

## [Masson on Peirce, 'Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire'](#)

Discussion published by Jessie Frazier on Thursday, December 6, 2018

The following book review from H-War may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Leslie Peirce

Reviewer:

Gemma Masson

**Leslie Peirce.** *Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 368 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03251-8.

**Reviewed by** Gemma Masson (University of Birmingham) **Published on** H-War (November, 2018) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

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Leslie Peirce is well known as a historian whose work reveals the lives of Ottoman women. Her previous work on the Ottoman Imperial Harem (*The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* [1993]) is a staple on Ottoman reading lists as is her work on women in the courts of Aintab (*Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* [2003]), both of which bring the lives of the wider female population into the historical narrative. With the success of the Turkish television series *Magnificent Century* (2011-14), which focused on the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (also known as The Lawgiver) and his family, there had never been a better time for a new assessment of the concubine Hurrem Sultan, also known as Roxelana.

Roxelana rose to become the first, and only, wife of an Ottoman sultan for centuries, achieving the status of queen, previously unknown in the empire. Her story has been told repeatedly by historians. She is credited with beginning what is known in Ottoman history as the Sultanate of Women, a period during which the women of the royal family exerted greater influence and power over political affairs than previously or since. Traditionally associated with weak sultans and cast as scheming seductresses, these women have, to date, been over-romanticized for dramatic effect. Peirce, however, approaches her subject with all of the objectiveness and balanced analysis of an unbiased professional.

By using Roxelana's life as a narrative guide, Peirce follows the story of someone coming into the Ottoman Empire from the outside and learning about her new world as she goes along. This framing device makes the work accessible and readable to both a general audience and historians interested in a revision of this character's history. However, it is a mistake to assume that this book is a narrow microhistory or traditional biography. Peirce contextualizes every step of Roxelana's career in detail,

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linking her life to events across the whole empire and even the globe.

The work proceeds chronologically and begins with Roxelana's capture and sale into the Imperial Harem. The early part of Roxelana's life is generally shrouded in mystery and strongly debated. Peirce addresses all of the claims regarding which nation Roxelana originated from and the path she followed to end up in the harem. Working with such apocryphal information, such as second- and third-hand accounts on the early life of Roxelana, can make the writing of a history sound less plausible but Peirce manages to carry it off successfully. Chapter 3 also covers a period of Roxelana's life for which little specific information is known: the training and lessons new concubines learned during their induction into palace life, including conversion to Islam, language, manners, and needlework. Moving further along the timeline, information becomes more solid as Roxelana is assessed in her role as mother to Ottoman royal children.

Roxelana and Süleyman are well known for breaking with traditions and paving their own way, by engaging in a (as far as anyone can tell) monogamous romantic and sexual relationship. They formed a nuclear family within a polygamous system that allowed little for love and viewed sexual intercourse and reproduction as duties and career moves. These breaks with tradition are what has often led to an overly romanticized interpretation of the royal couple's relationship. While there is no denying that they must certainly have cared for each other very deeply, Peirce manages to maintain realism throughout her writing while also allowing for human emotions to be deduced from historical evidence. Emotion as a motivating factor is something that is often speculative and difficult to incorporate into academic writing of history. It can be achieved by accurately contextualizing and offering several interpretations before settling on the most likely conclusion supported by evidence. This is a method Peirce uses often as well as a refreshing honesty of acknowledging that there are some things historians cannot be sure of.

The latter part of the book focuses on politics in which Roxelana was involved. As a key player, she participated not only in the family politics and the management of the harem but also in the endowment of charitable foundations and as her husband's key correspondent during the long campaign season he spent away from her at war. Roxelana also took a role in international relations by meeting and hosting foreign women who came to Istanbul as well as building a network of correspondence with other foreign queens and nobles, which had a direct impact on international issues, such as diplomacy and trade. Peirce highlights how the stereotype of the Ottoman woman, imprisoned in the harem with little or no agency, is in many cases false, especially for women of Roxelana's social standing. Tracing the path of influence from one woman to international trends and events places this work nicely into the current interest in global history, showing how everything and everyone can be, to a certain extent, connected. It also confirms the idea of the Sultanate of Women in so far as it shows Ottoman royal women becoming more involved in politics and ruling, but without the traditional sexism and misogyny that has often accompanied more traditional narratives of this period. It is not all practical politics however, and Peirce does discuss some of the more emotional and painful aspects of Roxelana's life, such as the loss of several of her children by various means, some political some not. Again, Peirce maintains a balance between presenting genuine human feelings and professionally researched and analyzed academic history.

This book could not have come at a more appropriate time. With the success of *Magnificent Century* and the subsequent television series detailing the loves of other Ottoman women, we need to

bring discussion of these figures back into a balanced and productive scholarly discourse. Peirce's treatment is refreshing and approachable. We can only hope that Peirce proceeds to carry out more work on Ottoman royal women, bringing her significant knowledge in the field to bear upon the history of their lives.

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