

Architecture and Interiors of the Harems

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Introduction

We started *Letters and Gifts*, this volume's prequel, by identifying a small but regal portrait as Sultan Selim III's mother, Mihrişah Valide Sultan (d. 1805).¹ We argued that this painting commission was an instance of dual portraiture and that when Selim sat for a self-portrait, his mother did so as well – a practice unheard of among Ottoman dynastic women that preceded her. In the immediate aftermath of Selim's accession to the Ottoman throne in 1789, many other analogous moments of tandem patronage of mother and son followed suit. This volume begins with the quick, post-accession building process of their own quarters inside the imperial palace's extant and quite clustered harem section in Istanbul.² They constructed two rooms each, around and especially above an extant courtyard that would afford them multiple views of their capital, the heart of their empire. Building atop existing structures was a practical choice in this hermetic space situated on a fifteenth-century blueprint but it also foregrounded their panoptic gaze upon Istanbul, on which the duo had already devised an infrastructural overhaul during Selim's princely seclusion. Jointly, they would populate the suburbs by expanding the water network, construct military barracks, mosques, manufacturing facilities, and renovate royal retreats across the city to affirm their presence for their subjects.

Architecture and Interiors commences with a detailed description of Selim's and Mihrişah's little studied additions to the imperial palace's harem. When they were constructed in the span of a year, the four rooms were collectively conceived and visually interlinked, manifesting the most striking examples of the Ottoman baroque and rococo domestic interiors. Each room followed a template (structured around a prominent, centralized alcove) and each contained an inscription band carefully composed to promote both the individual and joint virtues of the sultan and his mother. These poetic inscriptions also spoke directly about the decorative program, describing the intention behind the

¹ Deniz Türker and A. Hilâl Uğurlu, *Letters and Gifts in the Harems of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Valide Sultan is an honorific title given to the mother of ruling sultans. We will refer to Mihrişah interchangeably as *valide* throughout this Element.

² There were two main imperial palaces in Istanbul, and thus two primary imperial harems, both built in the mid-fifteenth century by Mehmed II. The old palace (*eski saray*), located in the heart of the capital, served as the primary residence of the imperial family until the reign of Süleyman (r. 1520–66). The new palace (*saray-ı cedid*), initially used primarily for governmental purposes, later became home to the harem of the reigning sultans, while the old palace was thereafter used as the residence of the female members of previous sultans. Today, the new palace is known as the Topkapı Palace, which can cause confusion, as from the eighteenth century onward, the Topkapı (or Topkapısı) Waterfront Palace referred only to the waterfront palace complex located in the palace gardens at Sarayburnu. In this Element, we refer to the new palace as the Topkapı Palace, as is customary today, and the palace complex near the tip of the peninsula as the Topkapısı Waterfront Palace (*sahilsarayı*).

murals of landscapes and architecture, myriad colors and materials used, as well as the extravagant stucco projections of floral reliefs. The inscriptions were also portentous (written in the first two years of Selim's accession), foretelling the many philanthropic initiatives that their owners would soon undertake. One of the couplets in the new *valide* quarters, conjoins the patronage of Selim and Mihrişah, and sees them build "many mosques and sanctuaries for the needy and the destitute" and "inspire courtiers around them to do the same."³ The windows of these new chambers, especially those belonging to Mihrişah, looked out toward the two coasts of the Golden Horn estuary: Eyüp and Hasköy. She would soon commission the building of her own soup kitchen (*imaret*) and tomb on the northwestern side of the waterway, adjacent to the extant tomb and mosque of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari (one of Prophet Muhammed's early supporters, who died in the first Arab siege of Constantinople, and lent his name to the neighborhood). It was and continues to be one of the most important Muslim pilgrimage destinations, but it was also a site that stood to legitimize Ottoman dynastic rule by hosting the sword-girding ceremony of the new sultans.⁴ Situated on the northeastern side of the estuary, directly across from the holy site of Eyüp, she commissioned a mosque, which is recorded in her foundation register as part of her charitable complex in Eyüp. In the *valide*'s mind, the waterway in between the two sites did not bisect but bound them. This mosque stood within the courtyard of the expansive military barracks her son was constructing for his reformed corps of miners and bombardiers. In addition to the mosque, Mihrişah financed the water infrastructure for the barracks complex and built several fountains. These contributions prominently showcased her authority as the *valide* and her close collaboration with her son in his efforts to reform and modernize the state.

"Ocular politics," central to Gülru Necipoğlu's analysis of the Ottoman imperial palace's earliest, fifteenth-century incarnation, continues to drive the architectural orientation of its eighteenth-century patrons.⁵ Like their ancestors, these modern rulers were deliberate in setting the locations from which they projected their gaze. They knew that their residences were their embodiments. This volume elaborates on royal paintings from Selim's reign that speak to this very association of the built environment with the ruler's presence, not only his but also those of his male and female dynastic agents. Günsel Renda's

³ The appendix provides all four of these poetic inscriptions and their translations as important primary sources of an imperial vision as well as records of little-known spaces that have been undergrounding extensive renovations. Appendix 2, couplets 5 to 7.

⁴ Cemal Kafadar, "Eyüp'te Kılıç Kuşanma Törenleri," in *Eyüp: Dün/Bugün Sempozyumu, 11–12 Aralık 1993*, ed. T. Artan (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1994), 50–61.

⁵ Gülru Necipoğlu, "Framing of the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Palaces," *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 303–42.

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foundational scholarship on the Ottoman Greek court painter Konstantin Kapıdağlı and on eighteenth-century murals on the walls of Topkapı's harem constituted staple references.⁶

A poignant letter that Mihrişah asks her son to address to her own steward (*kethüda*), the illustrious and feared Yusuf Ağa, exemplifies both the value that dynastic rulers attributed to imperial sightlines, the very act of prolonged looking and seeing without being seen, as well as the embodied significance of royal monuments. It appears that while sitting inside one of the shoreline pavilions of the imperial palace (likely Yeni Kiosk discussed in this volume) with her son and contemplating Selim's new mosque in Üsküdar situated across the sea from them, Mihrişah voiced her desire for a second minaret to be placed on her Hasköy mosque, the structure that she saw from the windows of her harem chambers.⁷ In her request, she referenced other *valide* mosques that in previous centuries broke the rule which reserved multiple minarets for sultanic commissions alone. She was likely thinking of the Atik Valide Mosque, built by the sixteenth-century *valide* Nurbanu Sultan (d. 1583). Located in Üsküdar, near Selim's new mosque, the structure had been enhanced with a second minaret when Nurbanu's son, Murad III (r. 1574–1583), ascended the throne in 1574.⁸ Selim granted his mother's wish without objection.

In this volume, we foreground the domestic environments that Selim, his mother, sisters, and female cousins devised for themselves at the end of the eighteenth century. These lavishly intimate royal sites, designed with clearly defined private and public functions, are now largely lost or inaccessible, making their study all the more significant. The first half of the narrative is a close architectural study of the changes that the new sultan, Selim and his mother, Mihrişah undertook in the imperial palace, first in the extant harem and next on the fourth courtyard (along the sea walls) at a section of the palace that was known as the shoreline palace of the Cannon Gate (*Topkapısı Sahilsarayı*). Although the eighteenth-century proliferation of waterfront palaces in Istanbul may suggest to some a decline in Topkapı palace's prominence, they never sought to leave the palace which had long served as the sultans' principal

⁶ Günsel Renda, Serpil Bağcı, Filiz Çağman, et al., *Osmanlı Resim Sanatı / Ottoman Painting* (Istanbul: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism Publications, 2006); Günsel Renda, "Ressam Kostantin Kapıdağlı Hakkında Yeni Görüşler," in *19. Yüzyıl İstanbul'unda Sanat Ortamı* (Istanbul: Sanat Tarihi Derneği, 1996), 139–62; Günsel Renda, "Renaissance in Europe and Sultanic Portraiture," in *The Sultan's World: The Ottoman Orient in Renaissance Art*, ed. Robert Born, Michale Dziewulski, and Guido Messling (Brussels and Krakow: Center for Fine Arts and National Museum in Krakow, 2015), 37–43.

⁷ A. Hilâl Uğurlu, "Siyâsî Bir Projenin İzinde Bânilik: Mihrişah Vâlide Sultan'ın İmar Faaliyetlerini Yeniden Okumak," *Belleten* 80, no. 287 (2016): 85–102.

⁸ Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, 2nd ed. (London: Reaktion Books, with the University of Chicago Press, 2011), 268.

residence and was a defining architectural emblem of Mehmed II's post-conquest capital.⁹ The mother and son amended the palace and initiated a completely new segment, which would enhance their visibility from the capital's heavily crisscrossed waterways. The second half of the narrative focuses on the now lost imperial retreats and women's mansions, first along the shores of the Golden Horn and later the Bosphorus. It aims not only to pinpoint their exact locations and establish their connections to other significant imperial sites but also to explore alternative sources – such as the *kethüda* letters, sketches, and memoirs of Grand Tourers – to gain deeper insights into their interior layouts and exterior designs. The waterfront mansion of Selim III's cousin Esma (the Younger) in Eyüp occupies most of our discussion in Section 3 than the residences of other dynastic women because of the inordinate number of extant letters from Esma and her mother, Sineperver, to her designated steward, Ömer Ağa, which detail the prolonged process of its construction. These letters reveal the involvement of Ottoman Greek builders (*kalfas*), cost of construction, use of salvaged material, and the engagement of women as patrons at every stage of the building process. The letters are also eye-opening in exposing the competitive spirit with which these women commissioned their homes: They desired that they outmatch the style of structures and objects, which they observed in the mansions of their female peers with whom they shared considerable social hours.

Following in the footsteps of his grandfather Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730), Selim also appears to have mandated married women of the dynasty (mainly his sisters and female cousins) to energize the capital through their patronage circles and associated object commissions and building projects.¹⁰ Selim's historical modeling of his rule on those of his predecessors, especially with regards to the increased public presence of dynastic women, has been skillfully rendered by Tülay Artan in her magisterial doctoral work, “Architecture as Theater for Life,” alongside her more targeted, in-depth studies

⁹ Nilay Özlü, “Dolmabahçe'den Evvel Dolmabağçe . . .,” in *Dolmabahçe: Mekânın Hafızası*, ed. Bahar Kaya (Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2005), 39–62. For the proliferation of waterfront palaces in eighteenth-century Istanbul, see: Tülay Artan, *Architecture as a Theatre of Life: Profile of the Eighteenth-Century Bosphorus* (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989); Shirine Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

¹⁰ For an analysis of patronage and cultural production during the reign of Ahmed III, see Artan, *Architecture as a Theatre of Life*; Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures*, 45–78. For the court's residence in Edirne between 1656 and 1703, see Metin Kunt, *The Sultan's Court: Politics and Society in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112–29; İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi: Karlofça Anlaşmasından XVIII. Yüzyılın Sonlarına Kadar* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1978); and Akdes Nimet Kurat and John Selwyn Bromley, “The Retreat of the Turks,” in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 7, ed. J. O. Lindsay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 157–219.

on the wealth and material life of women like Esma the Younger, Hatice Sultan, and others.¹¹ It is in this period that the suburban shorelines of Eyüp became a venue for architectural competition between these women.

An analysis of the spatial distribution of the existing and newly built imperial palaces, mansions and kiosks at the end of the eighteenth century reveals a clustering in specific urban locales, particularly within Istanbul's city walls near the Golden Horn in the vicinity of Eyüp, along the Bosphorus coast between Beşiktaş and Bebek, and on the hilltops overlooking their own waterfront palaces (Figure 1). In this Element, while we acknowledge the significance of their palaces in Istanbul *intra muros*, where the married women of the dynasty spent their winters, we have deliberately chosen not to address them due to lack of detailed information; numerous cost estimate registers in the Ottoman archives provide no insight into either the architectural organization or the use of these palaces. Furthermore, foreign travelers' accounts are largely absent, as such visitors were typically hosted in the newly fashioned waterfront mansions of these women, rather than their intramural palaces.

These intramural sites given to the dynasty's women are particularly significant due to their proximity not only to the old palace (*eski saray*), the first palace built by Sultan Mehmed II in 1454 soon after the conquest of Istanbul, where the mothers of these women, if still alive, typically resided, but also – perhaps even more importantly – to Topkapı Palace, where Selim and Mihrişah spent their winters. Being close to Topkapı, the epicenter of political power, ensured that these women maintained access to the central authority and influence of the Ottoman court, further solidifying their position within the imperial hierarchy. Although the exact locations of these are unclear, historical evidence nevertheless allows us to approximate their siting. For example, the choice location of the urban mansion belonging to Esma the Younger, situated along the imperial avenue called Divanyolu (or *Mese*, the main artery of the Byzantine Constantinople), would later house the tomb complex of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839), Esma's brother.

¹¹ Artan, "Architecture as a Theatre of Life"; Tülay Artan, "18th Century Ottoman Princesses as Collectors: From Chinese to European Porcelain," *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2010): 113–47; Tülay Artan, "Noble Women Who Changed the Face of the Bosphorus and the Palaces of the Sultanas," *Biannual Istanbul* 1 (1993): 87–97; Tülay Artan, "The Kadırga Palace: An Architectural Reconstruction," *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 201–11; Tülay Artan, "From Charismatic Rulership to Collective Rule: Introducing Materials on Wealth and Power of Ottoman Princesses in the Eighteenth Century," *Toplum ve Ekonomi* 4 (1993): 53–94; Tülay Artan and Halil Berktaş, "Selimian Times: A Reforming Grand Admiral, Anxieties of Re-Possession, Changing Rites of Power," in *The Kapudan Pasha: His Office and His Domain* (Rethymnon: Crete University Press, 2002), 7–49; Tülay Artan, "Eyüp'ün bir Diğer Çehresi: Sayfiye ve Sahilsaraylar," in *Eyüp: Dün/Bugün*, ed. Tülay Artan (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1994), 106–15.

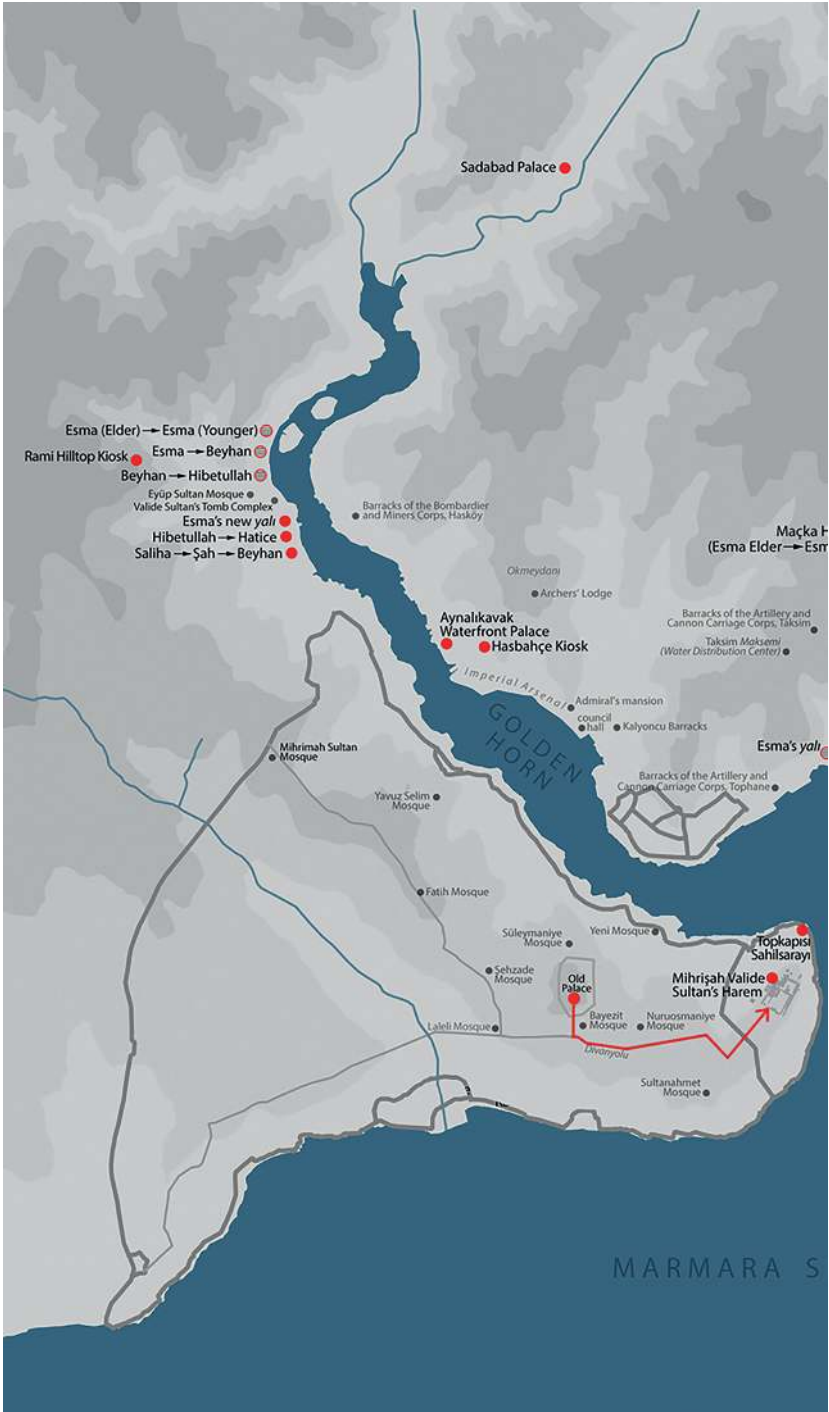


Figure 1a Map of Istanbul showing the eighteenth-century imperial palaces and waterfront mansions appointed to or built by the members of the Ottoman dynasty. (Prepared by Murat Tülek)



Figure 1b

To a certain extent, we conceive of *Architecture and Interiors* as a cartographic reference that lays out the complicated ownership of waterfront mansions by the dynasty's women, especially in Eyüp, but also along the Kuruçeşme-Beşiktaş segment of the Bosphorus coast (Figure 1). We roughly follow the traditional path taken by many Ottoman İstanbulite authors, such as Eremya Çelebi Kömürçüyan (d. 1695) and Ghukas İncicyan (d. 1833), as well as European figures like the French diplomat and scholar Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier (d. 1817) and the French artist and imperial architect Antoine Ignace Melling (d. 1831), in their textual and visual narratives of the city. This journey begins at Sarayburnu, the tip of the historic peninsula where the Ottoman Palace is located, continues toward the Golden Horn, and then moves to the northern shore of the Bosphorus.

The extensive restoration notes of Selma Emler (d. 2001), a consummate architect and under-recognized restorer of the imperial palace, with her collaborator Mualla Eyüboğlu (d. 2009), meaningfully rendered for us segments of the Topkapı Palace that are inaccessible today.¹² *Architecture and Interiors* is dedicated to Emler's memory. Moreover, we were able to layer our findings on the architectural changes in Eyüp and the Bosphorus shores thanks to the urban histories written by Artan and Shirine Hamadeh.¹³ Their dedicated work on the capital's physical growth in part due to the expansion of its architectural patrons and their network allowed us to build our findings on the relationships between dynastic homemakers and the interconnected community of non-Muslim builders. Artan and Hamadeh's expansive understanding of the eighteenth-century Ottoman capital also enabled us to argue that dynastic patrons strategically crisscrossed between the sites designated for them, in order to regulate their public visibility. The online project entitled "Map of Women Patrons' Structures in Ottoman Istanbul" has served as an important visual resource for our research.¹⁴

A majority of *Architecture and Interiors* is also an analysis of the Ottomanization of baroque and rococo forms in global circulation during the reigns of Selim and Mihrişah. We focus our analyses on their particularly ebullient uptake inside imperial residences, especially intimate spaces within the harem that both physically (through inscriptions) and metaphorically (through visual representations) spoke of the taste and symbols of their patrons. Baha Tanman's extensive knowledge of eighteenth-century waterfront mansions and palaces has deepened our understanding of the era's aesthetics of the

¹² Selma Emler, *Topkapı Sarayı restorasyon çalışmaları* (Istanbul: Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi, 1963).

¹³ Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures*.

¹⁴ Firuzan Melike Sümertaş and Murat Tülek, *Map of Women Patrons' Structures in Ottoman Istanbul*, 2017, accessed February 5, 2025, <https://saltonline.org/projects/kadinbaniyapilari/>.

interior. Ünver Rüstem’s volume on the more visible, public-facing Ottoman baroque monuments of the period has been supplemental for our approach.¹⁵

This volume, like its prequel, re-energizes extant eyewitness accounts alongside underused archival records to illuminate the role of Ottoman imperial women in the empire’s capital, specifically during Sultan Selim III’s rule (1789–1807). His mother Mihrişah, as the female head of the dynasty, presided over the lives of a group that included his half-sisters, Şah, Beyhan, and Hatice, and their mothers, who were the consorts of Mustafa III (Selim’s father, r. 1757–74) just like Mihrişah. The *valide*’s oversight extended over Selim’s female cousins, Esma, the Younger, and Hibetullah, alongside their mothers, who were the consorts of Abdülhamid I (Selim’s uncle, r. 1774–89) (Figure 2).

The power dynamics varied for Ottoman imperial women depending on their origins and the stages of their lives. Women born into the dynasty – such as Şah, Beyhan, Hatice, Esma, and Hibetullah – held secure and relatively untouchable positions, especially when supported by strong connections and networks. In contrast, women of slave origin, who were given to or purchased by senior harem members, aligned their loyalties with specific cliques from the outset, gradually amassing power until, one day, they rose to the position of *valide*. This role represented the pinnacle of authority and influence for a woman – and indeed any man other than the sultan – to attain in the empire. The duration of this topmost status varied dramatically, lasting anywhere from a few days to

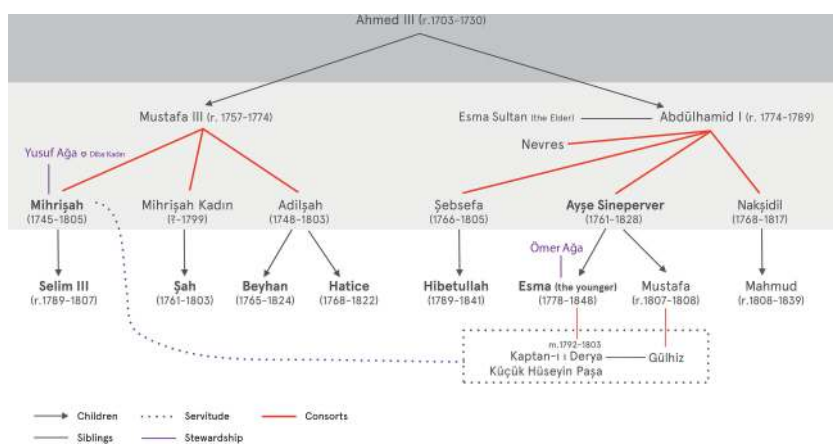


Figure 2 Family tree illustrating the imperial women connected to Sultan Selim III’s reign.

¹⁵ Ünver Rüstem, *Ottoman Baroque: The Architectural Refashioning of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019).

several decades. For example, Mihrişah enjoyed this position for sixteen years (1789–1805), but Sineperver held it for only fourteen months (1807–1808).

Whether mother or daughter of a sultan, each woman was keenly aware of her social standing and recognized the stages of her life when her power was at its zenith. Consequently, she shaped her material investments and structured her sociopolitical relationships with this awareness in mind. We examine a section of this continuous history of imperial women and intentionally adopt a microhistorical approach, seeking to reevaluate the presumed anonymity and invisibility of Ottoman dynastic women of this period. While *Letters and Gifts* closely examine the many facets of their power and the networks they actively cultivated, this volume focuses on the material worlds they constructed around themselves. Far from being hidden in their harem quarters (a regrettably long-sustained Orientalist trope), these women interacted frequently with individuals of similar imperial stature. Their letters and expense accounts – consistently analyzed throughout these volumes – document their dynamic intra-court mobility, which allows us to map their diverse networks and identify the familial practices (intermarriages, the exchange of cultivated female servants, and constant gifting) that supported their political ambitions.

1 A New Sultan and a New *Valide* in the Imperial Palace's Harem

On April 11, 1789, four days after her son Selim ascended the imperial throne, Mihrişah moved from the old palace (*eski saray*), where she had resided for the last four years, processing to the empire's official palace (today known as Topkapı) as was customary for the sultan's mother (*valide alayı*).¹⁶ As more than three decades had passed since the last *valide* procession had occurred and a *valide* had last presided over the imperial harem, a slight alteration was made in the order of ceremonial protocol to speed up Mihrişah's relocation to the palace before her son's sword-girding ceremony in Eyüp. Her expenses in her first week as the *valide* indicate that she paid individual visits, bearing gifts, to each of Selim's three adult sisters, Şah, Beyhan, and Hatice – who were born to two other consorts of Mustafa III – in their respective intramural palaces.¹⁷

¹⁶ After the death of Mustafa III, Mihrişah was given permission by Sultan Abdülhamid I to remain in the New Palace to accompany her son. However, following the discovery of an attempt to overthrow Abdülhamid by a group of Prince Selim's confidants, led by Halil Hamid Paşa, Selim was confined under stricter conditions in the *kafes*, and Mihrişah was sent to Eski Saray. See Fikret Sarıcaoğlu, *Sultan I. Abdülhamit: Kendi Kaleminden Bir Padişahın Portresi* (Istanbul: TATAV, 2002), 73; Feridun M. Emecen, ed., *Taylesanizâde Hâfız Abdullah Efendi Tarihi: İstanbul'un Uzun Dört Yılı (1785–1789)*, 2 vols. (Istanbul: TATAV Yayınları, 2003), 1:364–65; for the decision regarding the date of Mihrişah's return to the New Palace, see BOA HAT 181–8253; for the details of the ceremony, see *Teşrifati Naim Efendi Tarihi*, Millet Kütüphanesi Pertevpaşa 644 [no:421], 4.

¹⁷ Mihrişah's expenditures for individual visits were itemized in an account register as: 29,000 *guruş* for Şah, 45,500 *guruş* for Beyhan, and 37,250 *guruş* for Hatice. (See BOA TSMA d 5856) The