

*Encyclopedia of*  
THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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forced the Don Cossacks to swear an oath of loyalty to the czar, abolished their self-government, and effectively impeded the influx of fugitive serfs into the Don Cossack host. The bloody pacification of the Cossacks in 1708 resulted in thousands of deaths. Some Don Cossacks, led by Ignat Nekrasov, fled to the south toward the Kuban' River. These fugitives later formed the nucleus for a military unit known as Nekrasovites that settled in Ottoman territory in the Danube delta. By the end of the 18th century the Russian government had succeeded in transforming the remaining Don Cossacks into loyal military settlers. The Don Cossacks, at this point, were no longer an object of Ottoman foreign policy.

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**courier network** See MENZIL/MENZILHANE.

**court and favorites** In the early modern period (1500–1800), a particular type of court developed in most empires of the world. On the way to the formation of modern nation-states, royal courts were the primary setting for politics, and court favorites were among the leading actors on the political stage. The Ottoman Empire was no exception in terms of the position and functions of the court and favorites. The Ottoman court defined not only a princely residence but also a larger matrix of political, social, economic, cultural, and religious relations that converged in the sultan's household. Like any pre-modern ruler, the Ottoman sultan was personally the source of secular authority and the principal dispenser of offices, patronage, and power. Hence the Ottoman court was the prime locus of decision making, the major house for preferment, and the main spatial setting for daily rituals of rule. Overall, it fulfilled a series of multiple and sometimes opposing functions. While it enclosed the sultan and thus limited access to his person to a favored entourage, it also served as a means of connecting the Ottoman ruler to the larger political universe that lay beyond the palace gates.

The Ottoman court and favorites began to emerge in the mid-16th century with the consolidation of royal power that was coterminous with the centralization of

the bureaucracy and the sedentarization of Ottoman imperial rule. A defining feature of the early modern court, this sedentarization was realized with the creation of a permanent imperial seat in ISTANBUL'S TOPKAPI PALACE, a residence that outshone those of all former Ottoman sultans. The majesty of this new palatial residence and its inhabitants was guaranteed and accentuated by elaborately tailored rituals of ceremony, power, and hierarchy. The major consequence of these developments was the emergence of a new type of sultan who tried to rule the empire from seclusion, both physical and ceremonial. At the same time, two interrelated factors became crucial for both building and holding political power in this new setting: controlling the points of access to the person of the sultan, and establishing privacy with the sultan and with other powerful figures of the court.

#### THE EARLY OTTOMAN ERA: 1300–1450

The first 150 years of Ottoman rule was characterized by frequent military campaigns, which demanded a ruler and political-military elite to be constantly on the move. During this formative period, the itinerant character of the Ottoman political body also required direct involvement and leadership from the sultans. Although there were capital cities—first BURSA (1326) and then EDIRNE (c. 1360)—that accommodated the royal household, the court of the sultan was not sedentary and moved to new locations that were dependent on military conquests and territorial expansion in the 14th century. Thus, between 1300 and 1450, the itinerancy of the Ottoman ruling body hindered the development of a permanent seat for court and favorites.

#### AFTER THE CONQUEST OF CONSTANTINOPLE: 1450–1550

The Ottoman CONQUEST OF CONSTANTINOPLE in 1453 was a turning point in the making of the empire and court. From this point until the end of the reign of Sultan SÜLEYMAN I (r. 1520–66) came a period of imperial maturation. During this era, the sultans consolidated their imperial-dynastic sovereignty through networks of legitimization by a fully grown bureaucracy and law-making efficacy. The conquest of Constantinople gave the Ottomans a permanent capital city. The construction of the Topkapı Palace in the new capital, or the New Palace as it was called by the Ottomans, began with the initiative of Sultan MEHMED II (r. 1444–46; 1451–81) immediately after the takeover of the city. Although the initial layout of the palace was shaped during Mehmed's reign, successive sultans rebuilt and added sections to the palace. Its construction was rather a process, corresponding to the aspirations of the expanding empire, and it had to be adjusted according to changing conditions. The establishment of the Topkapı Palace as the ultimate residence

of the sultans, together with the increasing seclusion of the sultans in the inner compounds of the palace, were the determining factors for the making of the Ottoman court in the period between 1450 and 1550.

Although the sultans of this period still spent most of their reigns on battlefields, a less visible sultan gradually emerged as part of the new definition of sultanic imagery. The initial signs of royal seclusion and dignity can be found in some of Mehmed II's new practices, which also found their way into his law codes. Perhaps the most significant of these practices was that, beginning with Mehmed II, the sultans ceased to attend the meetings of the Imperial Council.

Constant victories resulting in further territorial expansions during the 15th and first half of the 16th century created a well-fed self-importance and overconfidence among the Ottoman ruling elite. This self-confidence, especially during the reign of Süleyman I, cultivated an appetite for the world domination. The Ottoman sultans' dignity grew, and a well-regulated ceremonial procedure set down the rules of behavior to deal with the sultan. This was manifested in the increasing seclusion of the sultans. The sultans' retinue also grew enormously, and with the reign of Süleyman, the court ceremonial and the fabricated aura surrounding the sultan became more solemn. Süleyman I took another crucial step toward the making of the court. He transferred all members of his royal household from the Old Palace to the new one, and the sultan's household and the business of rule were thus entwined in the Topkapı Palace. The accommodation of the bureaucracy, imperial government, and royal household under the same roof was the most important last step for the making of the Ottoman court as the central stage for power politics between 1450 and 1550.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF THE OTTOMAN COURT: 1540–1600

The next period marked the emergence of the court as the nerve center of political struggles and practical politics. The emergence of the Ottoman court as the new political setting dictated specific rules for both building and practicing power. The sultans of the latter half of the 16th century ruled within the mechanisms and relations dictated by these rules of court politics. The basic imposition of this new political framework was to create agencies to bridge the gap between the ruler, the court, and the outside world. The main agents who bridged this gap were the favorites. Thus the rise of the favorites as agents of power politics was a direct consequence of the emergence of the Ottoman court.

Although SELIM II (r. 1566–1574) was the first Ottoman sultan whose reign began in this new political setting, the overwhelming control of the grand vizier

Sokollu Mehmed Pasha over the business of rule throughout his reign delayed the true emergence of favorites until the beginning of the reign of Sultan MURAD III (r. 1574–1595). The assassination of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in 1579, during the fifth year of Murad III's reign, marks the beginning of favorites as a new power elite within the Ottoman political order.

It is challenging to delineate the borders of the Ottoman court in terms of its social, political, and economic interactions with society as a whole. However, one of the most important parameters for understanding how power was built and practiced in court politics was the concept of access. Since access to the court and access from the court to the outside world were strictly controlled in the Ottoman political order, anyone contending for power in the court—including the sultans—needed to establish a communication network within and outside of the court. Therefore the favorites were not only the inevitable outcome of the changes in the Ottoman political setting, they were also deliberate creations of power contenders at court. In fact, we observe the first examples of such creations in the reign of Murad III.

Of the anti-Sokollu factionalism under Murad III's first years, Şemsi Pasha was one of the first examples of such creations. The main reason for bringing Şemsi Pasha from his retirement to the court of Murad III was his well-known animosity to Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, and with the power invested in him as a favorite, he worked hard to divert the flow of the business of rule toward the sultan. However, the first proper example of created royal favorites was Doğançlı Mehmed Pasha, the governor of Rumelia, whose status as favorite was officially granted by an imperial decree in 1584. The extraordinary privileges given to Mehmed Pasha by Murad III bypassed the well-established patterns of the hierarchical order and cut through the jurisdictions of the different offices of the bureaucracy.

A more accurate picture of court politics includes a number of power foci and a multiple set of relations among them. While some favorites were deliberate creations, others were engendered and gained unprecedented power as a result of their control over the points of access to the court and politics of privacy. The most illustrious examples of these new power elites were the queen mothers and chief eunuchs of the palace. After Murad III moved his mother, Nur Banu Sultan, to the Topkapı Palace, the queen mother became one of the most important power contenders of the court. Successors of Nur Banu Sultan, such as Safiye Sultan, the mother of Sultan MEHMED III (r. 1595–1603) or Kösem Sultan, the mother of Sultan MURAD IV (r. 1623–1640) and Sultan İBRAHİM (r. 1640–1648), were prime examples of queen mothers who concentrated immense power in their hands through their own networks of favorites and protégés.

#### THE TOPKAPI PALACE AND ISTANBUL: 1600–1700

The reign of Sultan AHMED I (r. 1603–1617) constitutes another watershed in the development of the court and the roles played by the favorites in the Ottoman imperial establishment. He was the first sultan in Ottoman history to come to the throne from the inner compounds of the palace without having first served in a province as governor. This lack of experience, which was designed to prepare the princes for a future sultanate, prevented Ahmed from establishing his own retinue that would form the nucleus of his government and court when he came to the throne. Overall, with Ahmed's reign, dynastic succession, power struggles, and patronage networks within the Ottoman political body shifted from a larger setting, which once included the provincial princely households, to a narrower domain consisting of the Topkapı Palace and Istanbul.

Ahmed's reign witnessed the crystallization of the crucial roles played by the favorites. Given the increased invisibility and inaccessibility of the Ottoman sultan during this period, a favorite who managed to enter the sultan's quarters consolidated his power against challengers. In this context, El-Hac Mustafa Agha, who held the office of chief eunuch throughout Ahmed I's reign, became the royal favorite par excellence. Especially after the untimely death of Ahmed's mother Handan Sultan in 1605, Mustafa Agha enjoyed exclusive access to Ahmed since he was now the highest authority in the royal palace. Thanks to his position, he was not only able to attain enormous power and to control almost all petitions and information addressed to the sultan, he also distributed wealth, power and patronage both in the sultan's name and in his own name. It was during the first half of the 17th century that the position and function of the chief eunuch of the palace within court politics were solidly entrenched, and until the end of the 18th century, several chief eunuchs, such as El-Hac Beşir Agha, exercised great power over imperial politics.

However, while the Ottoman court continued to serve as the nerve center of politics until the end of the 17th century, it also remained a contested domain for power struggles in which various factions and patron-client relations limited, and thus often undermined, both the sovereign authority of the sultan and the standing of his favorites. During this period various factions among members of the government, the army, and the religious establishment often allied and worked against the Ottoman rulers and their male and female favorites. Such united factions within the court and the larger political body often managed to make and unmake sultans such as MUSTAFA I (r. 1617–18, 1622–23) and MEHMED IV (r. 1648–87). These factions even led to the first two regicides in Ottoman history: sultans

OSMAN II (r. 1618–1622) and İBRAHİM I (r. 1640–48) were murdered in 1622 and 1648, respectively. Many favorites too lost their lives in the midst of such tumults and as part of the power struggles in the court.

Overall, the early modern Ottoman courtly practice, with embedded royal favorites and constant factionalism, belied the rhetoric of "absolute" and "arbitrary" sultanic power.

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**Further reading:** Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli (1541–1600)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Gülrü Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1923* (London: John Murray, 2005); Baki Tezcan, "Searching for Osman: A Reassessment of the Deposition of The Ottoman Sultan Osman II (1618–1622)" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2001).