

## The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem

Eunuchs were a common feature of pre- and early modern societies but are now poorly understood. Here, Jane Hathaway offers an in-depth study of the chief of the African eunuchs who guarded the harem of the Ottoman Empire. A wide range of primary sources are used to analyze the Chief Eunuch's origins in East Africa and his political, economic, and religious role from the inception of his office in the late sixteenth century through the dismantling of the palace harem in the early twentieth century. Hathaway highlights the origins of the institution and how the role of eunuchs developed in East Africa, as well as exploring the Chief Eunuch's connections to Egypt and Medina. By tracing the evolution of the office, we see how the Chief Eunuch's functions changed in response to transformations in Ottoman society, from the generalized crisis of the seventeenth century to the westernizing reforms of the nineteenth century.

JANE HATHAWAY is professor of history at Ohio State University and one of the world's leading authorities on the Ottoman Empire and on eunuchs in Islamic societies. She is the author of five books, including *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule* (2008), which won the Turkish Studies Association's M. Fuat Köprülü Book Prize. She also authored the article "Eunuchs" for the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, a seminal reference work. Her research has been funded by prestigious grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Institute for Advanced Study.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-10829-5 — The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem  
Jane Hathaway  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

The Chief Eunuch of  
the Ottoman Harem  
*From African Slave to Power-Broker*

---

Jane Hathaway  
*The Ohio State University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-10829-5 — The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem  
Jane Hathaway  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107108295](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107108295)

DOI: 10.1017/9781316257876

© Jane Hathaway 2018

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow, Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-107-10829-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-10829-5 — The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem  
Jane Hathaway  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

In memory of Meg Hathaway (1927–2014)

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-10829-5 — The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem  
Jane Hathaway  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

---

## Contents

---

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of Maps</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Note on Transliteration and Diacritics</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiv
1 Introducing the Chief Harem Eunuch	1
2 The African Connection	12
3 Arrangement in Black and White: Eunuchs in the Ottoman Palace	40
4 The Creation of the Office of Chief Harem Eunuch and the Career of Habeshi Mehmed Agha	55
5 The Crisis Years of the Seventeenth Century	77
6 Yusuf Agha and the Köprülü Reforms	105
7 A New Paradigm: El-Hajj Beshir Agha and His Successors	129
8 Exile and the Kingdom: The Chief Harem Eunuch and Egypt	160
9 The Chief Harem Eunuch and Ottoman Religious and Intellectual Life	193
10 Reformed Out of Existence: The Dénouement of the Chief Harem Eunuch	221
11 Memorializing the Chief Harem Eunuch	248
12 Conclusion	275
<i>Appendix: Ottoman Chief Harem Eunuchs</i>	283
<i>Works Cited</i>	287
<i>Index</i>	304
	vii

## Figures

---

3.1 Plan of Topkapı Palace	<i>page</i> 46
4.1 Habeshi Mehmed Agha's mosque in Istanbul's Çarşamba district	71
5.1 Inscription on the façade of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, naming el-Hajj Mustafa Agha as superintendent of the mosque's construction	90
9.1 El-Hajj Beshir and Moralı Beshir Aghas' <i>sebil-mektebs</i> in Cairo	199
9.2 El-Hajj Beshir's complex near Topkapı Palace and the book depot inside the mosque	206
10.1 Photographs of Nadir Agha in the palace and as an older man	241
11.1 Habeshi Mehmed Agha	251
11.2 Osman II with harem and Third Court eunuchs	254
11.3 El-Hajj Beshir Agha in procession with the Chief Threshold Eunuch	257
11.4 El-Hajj Beshir Agha presents the grand vizier's gifts to Sultan Ahmed III	259
11.5 Two palace eunuchs	262
11.6 El-Hajj Mustafa's and el-Hajj Beshir's tombs on either side of the tomb of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari	266



## Maps

---

0.1 The Ottoman Empire in the mid-sixteenth century	<i>page</i> xv
0.2 The Ottoman Balkans in the late sixteenth century	xvi
2.1 Ethiopia and adjacent regions, showing major ethno-regional groups	21
4.1 Istanbul, showing neighborhoods where Chief Harem Eunuchs endowed structures	70
8.1 Egypt, showing subprovinces	166
8.2 Cairo, showing neighborhoods where harem eunuchs were active	174

## Tables

---

4.1 Major officers of the harem and Third Court during the reign of Murad III	<i>page</i> 56
5.1 Major officers of the harem and Third Court during the crisis era	79
6.1 Major officers of the harem and Third Court in the late seventeenth century	106
7.1 Major officers of the harem and Third Court in the early to mid-eighteenth century	130
10.1 Major officers of the harem and Third Court from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries	222

## Acknowledgments

---

This book has been a long time coming, and I have many people and institutions to thank. I have used the notes for this purpose where appropriate, but they cover only part of the debt.

Early research for this project was funded by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies. I began writing the book while holding the Douglas Southall Freeman Professorship in History at the University of Richmond, Virginia, and finished drafts of most of the chapters while holding the Gladys Kreible Delmas Membership at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ. I am grateful to Ohio State's College of Arts and Sciences for allowing me to accept these positions and for funding a Special Assignment in spring 2017 that allowed me to complete a full draft of the book.

I am grateful to the staff and directors of the Başbakanlık Ottoman Archives, the Süleymaniye Library, the Köprülü Library, and the Topkapı Palace Museum Library and Archive in Istanbul for access to their collections, and to Dr. Anthony Greenwood and the staff of the American Research Institute in Turkey's Istanbul branch for providing a haven on numerous occasions. Over the years, a number of colleagues and students have provided access to research materials. Here, I must single out Muhammad Husam al-Din Ismail Abd al-Fattah, Günhan Börekçi, Emine Fetvacı, Betül İpşirli Argıt, George Junne, Svetlana Kirillina, Mikhail Meyer, Özgül Özdemir, Doğa Öztürk, and Ata Potok. For helping me track down eunuch monuments and tombs, I thank Caroline Finkel (who also gave the book manuscript a close read), Catalina Hunt, Davidson McLaren, Darin Stephanov, and Professor Abd al-Fattah's graduate students at Ayn Shams University.

I thank Nicolas Vatin for inviting me to deliver a series of lectures, sponsored by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, at the Sorbonne in spring 2008 that were instrumental in my conceptualization of this project. I likewise thank the late Patricia Crone for commissioning my short biography of el-Hajj Beshir Agha (2006), which served as a forerunner for this project.

xii Acknowledgments

I am grateful to two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press and, above all, to my retired colleague Stephen Dale, who during summer 2017 read the entire book manuscript and offered chapter-by-chapter comments. Needless to say, responsibility for any errors or omissions is entirely mine. Laura Seeger of Ohio State’s Goldberg Center for Excellence in Teaching proved vital to the preparation of the maps and images.

I could not have completed this book without the support of my husband, Robert (“Mimar Bob”) Simkins, and Pelin and Tasha, the worthy successors to the legendary Beshir and Stella. I dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, Meg Hathaway, the only member of my family to have read all my books. The last time I saw her, in May 2014, she asked me if I had another book for her to read. Here it is, Mom, only a few years late.

## Note on Transliteration and Diacritics

---

Since I use both Ottoman Turkish and Arabic primary sources in my research, I constantly confront the question of which transliteration system to employ in my publications. Since this is a book about an Ottoman official who served mainly in the imperial capital (even though he might be exiled to Cairo), I have chosen to give pride of place to Turkish transliterations. Thus, I use Turkish transliteration for the names and offices of Ottoman officials, most Ottoman institutions, titles of books composed in Ottoman Turkish, and the Islamic (*hijri*) months. I use Arabic transliteration for Arabic book titles and the names of most Arabophone authors. I follow the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, although, in consultation with my editor, I have elected to omit diacritics apart from *‘ayn*, which is indicated by a backward apostrophe, and *hamza*, which is indicated by a forward apostrophe.

Names of Islamic institutions and offices that can be found in a present-day English dictionary (e.g., *hadith*, *madrasa*, *qadi*, Sufi) retain the spellings found there.

Otherwise, the sounds indicated by the distinctive letters of the modern Turkish alphabet are as follows:

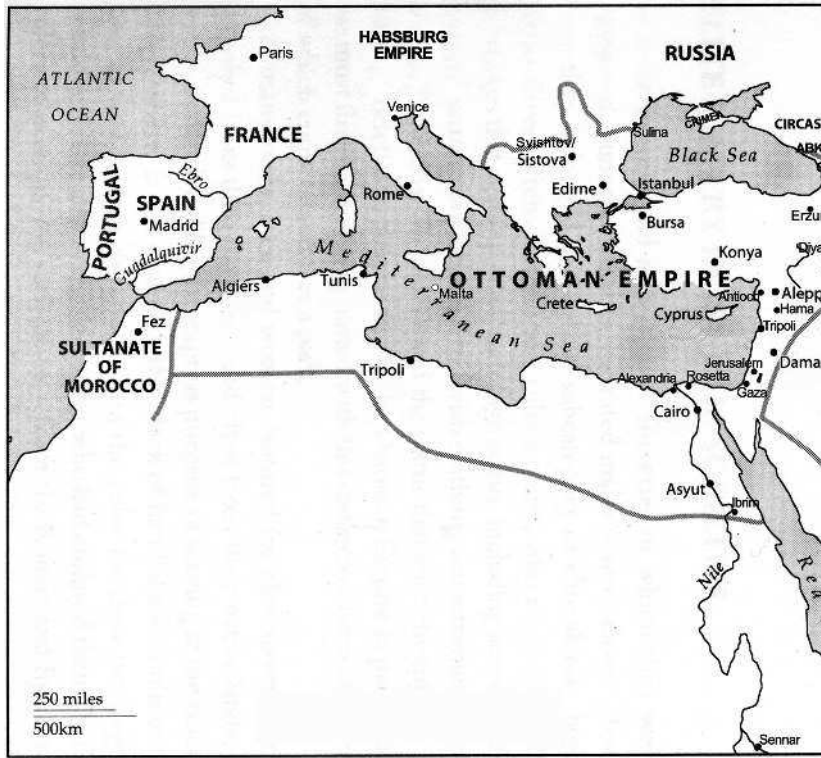
Letter	Sound
c	j
ç	ch
ğ	elongated vowel, as in “espagnol”
ı	short <i>u</i> , as in “put”
ö	<i>er</i> , as in “pert,” or French <i>oe</i>
ş	sh
ü	long <i>u</i> , as in “cute,” or French <i>u</i>

## Abbreviations

---

BOA	Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives, Istanbul)
<i>EI</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 2nd edition (Leiden, 1960–2004)
<i>EI</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam Three</i> (Leiden, 2007–present)
MD	Mühimme Defteri (Register of Important Affairs)
<i>TDVİA</i>	<i>Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi</i>

Because I find the classification abbreviations currently employed by the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi to be a source of considerable confusion, I do not use them in my notes. They are, however, provided in the Works Cited, in parentheses after the title of each major classification.



Map 0.1 The Ottoman Empire in the mid-sixteenth century.



Map 0.2 The Ottoman Balkans in the late sixteenth century.