit of that unfortunate member of Muslim harem, the concubine whose children were all girls,” which came as a further result of her unusual interest in the welfare of the women living within the harem.¹²⁵ The *qahramânas* supported the caliphial harem with decadent purchases of textiles and other such lavish goods that further stimulated the local economy, especially in the textiles and luxury goods industries.¹²⁶

¹²³ El-Cheikh, 46.

¹²⁴ Van Berkel, 9.

¹²⁵ Abbott, 16.

¹²⁶ Kennedy, 198.

Another *qahramâna* of al-Muqtadir's harem included Fatima. Fatima had two important allies among the influential military leaders, Bunayy b. Nafis and Qaysar. According to Van Berkel, Fatima gave these men one of her daughters in marriage, and through the marriage, created an important alliance.¹²⁷ The next *qahramâna*, Thumal, acquired the most power of the stewardesses when the caliph appointed her a judge at the *qadis*, Islamic courts.¹²⁸ Specifically, "she became the caliph's deputy in one of the *mazalim* courts in Baghdad in the district of Rusafa."¹²⁹ Thumal acquired judicial power in a system that usually did not allow women an active role in the government.

On the other hand, Zaydan used her influence as jailer of important political prisoners. According to el-Cheikh, Zaydan had her home transformed into a prison after gaining the trust of the caliph. She had the opportunity of acting as a mediator for the prisoners and the caliph. This gave her leverage to build her own influential network based on the moral debt owed her by her prisoners.¹³⁰ Some of her important prisoners included, "the rebellious leaders of Azarbayjan (Yusuf b. Abi l-Saj) d.938 and Mosul (al-Eusayn b. Eamdim) as well as many discharged viziers."¹³¹ The role of the *qahramâna* allowed certain women of the harem to influence the economic environment in the harem and the political environment outside the harem.

Conclusion

The imperial harems of the Abbasid and Ottoman empires worked with in particular political, social, and economic environments. These environments influenced the lives of the caliph's and sultan's wives, concubines, relatives, sons, daughters, and slaves. During the

¹²⁷ El-Cheikh, 47.

¹²⁸ El-Cheikh, 52-53.

¹²⁹ Van Berkel, 10.

¹³⁰ El-Cheikh, 44.

¹³¹ Van Berkel, 9.

Abbasid dynasty of 720-1258, the caliph's harem developed the social role of the queen-mother and the administrative role of the *qahramâna*. Within the economic, political, and social spheres of the Abbasid harem, these roles developed as the most prominent in the harem's two branches, social and administrative. The social branch encompassed all of the caliph's family members, wives, and slave women. The administrative branch encompassed the eunuchs, female attendants, and stewardesses of the harem. Within a caliph's harem, his mother would run all socio-political and economic functions of the harem. She picked his concubines, made political relationships with court officials, and even acted as regent of the empire if the caliph was unable to rule. The queen-mother set a precedent for the other women of the harem to live by.

The Ottoman Empire's imperial harem during the seventeenth and eighteenth century also developed similar roles to the Abbasids. The role of the queen-mother and *qahramâna* combined to form the role of the *valide sultan* in the Ottoman harem. The *valide sultan*, or mother of the sultan acted as guardian of the royal family and chief administrator of the harem. Within these defining points of her position, the *valide sultan* created the sultan's harem, controlled who came and went in the harem, and groomed her son to become the next sultan. This position developed out of the complex political and economic environments that existed within the overarching social hierarchy of the harem.

Although the Abbasid and Ottoman harems occurred over different centuries and under different ethnic groups, both demonstrated several similarities that reflected Middle Eastern and Islamic customs. The roles of the *queen-mother* and *valide sultan* encompassed the Middle Eastern custom of the importance of motherhood. Within both harems, motherhood acted as the key to advancing women's social, political, and economic status within their respective harems. Once a woman bore a son to a caliph or sultan, her whole life became devoted to that of her son

and his political career. Only by advancing her son's chances to the throne, did women create the opportunity to become either the queen-mother or *valide sultan*. Economic similarities between the two harems also drew from Islamic customs. One such custom included philanthropy toward the *hajj*. These similarities remained the same over time, ethnicity, and distance to set a basis for how the imperial harems functioned and influenced the lives of the women living within.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Nabia. *Two Queens of Baghdad: the mother of Harun al-Rashid*. London: Al Saqi Books, 1986.
- Araci, Emre. "Giuseppe Donizetti at the Ottoman Court: A Levantine Life." *The Musical Times*. no. 1880 (2002).
- Barzilai-Lumbroso, Ruth. "Turkish men and the History of Ottoman Women: Studying the History of the Ottoman Dynast'ys Private Sphere Through Women"s Writings." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. no. 2 (2009).
- Cushman, Beverly W. "The Politics of the Royal Harem and the Ccase of Bat-Sheba." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. no. 3 (2006).
- El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "Revisiting the Abbasid Harem." *Journal of Middle Eastern Women's Studies*1, no. 3 (2005): 1-19.
- El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of al-Muqtadir." *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 48, no.2 (2005): 234- 252.
- El Cheikh, Nadia Maria. "The Qahramâna in the Abbasid Court: Position and Functions," *Studia Islamica* 97, (2003): 41-55.
- El Guindi, Fadwa. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999)
- Esposito, John L, ed. *The Islamic World: Past and Present Vol.1*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. s.v. "Harem."
- Esposito, John L, ed. *The Islamic World: Past and Present Vol.1*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. s.v. "Ottomans."
- Esposito, John L, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. s.v. "Ottomans."

- Isom-Verhaaren, Christine. "Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem: The Political Uses of Fabricated Accounts from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-first Century." *Journal of World History*. no. 2 (2006).
- Kennedy, Hugh. *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: the Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty*. New York: De Campo Press, 2004.
- Kimber, Richard. "The Succession to the Caliph Mūsā al-Hādī.", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 2001), 428-448.
- Al-Tabari. *The Early 'Abbasi Empire Vol.2*. Translated by John Alden Williams. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989.
- Still, Judith. "Hospitable Harems? A European Woman and Oriental Spaces in the Enlightenment." *Paragraph*. no. 1 (2009).
- Toledano, Ehud R. "The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Heart of Islam." *Middle Eastern Studies*. no. 3 (1984).
- Van Berkel, Maaïke. "The Young Caliph and His Wicked Advisors; Women and Power Politics under Caliph Al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932)." *al-Masaq* 19, no. 1 (2007): 3- 15.
- Wasti, Syed Tanvir. "The Ottoman Ceremony of the Royal Purse." *Middle Eastern Studies*. no. 2 (2005).
- Wortley Montagu, Lady Mary. *Letters During Mr. Wortley's Embassy to Constantinople [1716-1718]*. *Letters from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: 1709 to 1762*. Edited by Ernest Rhys. London: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1906.