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1 Introducing the Chief Harem Eunuch

Let's start with the cover illustration. It shows the most powerful Chief Harem Eunuch in Ottoman history, el-Hajj Beshir Agha, leading three sons of Sultan Ahmed III through the Third Court of Topkapı Palace. The year is 1720. The princes are about to be circumcised in the Circumcision Room in the palace's Fourth Court. Each of them is held on either side by a vizier, or government minister. Beshir Agha is right at the front of the painting, flush with the picture frame. Even the grand vizier, supposedly the most powerful figure in the Ottoman Empire at the time, walks behind him, holding the right arm of the oldest prince. What is the message of this painting? El-Hajj Beshir Agha is the most powerful person in the palace, more powerful than the grand vizier or any of the princes. He holds the princes' fates and, by implication, the fate of the empire in his hands. But he also guards the barrier separating the princes and the viziers from the viewer. In this sense, he is both a central figure and a marginal figure, both the master of the princes and viziers and their servant. He is also the only dark-skinned figure in the painting, yet he is leading all the pale-skinned figures.

Does this image seem contradictory? It should. The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Empire's imperial harem embodied all these contradictions. He was a castrated African slave, permanently separated from his family of origin and incapable of founding a family of his own, yet someone who was on intimate terms with the Ottoman royal family, to the extent of announcing the birth of a prince or princess to the sultan, overseeing the princes' education, representing the bridegroom at the wedding of a princess, or informing the sultan of his mother's death. The very existence of such a person might seem outlandish and incomprehensible to us, and yet the office of Chief Harem Eunuch existed for more than three hundred years, building on precedents that may have gone back to the earliest human civilizations. This book's task is to explore this office and the characteristics of the people who held it over these three centuries, examining how the office changed in response to the transformations in Ottoman society and Ottoman court life that occurred during this lengthy period.

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Introducing This Book

Astonishingly enough, no book-length study has yet been devoted to this pivotal yet enigmatic figure. The Turkish historian İ. H. Uzunçarşılı provided the best description of the office's duties in a seminal study of Ottoman palace institutions published in 1945.[1] Since then, various works on Topkapı Palace and on the Topkapı harem, both scholarly and popular, have discussed the role of both African and white palace eunuchs, including the Chief Eunuch.[2] A popular Turkish overview of the harem eunuchs appeared in 1997, while an English-language book based on secondary sources appeared in 2016.[3] What I attempt here is a study of the office's development based on primary sources. But this is, I hope, more than simply a research monograph. It is also a wide-ranging consideration of how the development of the office of Chief Harem Eunuch paralleled the empire's development during this era.

We start by framing the subject: Which societies used eunuchs? Where did they come from? What functions did they perform? Then we narrow the focus: Where did the practice of employing African eunuchs, as harem guardians and in other capacities, originate, and how did the Ottoman Empire come to adopt it? Finally, what was the Ottoman harem like, and what place did it occupy in the imperial palace? These institutional concerns occupy Chapters 1–3.

We then turn to the career of the Ottoman Chief Harem Eunuch specifically. Rather than simply tracing the accomplishments and failures of all seventy-six Chief Eunuchs, one after another, I attempt to show how the careers of key Chief Eunuchs reflected and were affected by transformations in Ottoman political, social, and institutional history. The office of Agha of the Abode of Felicity (Ağa-yı Darü's-sa'ade, or Darüssaade Ağası) was founded just after Sultan Murad III (r. 1574–95) moved into the harem and began to spend most of his "free" time there, more or less abandoning his privy chamber in the palace's Third Court. This move made the head of the harem eunuchs, Habeshi Mehmed Agha, one of the people he saw most frequently. Around the same

[1] İ. Ḥ. Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilatı* (Ankara, 1945; reprinted 1984, 1988), 72–83.

[2] Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (New York and Cambridge, MA, 1991), 43, 49, 73, 74, 79, 89–90, 102, 111, 115, 117, 121, 133–35, 160–64, 174, 177–83, 225, 230; Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, NY, 1993), 11–12, 46, 49, 125, 135–37, 195–96, 206, 235, 241–42; M. Çağatay Uluçay, *Harem II* (Ankara, 1971), 117–26; N. M. Penzer, *The Harem: An Account of the Institution as It Existed in the Palace of the Turkish Sultans, with a History of the Grand Seraglio from Its Foundation* (Philadelphia, 1936; 2nd ed. London, 1965; reprint New York, NY, 1993), especially 117–92.

[3] Sema Ok, *Harem Dünyası: Harem Ağaları* (Istanbul, 1997); George H. Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Sultan* (London, 2016).

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time, not coincidentally, he made Habeshi Mehmed superintendent of the imperial pious foundations for the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, known in Ottoman Turkish as Evkafü'l-Haremeyn; this post had previously been held by the head of the white eunuchs of the Third Court.

Chapter 4 dissects the career of Habeshi Mehmed Agha, who set a number of lasting precedents in the course of his seventeen years in office. He died shortly before the onset of the prolonged crisis of the seventeenth century, which coincided with the reigns of a series of youthful sultans who either died heirless or left behind only young children. The sultan's mother and favorite concubines competed to fill the resulting power vacuum, and the Chief Harem Eunuchs became their allies in this effort. Chapter 5 explains how the chaotically competitive atmosphere of the crisis years gave rise to factionalism within the harem and how the Chief Eunuch participated in, and manipulated, this brand of factionalism.

The reforms of the Köprülü family of grand viziers mark the end of the crisis, and Chapter 6 demonstrates how they channeled their own clients into the office of Chief Harem Eunuch or, at the least, promoted Chief Eunuchs whose priorities matched their own. With the Köprülüs, the office of Chief Harem Eunuch begins to intersect directly with the corps of eunuchs who guarded the Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina, for the Köprülüs introduced the practice of naming a former Chief Eunuch to head the tomb eunuchs. In general, the Köprülüs tried to ensure the grand vizier's control over all appointments and decisions made in the imperial capital. As Chapter 7 demonstrates, though, only after the middle of the eighteenth century was the grand vizier truly able to transcend the Chief Eunuch's influence, and even then, the Chief Eunuch was far from powerless. One of his unfailingly reliable channels of influence, at least before the westernizing reforms of the nineteenth century, was Egypt, which supplied grain to the Evkafü'l-Haremeyn and provided deposed Chief Harem Eunuchs with a comfortable place to spend their retirement. Accordingly, Chapter 8 addresses the Chief Eunuch's connections to this critical Ottoman province.

Despite the largely chronological flow of the discussion in Chapters 4–8, several key themes keep surfacing: the Chief Eunuch's relationship to the sultan and his mother, his concern with the Evkafü'l-Haremeyn, the interplay of several different kinds of palace factionalism, the Chief Eunuch's competition with the grand vizier, and his connections to Egypt. I have chosen to emphasize these themes in my treatment of the office of Chief Harem Eunuch, rather than trying to impose an externally derived theoretical framework on the subject. Above all, I seek to show how the office of Chief Harem Eunuch mirrored the Ottoman Empire's experience of a wrenching, multifaceted crisis during the seventeenth century, followed by gradual adaptation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and economic prosperity,

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an expansion of international trade, and a growing regularization of imperial institutions in the later eighteenth, before the nineteenth-century reforms transformed the imperial administration.

Three of the book's last four chapters treat themes that run through most of the three hundred years during which the office of Chief Harem Eunuch was active while also considering how the story of the Chief Harem Eunuch came to an end. Chapter 9 examines the Chief Eunuch's considerable impact on Ottoman religious and intellectual life through the establishment of educational institutions, religious complexes, and libraries, many of which are still functioning today. In Chapter 10, we see how the westernizing reforms of the nineteenth century drastically curtailed this kind of society-wide influence. For the last seventy-five years of its existence, roughly 1834–1909, the office of Chief Harem Eunuch was purely a palace position, largely irrelevant to the broader concerns of empire.

In view of these dramatic shifts in the Chief Eunuch's status and fortunes over three centuries, Chapter 11 asks how the Chief Harem Eunuch is remembered, and how he fashioned his own memorials through miniature paintings, on the one hand, and tombs and gravestones, on the other. These considerations provide an appropriate segue to the Conclusion, which considers the Chief Eunuch's place in the *longue durée* of Ottoman history and, even more broadly, in world history.

Why Eunuchs?

Nowadays, many students, to say nothing of the reading public, find it impossible to understand why eunuchs were ever an institution. Castration, they believe, was a dastardly punishment that the victim must have resented for the rest of his life, dreaming ceaselessly of revenge. But how could this have been the case when much of the world, excluding western Europe and possibly the precolonial Americas, employed eunuchs in positions of trust close to the ruler? Eunuchs were a deeply rooted institution in most, if not all, of the great Mediterranean and Asian empires: the ancient Mesopotamian empires, beginning at least with the Neo-Assyrians (911–612 BCE), all the Persian empires (Achaemenid, 550–331 BCE; Parthian, 240 BCE–220 CE; and Sasanian, 220–651 CE), the Roman and Byzantine Empires (27 BCE –1453 CE), all Chinese empires beginning with the Zhou (1045–771 BCE) and ending only with the overthrow of the Qing in 1911, and even many sub-Saharan African kingdoms, which will be discussed in Chapter 2. The only ancient Old World civilization about which we are unsure is Pharaonic Egypt.[4] The tradition

[4] See Chapter 2 on Egypt and the "Eunuchs in Africa and Related Topics" and "Eunuchs in Other Societies" sections of the Works Cited.

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continued under the major medieval and early modern empires of Asia and Africa, including all Islamic empires from at least the Abbasids (750–1258 CE) onward. Even in the kingdoms of western Europe, where such "guardian" eunuchs were unknown, the eunuch singers known as *castrati*, a possible evolution of castrated church singers in the Byzantine Empire, were performing in the church choirs of the Vatican by the mid-sixteenth century and were wildly popular on opera stages until the 1820s.[5] In fact, the eunuch institution was so widespread that the appropriate question may be not why so many societies employed eunuchs but why certain others did not.

So why did these polities use eunuchs, and court eunuchs in particular? Apart from the western European kingdoms, all of them shared three features that required the use of eunuchs. First, they all featured more or less absolute rulers who lived in isolation from their subjects and were sometimes quasi-deified. Orlando Patterson has noted that "rulers who claim absolute power, often with divine authority, seem to prefer – even to need – slaves who have been castrated."[6] Because of the risk of assassination or rebellion, access to the ruler had to be strictly controlled, fueling a need for servants and confidants with no family or locational ties that would dilute their utter loyalty to the sovereign. Eunuchs, and particularly eunuchs who came from outside the empire or from its peripheries, supplied this need.

But the absolute ruler's need for eunuchs went beyond the practicalities of protection. Absolute rulers inhabited a quasi-sacred, inviolate space, comparable to the inner sanctum of a temple. Eunuchs provided a sort of *cordon sanitaire* around this taboo precinct, so that it could not be "polluted" by contact with commoners. In their mediating role, they arguably resembled demigods or angels.[7] Yet they differed from angels and demigods in occupying a dangerously ambivalent zone, for they could not become so intimate with the "sacred" ruler that they would diminish his status while, at the same time, losing their connection with the common population. Figuratively, then, they walked a fine line between the ruler's sacred purity and the mundane impurity of the mass of his subjects.

[5] Helen Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife* (Oxford, 2011), especially 13, 15–16, 18, 68, 76–77, 183; Neil Moran, "The Choir of the Hagia Sophia," *Oriens Christianus* 89 (2005): 1–7; Georges Sidéris, "Une Société de ville capitale: les eunuques dans la Constantinople byzantine (IVe–XIIe siècle)," in *Les Villes capitales au Moyen Âge – XXXVIe Congrès de la SHMES (Istanbul, 1er-6 juin 2005)* (Paris, 2006), 262. I thank Professor Sidéris for providing me with a copy of his article.

[6] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 323.

[7] Kathryn Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, IL, 2003), chapters 4, 7; Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (London, 2008), 86, 89, 106–7, 113–15.

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As to the second shared feature, all these empires practiced seclusion of royal women as a means of controlling dynastic reproduction. A designated, circumscribed place for all the ruler's potential sexual partners (and their numerous servants and assistants) made it possible to limit the number of children, particularly sons, that each wife or concubine bore and to ensure that these women never had sexual partners apart from the ruler. This was the famous harem or "inner sanctum" institution, practiced not only in Islamic empires and kingdoms but also in imperial China and in the Roman, Byzantine, and ancient Persian empires. Even if some of these empires cultivated marriage alliances with neighboring polities, the foreign princesses entered the harem after their weddings, often sharing quarters with concubines. In this scheme of things, eunuchs policed the boundary between the women's space and that of the ruler and his (castrated or uncastrated) male pages.[8]

The third shared feature is somewhat less obvious: many, if not all, of these regimes employed elite military-administrative slaves, who in Islamic empires were usually called *mamluk*s or *ghulam*s. The late David Ayalon has argued that the use of eunuchs invariably accompanied the use of these uncastrated elite male slaves, if not for military purposes, then as pages to the ruler. His reasoning is logical: a large corps of young male recruits, usually from far-flung lands, usually ignorant of the language and customs of their new masters, inhabited a barracks or similar quarters for training with older recruits who could easily abuse them, sexually and otherwise. The ruler therefore stationed eunuchs in the barracks to prevent this eventuality.[9] Their function in the barracks mirrored their role in the women's quarters: they policed the sexuality of the inhabitants. Ayalon's analysis points up the fact, also noted by scholars of the Ottoman Empire, that the space occupied by the ruler and his pages resembled a "male harem."[10] In the Ottoman palace, this male harem – the Third Court, including the sultan's privy chamber – had its own corps of eunuchs who might compete with the harem eunuchs.

These three features describe the distinctive practices of the ruling elite in polities that employed eunuchs. Broader socioeconomic considerations, however, may help to explain why castration was accepted by the societies that these elites ruled. Consider the life of the average subject of a premodern polity in Asia, eastern Europe, or Africa. Such a person would have lived in a rural region and had a short life expectancy – hardly beyond thirty or forty in most

[8] Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 136.
[9] David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs, and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem, 1999), 33–34, 45–58.
[10] Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 11; Koçi Bey, *Koçi Bey Risaleleri*, ed. Zuhuri Danışman, prepared by Seda Çakmakoğlu (Istanbul, 2008), 103.

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cases – subject to disease, food shortages, natural disasters, and the myriad accidents that could occur in a premechanized rural environment.

The life of an elite slave was very different. An elite slave lived in the ruler's palace, had decent, even elegant, clothing, never went hungry, received the best medical care available, and in many (though not all) cases, acquired an education. And if he were castrated, that slave would be able to function in very close proximity to the ruler. Despite the physical hardships that eunuchs suffered, castration might have seemed an acceptable price to pay for this kind of security and privilege – at least to the ruling elite and society at large; the eunuchs themselves, virtually all of whom were slaves, almost never got to choose whether or not to be castrated. In the context of a premodern or early modern society, castration resembled a security clearance. There were serious costs involved, but there were also tremendous benefits.

The Harem, Gender, and Sexuality

The harem women's sexuality was, obviously, essential to dynastic reproduction. Still, it was a tightly controlled sexuality. The Ottoman imperial household sought to ensure that imperial wives and concubines produced only a limited number of potential male heirs to the throne. This guaranteed the succession while avoiding the chaos of large numbers of sons, with their mothers' active support, competing for the throne. As Leslie Peirce has pointed out, the Ottoman harem by the late sixteenth century – just when the Chief Eunuch became an influential figure – featured a rigid age and status hierarchy among its inhabitants. Imperial wives and concubines who had borne male children held pride of place, with a pecking order descending from the mother of the eldest son to that of the youngest. The sultan's mother dominated all, particularly during the crisis years of the seventeenth century, when these formidable women often ruled de facto on behalf of their young sons. This period came to be called "the sultanate of women" as a result.[11]

As in other absolutist empires, the harem eunuchs occupied an asexual liminal space between the male harem – that is, the Third Court, inhabited by the ruler and his male pages – and the female harem. As Peirce explains, "With the exception of the sultan, only those who were not considered to be fully adult males were routinely permitted in the inner worlds of the palace: in the male harem household, boys and young men, eunuchs, dwarves, and mutes; and in the family harem household women and children."[12] As her description implies, the harem eunuchs almost never entered the living quarters of the palace women but remained in the corridors just inside the harem entrance, where they had their

[11] The term was coined in 1916 by the historian Ahmet Refik (Altınay) (1881–1937).
[12] Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 11.

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lodgings.[13] The Chief Eunuch acted as a sort of liaison between the top woman in the harem – either the sultan's favorite concubine or, by the seventeenth century, his mother – and the sultan and his male pages, at least some of whom were white eunuchs from the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Both the African and the white eunuchs could function in this space because their sexuality had never fully developed. They arguably comprised not so much a third gender as an arrested male gender, much as if they were young boys, with all the androgyny that young boys can exhibit. Shaun Marmon has eloquently compared harem eunuchs to the three boys in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, who "act as neutral messengers between the dangerous and disorderly female world of the Queen of the Night and the sunlit, rational world of Sarastro." "The eunuch/child," she adds, "is an intermediate being, safe in both worlds and belonging to neither."[14] Just so the harem eunuchs, like perpetual children, were able to mediate between the taboo space of the female or male harem and the public spaces of Topkapı Palace. In this sense, too, they resembled guardian demigods or angels, as noted above.

This liminality has been one of the main reasons that eunuch gender has proven so challenging, not only for the societies in which eunuchs have historically existed but also in scholarship on the subject. There is still disagreement on whether court eunuchs, who generally dressed in clothing designed for men, were male-gendered or belonged to some other gender entirely; this is the case above all in scholarship on the Roman and Byzantine Empires, where eunuchs have been most thoroughly examined from the perspective of gender.[15] If court eunuchs were male-gendered, then theirs was not a normative adult male gender but a nonnormative or alternative male gender. As such, it quite obviously subverted societal norms of masculinity, which, in most Islamic societies, included the ability to father children and to grow facial hair. This subversive gender, moreover, resulted from surgical intervention. Premodern and early modern societies worldwide perceived a need to intervene to complicate normative gender categories. But in so doing, they were also emphasizing these normative categories, for eunuchs, in a sense, enforced them. As Marmon stresses, the figure guarding the boundary between two realms must be comfortable in both while belonging to neither. It was as if the eunuch, by being neither/nor, sharpened the boundary between either/or.

[13] Ibid., 136.
[14] Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (New York, NY, 1995), 90.
[15] Sidéris, "Les Eunuques dans la Constantinople byzantine," 245; Pascal Boulhol and Isabelle Cochelin, "La Réhabilitation de l'eunuque dans l'hagiographie antique (IVe–VIe siècles)," *Studi di antichita cristiana* 48 (1992): 48, 49–76; Ringrose, *Perfect Servant*, chapters 1–3, 6; Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, 3, 5, 34–35, 50–51, 52, 96–118, 129; Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL, 2001), 96–102, 218–44.

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Distinctive Features of Ottoman Eunuchs

The Ottoman eunuch system was heavily influenced by those of earlier Islamic polities, including the Abbasids (750–1258 CE), the Great Seljuks (ca. 1037–1153), and their various subordinate dynasties in Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia; the Seljuks of Rum (ca. 1077–1308) in Anatolia; and the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) in Egypt, Syria, and southeastern Anatolia. But it also bore the influence of non-Muslim dynasties, most notably the Byzantines, who, as Chapter 3 will point out, were direct models for Ottoman court institutions, although certainly not the only models. There were key differences in the Byzantine eunuch institution, particularly the fact that Byzantine eunuchs were not radically castrated, as their counterparts in Islamic empires were, and that Byzantine eunuchs could join the church hierarchy and even become patriarchs of the Orthodox Church, at least before the thirteenth century CE or thereabouts.[16] In Islamic empires, by contrast, eunuchs could not hold official religious appointments, such as judge (*qadi*) of a Muslim law court or Chief Mufti, the official who dispensed legal decisions (*fetvas*) in accordance with Islamic law. On the other hand, they could be, and often were, extremely well read in Islamic law and theology, and might amass impressive libraries of texts in these and other fields. They could even found mosques, Qur'an schools, and madrasas, or Islamic theological seminaries. Their engagement in intellectual life stands in marked contrast to the experience of their counterparts in Ming dynasty China (1368–1644 CE), where eunuchs were sometimes totally uneducated and even illiterate, despite the wide variety of political and economic roles they performed.[17] Eunuchs also served in military roles in a number of these polities, including the Byzantine Empire, imperial China, and most medieval Muslim empires. In some of the medieval Muslim empires, military eunuchs could serve in the harem and vice versa.[18] The Ottomans, however, introduced a rigid barrier between the two categories.

The Evkafü'l-Haremeyn. Although the Chief Harem Eunuch's duties by definition revolved around the palace harem, the office of Chief Harem Eunuch owed its existence to the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. It was created in 1588, when Sultan Murad III transferred supervision of the imperial pious foundations for the holy cities from the head of the white Third Court

[16] Ringrose, *Perfect Servant*, chapter 5; Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, chapter 5 and 120, 123; Sidéris, "Les Eunuques dans la Constantinople byzantine," 253, 256.
[17] Shih-shan Henry Tsai, "Eunuch Power in Imperial China," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (Swansea, 2002), 227–29; Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty* (Albany, NY, 1996), 42–43 and chapters 4–9.
[18] Ringrose, *Perfect Servant*, 130–41; Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, 5, 35, 40, 97, 116, 120, 121, 122, 126, appendix 2 passim; Tsai, *Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, chapter 4. On the medieval Islamic empires, see Chapter 2 of the present work.

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eunuchs to the head of the mostly African harem eunuchs. As noted above, these endowments were known as Evkafü'l-Haremeyn, or Awqaf al-Haramayn in Arabic, literally, "endowments of the two *harams*," since the Great Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina were both considered *harams*, or spaces that were sacred, on the one hand, and forbidden to outsiders and the ritually impure, on the other hand. The Arabic word comes from the same root as harem (*harim* in Arabic), which is similarly a taboo space that is off-limits to outsiders – in this case, adult males, particularly those not related to the ruler by blood.

Supervision of the Evkafü'l-Haremeyn was a key part of the Chief Eunuch's duties almost as long as the office existed; the office lost much of its influence toward the middle of the nineteenth century, just as a Ministry of Pious Endowments was taking shape as part of the wave of top-down reforms. Reminders of the palace harem's link to the holy cities were ubiquitous in Topkapı Palace: the foundation documents were stored in cupboards lining the walls just inside the harem entrance,[19] and the tiles adorning the harem's entry corridor were painted with scenes of the Ka'ba in Mecca. The Chief Harem Eunuch spent much of his time in office worrying about collecting revenues earmarked for the endowments from the far-flung provinces of the empire. Even if he were deposed and exiled to Egypt, he could hardly forget the Evkaf since the villages that produced grain for Mecca and Medina were located in that province.

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, as Chapter 6 will make clear, deposed Chief Harem Eunuchs were often reassigned to Medina to head the corps of eunuchs who guarded the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, a venerable institution dating to the late twelfth century. This practice underlined the importance of the Evkafü'l-Haremeyn to the Chief Eunuch, even well after deposition. "Making the *hijra* to the Prophet" – referring to Muhammad's emigration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE – symbolically transformed a harem eunuch's identity; eunuchs were usually manumitted when they left the palace, and in Medina, they took enslaved African women as wives. They thus claimed, for the first time in their lives, the status of free, mature Muslim males. This was a mark of spiritual fulfillment that had obvious implications for the eunuchs' sexuality as well, although it is impossible to tell if married tomb eunuchs were sexually active in any fashion.[20] The paradox is striking: in the presence of the dead, the eunuchs enjoyed the perquisites of family life, at least in appearance, whereas at the site of dynastic reproduction,

[19] Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremony, and Power*, 180.
[20] John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia* (Beirut, 1972), 342, 344; Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah*, memorial ed. (London, 1893; reprint, New York, NY, 1964), I: 372.

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they maintained a monklike bachelorhood. Yet it makes sense at the same time: the eunuchs' sexuality, real or fictive, was no threat to the Prophet, who was dead and whose succession had long since been determined, at least so far as Sunnis were concerned. As free Muslim men, moreover, they were fitting companions to the Prophet.

We are justified, in any case, in saying that the Chief Harem Eunuch's mind was to some degree always on "the other harem," that is, the sacred precinct encompassing the Prophet's mosque and tomb in Medina, even if the Muslim holy city seemed to recede amid the daily exigencies of palace life. But by invoking the link to Medina, and to the pious endowments for the holy cities more specifically, I hope to stress the point that the office of Chief Harem Eunuch was an administrative position inextricably tied to these foundations. After the conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, the Ottoman sultan drew a great deal of prestige from his role as Khadim al-Haramayn, or "servant of the two *haram*s," referring to Mecca and Medina. Coincidentally or not, the Arabic word for "servant," *khadim*, came to designate a eunuch as early as the Abbasid era; by the Ottoman era, it was a virtual synonym.[21] The Chief Eunuch was likewise the "servant of the two *haram*s," only in his case, the two in question were the palace harem and the Prophet's tomb in Medina. In some respects, we can see the Chief Harem Eunuch's career unfolding between these two harems, although the balance between the two shifted over the years.

Because he guaranteed dynastic reproduction while, at the same time, controlling the pious foundations for the holy cities – two pillars of Ottoman legitimacy – the Chief Eunuch was indispensable to Ottoman authority, at least until the westernizing reforms of the nineteenth century. This fact helps to explain why the office of Chief Harem Eunuch persisted for more than three hundred years, despite the excesses of individual holders of the office, the machinations of political enemies within and outside the palace, and the attempts of certain grand viziers, particularly in the eighteenth century, to bar the importation of African eunuchs into imperial territory.

The evolution of the Ottoman harem institution, which made the Chief Harem Eunuch's role possible (and necessary), is the subject of Chapter 3. Before we get to the harem, however, we need to ask a fundamental question, namely, why were almost all Chief Harem Eunuchs, and all Ottoman harem eunuchs more generally, African? This is the subject of Chapter 2.

[21] Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs, and Sultans*, appendix A.

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