

“historical” *shari’as* accommodated the intervention of rulers and administrative elites in the regulation and production of written documents.

These comments should not undermine the conceptual and methodological contribution of Messick’s study. Much like the act of writing about writing which constitutes the core of the book, *Shari’a Scripts* is highly dialogic. As the Postscript attests, the book was written over decades through conversations with and for students and colleagues. Fittingly, the book has no “Conclusion.” ❖

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LESLIE PEIRCE. *Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). Pp. 368. \$32.00 cloth. ISBN 9780465032518.

Students and scholars of Ottoman history will be somewhat familiar with much of the scholarship before us. This is because Leslie Peirce’s earlier volume, *The Imperial Harem: Woman and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, became mandatory reading for understanding the role of women in Ottoman society and solidified her status as one of the most important Ottoman scholars of her generation.

Her new book, *Empress of the East*, not only enlightens us about the lives of women in the Ottoman court, but also shows us how the customs of that court radically changed when the courtesan known as Roxelana (and also by her Ottoman name, Hurrem) became the concubine of the sultan and then his wife. While early diplomatic alliances forged through marriage propelled Ottoman rulers into positions of regional power, marriage was then abandoned in favor of concubinage. However, the marriage between Roxelana and Sultan Süleyman (r. 1520-66) appears to have been a love match, and the union of Süleyman and Roxelana produced six children, five of whom were sons. Her historical import is undeniable: she was the only Ottoman concubine to marry the sultan who was her master; she helped to transform the imperial harem into an institution that wielded political power; and she left a legacy of charitable foundations, for which she advocated.

As for Roxelana’s origins, not much is known about her before she was sold at the slave market to the royal court. Apparently, she was bought at

the slave market by a woman who perceived promise in her. She is likely to have been a Christian from Ruthenia. From the fifteenth century, sultans tended to father children from Christian-born females who were converted to Islam. There are portraits of a woman purporting to be Roxelana, but nothing about her appearance is certain.

As the favored concubine in the sultan's harem, Roxelana defied protocol. The usual career track for a concubine began with sexual submission to the ruler, a man who enslaved her. Islamic law protected concubines and motherhood fostered routes to a secure future, as male offspring were born in line for dynastic succession. It was understood that a concubine mother should have only one son, and that she would then be off limits to other men. This meant, of course, that the ruling elite had relations with more than one concubine. The most important woman in the harem during Süleyman's reign was Hafsa, the Sultan's mother, whose death in 1534 removed a key barrier to his marriage to Roxelana in 1536. Not only was marriage to a concubine an unheard-of practice for Ottoman rulers, but until her marriage, Roxelana remained the only concubine of the Sultan. Further, observers of this unorthodox coupling were aware that the Sultan and Roxelana gave birth to six children. To observers this meant there was a monogamous sultan at the head of the realm, which was unprecedented. Roxelana and Süleyman arguably carved out space for a traditional family consisting of father, mother, and children within an imperial structure that did not prize a nuclear domestic unit. With their marriage and other practices such as charitable endowments and the transformation of the harem, Roxelana and Süleyman overturned long-established traditions.

This is especially visible in Roxelana's fame for funding buildings that included a mosque, hotel for pilgrims to Mecca and Medina, and a hospital. In this way she broke new ground for Ottoman female sponsors of public works. She became a patron of Istanbul's built environment and knew the geography of the city so well that she was able to travel from the location of what is now Istanbul University to the Topkapı Palace in half an hour. She was also a prolific writer of letters, most of which were about her longing for Suleyman and distress at his absence. One example is the following: "Day and Night I burn in the fire of grief over separation from you."

It is clear that Peirce has been able to construct a compelling narrative out of limited documentary sources including letters and accounts of travelers and diplomats. The personage of Roxelana that emerges from *Empress of the East* seems remarkably modern to the reader. Who can read the text without acknowledging the love that she and Süleyman clearly had for

each other and for their children, especially her concern for her husband or son when absent on military campaigns. What is also compelling in Peirce's history is her observation that Roxelana and the Sultan carved out space for a traditional family of father, mother, and children. What is not clear is how this way of living in the sixteenth century might have affected the rest of Ottoman society after the deaths of Suleyman and Roxelana.

Peirce has done wonders with the available archival material. This is a fascinating history that will be of interest not only to historians but also to readers of history generally. ✂

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SIAVUSH RANDJBAR-DAEMI. *The Quest for Authority in Iran: A History of the Presidency from Revolution to Rouhani* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017). Pp. 336. \$99.00 paper. ISBN 9781780765266.

Scholars such as Said Amir Arjomand and Daniel Brumberg have published masterly overviews of Iranian institutions and politics. Yet these and other studies tend either to be rather general – about the system of power and dual leadership – or focused on a limited period of time. Therefore, Siavush Randjbar-Daemi's book on the history of the Iranian presidency from its establishment in 1979 to the present certainly makes a new contribution to the field. The book is the first to focus entirely on the history of the presidential office in Iran, while also analyzing its evolution over a wide period of time.

The Quest for Authority in Iran follows a chronological and thematic approach, tracing the ascent of each Iranian president, his struggle to acquire authority, and the constant effort required to fend off various challenges to his power from within Iran's political system. Randjbar-Daemi argues that these power struggles between presidents and other political actors are due primarily to institutional limitations. For example, the elected president must be approved by an unelected *faqih* (jurist) and is thus subordinated to a religious authority. Through this comprehensive approach, the author is then able to assess the nature of power and authority in contemporary Iran and distinguish between the proclivities of *chap* (left) and *rast* (right) – i.e. reformist and conservative – political parties. Although perhaps an easier reading grid for the western