



The Concubine, the Princess, and the Teacher: Voices from the Ottoman Harem

Douglas Scott Brookes

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In the Western imagination, the Middle Eastern harem was a place of sex, debauchery, slavery, miscegenation, power, riches, and sheer abandon. But for the women and children who actually inhabited this realm of the imperial palace, the reality was vastly different. In this collection of translated memoirs, three women who lived in the Ottoman imperial harem in Istanbul between 1876 and 1924 offer a fascinating glimpse 'behind the veil' into the lives of Muslim palace women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The memoirists are Filizten, concubine to Sultan Murad V; Princess Ayse, daughter of Sultan Abdulhamid II; and Safiye, a schoolteacher who instructed the grandchildren and harem ladies of Sultan Mehmed V. Their recollections of the Ottoman harem reveal the rigid protocol and hierarchy that governed the lives of the imperial family and concubines, as well as the hundreds of slave women and black eunuchs in service to them. The memoirists show that, far from being a place of debauchery, the harem was a family home in which polite and refined behavior prevailed.

Douglas Brookes explains the social structure of the nineteenth-century Ottoman palace harem in his introduction. These three memoirs, written across a half century and by women of differing social classes, offer a fuller and richer portrait of the Ottoman imperial harem than has ever before been available in English.

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