

A Life Without You is Unbearable: Ḥafṣa Sulṭān's Letter to Sultan Süleymān

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Context

The *Vālide Sultān*, the mother of the reigning Ottoman sultan, held the highest position attainable by a woman within the imperial hierarchy and played a central role in both the dynastic household and palace governance. As the sultan's mother, she stood at the apex of the female court, wielding considerable symbolic and administrative authority. From the late sixteenth century onward, the office—designated in contemporary sources as *vālide-i pādīshāh* (“mother of the sultan”), *vālide-i sa‘ādet-penāh* (“mother of the refuge of felicity”, an honorific for the sultan), and *mehd-i ‘ulyā-yı salṭanat* (“the exalted cradle of the sultanate”)—conferred upon its holder exceptional prestige and established her as the most esteemed and influential figure within the imperial *harem*.¹ Court protocol strictly regulated all interaction with the *Vālide Sultān*; no individual was permitted to approach, speak to, or sit in her presence without her explicit consent, underscoring the ceremonial and political weight of her position.²

Among the women who shaped this powerful institution, Sultan Süleyman's (r. 1520–1566) mother, Hafsa Sultān (d. 1534), stands out as one of its most notable figures. Hafsa Sultān³ entered the Ottoman dynasty as a concubine of Şehzade Selīm (later Sultan Selīm I, r. 1512–1520). Although the details of her early life remain obscure, she emerges in the historical record as one of the most influential women of the sixteenth-century Ottoman court. Archival documents refer to her as Ayşe Hafsa bint ‘Abdülmu‘īn⁴, yet no reliable information survives regarding her family background.⁵ Hafsa

¹ For further reading on the imperial harem in the Ottoman Empire, see: Leslie P. Peirce, *Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, New ed, Studies in Middle Eastern History (Oxford University Press, 1994).

² Ali Akyıldız, “Vālide Sultan,” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul, 2012), 42:494.

³ In accordance with Ottoman tradition, all slave girls were given new Muslim names upon entering the dynasty. Hafsa was named after a prominent figure in early Islam—Hafsa bint ‘Omar, a wife of the Prophet Muhammad and the daughter of one of his closest companions. See, Betül İpşirli Argıt, *Life after the Harem: Female Palace Slaves, Patronage and the Imperial Ottoman Court*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108770316>.

⁴ For a biography of Hafsa Sultan see, Necdet Sakaoğlu, *Bu mülkün kadın sultanları: valide sultanlar, hatunlar, hasekiler, kadınefendiler, sultanevendiler*, Oğlak bilimsel kitaplar (Oğlak Yayıncılık ve Reklamcılık, 2008); Alan Fisher, “The Life and Family of Süleymân I,” in *Süleymân the Second and His Time*, ed. Halil İnalcık and Cemal Kafadar (Gorgias Press, 2010),

Sultan was renowned not only for her beauty but also for her philanthropic patronage, having founded numerous charitable institutions.⁶

She gave birth to Süleymân (d. 1566) during Selîm's governorship of Trabzon, at which time she is believed to have been approximately fifteen years old.⁷ The birth of a son marked a profound transformation in the life of a concubine, as exemplified by Hâfşa Sultân. Although she remained legally enslaved, becoming a mother transformed her institutional position. As the mother of a prince, she was given a larger household, increased financial resources, and clear hierarchical precedence over concubines who had not borne male heirs. Her primary role became caring for and raising the prince, and she probably stopped having sexual relations with Selim. Should the prince survive childhood and receive a provincial governorship, she would accompany him and assist in establishing his household. If he were to ascend the throne eventually, she would become the most senior female figure in the imperial court. However, such an outcome was not guaranteed, and the death of a prince could leave his mother politically marginalised and financially precarious.⁸ With the authority conferred by her role as mother of the prince during Süleymân's early career as a provincial governor (*sancak-beyi*), she accompanied him to his postings, first to Caffa in 1509 and then to Manisa in 1513.⁹ Upon Süleymân's accession to the throne in 1520¹⁰, Hâfşa Sultân was brought to Istanbul, where she assumed the title of *Vâlide Sultân*, thereby becoming the highest-ranking woman in the imperial hierarchy. She retained this

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⁵ Ali Haydar Bayat, "Hafsa Sultan," in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul, 1997), 15:122.

⁶ Bayat, "Hafsa Sultan."

⁷ Kaya Şahin, *Peerless among Princes: The Life and Times of Sultan Süleymân* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197531631.001.0001>.

⁸ Şahin, *Peerless among Princes*, 35.

⁹ Feridun M. Emecen, *Kanuni Sultan Süleymân ve zamanı*, with Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, Türk Tarih Kurumu yayınları 4/A-2.2.1 dizi, sayı: 52 (Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2024), Feridun M. Emecen, *Kanuni Sultan Süleymân ve zamanı*, with Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, Türk Tarih Kurumu yayınları 4/A-2.2.1 dizi, sayı: 52 (Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2024), 21. [Why is this title repeated twice?]

¹⁰ For more on this period and Süleymân see, Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300-1600*, trans. Norman Itzkowitz and Colin Imber (Phoenix, 2013).

preeminent position until her death in 1534 and was subsequently interred in the Sultan Selīm Mosque in Istanbul.¹¹

The letter under study is undated, but its content suggests that it was likely sent from Manisa in around 1520. In the letter, Ḥafṣa Sultān instructs her son to call for her “*as soon as you ascend the throne*,” indicating her awareness of the imminent transfer of authority. Historical records show that 117 individuals were moved from Manisa to Constantinople following Süleymān’s accession. Some of these individuals arrived earlier, while others—including his mother Ḥafṣa Sultān, his unnamed sister, and his sons and concubines—reached the capital several weeks later.¹² Accordingly, this letter was almost certainly composed during the interval between Süleymān’s receipt of the news of his father Selīm I’s death and the subsequent relocation of all 117 members of his Manisa household to Constantinople, marking a critical transitional moment in the establishment of his court in the new capital. While the phrasing could also refer more generally to ceremonial returns to the capital following military campaigns, the content points to a pre-accession context. Furthermore, the letter was almost certainly composed by a court scribe possessing considerable linguistic and literary skill. The poetic metaphors convey Ḥafṣa Sultān’s emotional vulnerability and underscore her dependence on the sultan’s favor for personal solace. The careful selection of words, phrases, and prayers also provides chronological clues, indicating that the letter was written precisely at the moment when Süleymān was on the verge of ascending the throne.

In conclusion, the study of this letter is particularly significant. This letter goes beyond personal sentiment to reveal the political and social realities faced by a sultan’s mother. It shows how Ḥafṣa Sultān’s well-being, influence, and security were closely tied to her son’s future position, making her appeal both an expression of maternal concern and a strategic assertion of her place within the imperial household. In this way, the letter provides a rare insight into the intersection of familial affection and

¹¹ Bayat, “Hafsa Sultan,” 123.

¹² Şahin, *Peerless among Princes*, 108.

political dependence in the Ottoman court. In this context, her personal anguish also signals the weight of these stakes, as she poignantly states, “*life without you is unbearable*¹³ *for me.*”

Transcription

*Cenāb-ı salṭanat-me’āb ḥazret-i begüm kām̄bīn u kām̄yāb
edāme’llāhu te’ālā salṭanatehū ve devletehū ‘aleynā ve ‘ale kāffeti’l-enām ilā yevmi’l-
ḥaṣri ve’l-ḥisāb
Ġıbbe ithāf-ı tuḥafī’l- ed’iyeti ’l-maḳrūneti bi-icābeti’l-Meliki’l- ‘alīm ve eṣera ihdā’-ı’l
ṣeniyyeti’l-memzūceti bi-enfāsi’n-nebiyyi’l-kerīm
ma ‘rūz-ı dā’iye-i sā’iye oldur ki ṣimdiki ḥālde eger lutf olunub bu ḥarīke-i nār-ı firāk ve
ġarīke-i baḥr-ı iṣtiyāk
ṭarafından isti lām buyurılırsa sen ‘ömrüm ḥaṣılı ve gözlerüm nūrı rāḥat-ı rūḥum ve
sermāye-i fütūḥumdan
ayru olalı ‘ömr-i ‘azīz-i bī-bedelden maḥzūz ve behremend olmayub gülistān-ı sa ‘ādet ve
būstān-ı devletinden
ayru düşmüş bülbül-i nālān ve ‘andelīb-i hezār-destān gibi feryād-kunān āteṣ-i mücerred
birle nār-ı hicrān
āfet-i cān vāki’ olub, ‘ıyşımız nış ve iṣümüz teṣvīṣ olmuṣdur eyle olsa benüm āfitāb-ı
devletüm
ve māhitāb-ı sa ‘ādetüm mercūḥdur ki sa ‘ādetlü başuñ içün bu ġurbet-zede’i bu firḳatdan
ḥalāṣ idüb serīr-i salṭanata
devlet ü sa ‘ādetle cülūs itdükde ḳadīmen [ve] ‘ācilen bu muḥliṣe’i rü’yet-i cemāl-i dil-
güşāñla müṣerref ve muġtenim buyurasız*

¹³ The original letter uses the word *ḥarām*, which literally means “forbidden” or “prohibited” in Islamic and Ottoman Turkish contexts—something a Muslim must not do and will not do. In Ottoman usage, *ḥarām* can also refer more broadly to anything considered impermissible or off-limits. In this context, Ḥaḥṣa Sultān employs the term metaphorically to convey that life apart from her son is not only forbidden but impossible; she cannot, and will not, endure such separation. I have therefore translated it as “unbearable,” as this rendering better captures the emotional intensity and sense of impossibility embedded in her plea, whereas “forbidden,” though literal, does not fully convey the affective force of the original term.

*ki 'ömr-i cihân bir dem sensüz harâmdur şöyle mülâhaza olına bâkî 'ömr-i devlet der
mesned-i sa 'âdet [ve] destgâh-ı devlet
müstedâm ü müstaḥkem bâd bi'n-nûn ve's-şâd
Ve dâye ḥâtûn selâmlar ve du 'âlar idüb ḥâk-ı pâ-y-ı şerîfîñûze yûzin sürer*

Translation

His Majesty, the refuge of sovereignty, my lord, the fortunate and successful
May God, Exalted, perpetuate his sultanate and his authority over us and over all
mankind until the Day of Resurrection and Judgment

Following the presentation of the gifts of prayer, conjoined with acceptance by the All-
Knowing Sovereign (i.e., God), and following the offering of exalted supplications
imbued with the breaths of the Noble Prophet, the humble petition of this earnest
supplicant is as follows:

If, by your gracious favor, should it please you to inquire into this conflagration of the
fire of separation and this drowning in the sea of longing, since the day I was parted
from you—who are the very fruit of my life, the light of my eyes, the solace of my soul,
and the very foundation of my every success—I have found no joy, nor taken any share
of delight from this precious and incomparable life.

I have become like a lamenting nightingale separated from the rose-garden of felicity
and the orchard of fortune and prosperity and a nightingale of a thousand songs,
crying out in anguish. With the sheer fire, the fire of separation has become a calamity
to my soul and our joyful days have become poisoned, and our affairs have been cast
into turmoil.

As this is so, the sunshine of my prosperity and the moonlight of my felicity would be
greatly surpassed if, for the sake of your felicitous head, you would deliver this one,
stricken by separation from you while you are far from home, from this affliction; and
if, upon your return with fortune and prosperity to the seat of the throne, you would
from the very outset and without delay graciously honor and favor this devoted and
loyal one with the sight of your heart-delighting countenance. For life in this world,

even for a single moment, is of no value or benefit to me without you, like something forbidden.

Let it be understood thus.

May the course of your good fortune and rule endure, firm and secure upon the seat of felicity.

With *Nūn and Ṣād*¹⁴

Post-Script¹⁵

And your *dāye*¹⁶ (wet-nurse/mother) sends her salutations and prayers, humbly laying her face at your noble feet.

¹⁴ The letter closes with “*Bi’n-nūn ve’s-ṣād*” (بِالنُّونِ وَالصَّادِ), Qur’anic disjoined letters (*ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa’āt*) that were commonly used in Ottoman epistolary practice as a pious formula invoking divine protection and blessing. Some Ottoman sources interpreted these letters as abbreviations for *nusret ve sa’ādet* (“victory and felicity”), though this reading remains a traditional or symbolic explanation rather than a universally attested meaning.

¹⁵ The post-script appears written in the same hand, placed along the right margin and oriented upside-down.

¹⁶ Sultan Süleymān’s *dāye* (wet nurse) was Surūrī Dāye Hātūn. This is known from the *Surūrī Dāye Hātūn Mosque*, built around 1530 in Yeşildirek (Eminönü, Istanbul), which she founded with the support of Sultan Süleymān and Hürrem Sultan. For further discussion of this, see, Oleksandra Ŗutko, *Hürrem Sultan*, 1st ed., trans. Hazal Yalın (Kitap Yayınevi, 2017).

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