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Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power

The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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SIX

The Third Court: The Palace School for Pages

The pages who lived in the dormitories grouped around the male section of the third court constituted an elite corps, educated and trained to be the future administrators of the empire. Their training took place in what amounted to a palace school, established in the New Palace from its very inception. According to Atâ it was Mehmed II who placed the inscription over the main gate of the third court that called it a “house of learning” (*dâr al-ilm*).¹ The origins of the palace school, which has been compared by scholars to that in Plato’s *Republic*, are not clear.² The sixteenth-century historian Taşköprizade says that it was founded in the early fifteenth century by Mehmed I, who placed slave pages under the tutelage of eunuchs, a system perhaps inspired by the Mamluk model. The Byzantine historian Doukas tells us that both Bayezid I’s palace in Bursa and Mehmed I’s in Edirne kept young boys of great beauty, all of them Christian in origin, since Muslims could not be enslaved, according to Islamic law.³

This allowed part of the local Christian population (at that time constituting a majority in a frontier principality at the edge of the Islamic world) to be fully integrated into the ruling group as converts. The palace school, then, was based on an Ottoman institution that already existed, but that, under Mehmed II, came to be more fully organized. Its purpose was to consolidate the system of centralized government through a trained class of administrators that would hinder the development of a Muslim landowning aristocracy capable of challenging the sultan’s absolute power. The palace

school of the Topkapı complemented the madrasas of Mehmed II’s mosque complex in Istanbul, which trained the highest-ranking ulama of the empire, and which replaced the Byzantine patriarchal university, built as a dependency of the Church of the Holy Apostles, that had occupied the same site. Given this striking parallel, it is tempting to propose that Mehmed II’s palace school might have been partly inspired by the university in the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors, which had also trained statesmen and administrators.

Kritovoulos writes that after conquering Constantinople in 1453, Mehmed II selected the noblest among the young boys in the conquered population, “according to their merits, to be his bodyguard and be constantly near him, and others to other service as his pages. He admired them for their prudence and other virtues and for their training. They were indeed of signal physical beauty and nobility and talent of soul, and in their manners and morals were outstanding, for they were of high and renowned ancestry and splendid physique, and well trained in the royal palace.” Mehmed also selected young girls for his court with “the modesty, grace, and beauty of the virgins, and their superiority among their race in every sort of good trait.”⁴ According to Menavino, who was himself a page, the boys were placed under the strict discipline of eunuchs and instructed by tutors to become “the warrior statesman and loyal Muslim who at the same time should be a man of letters and polished speech, profound courtesy, and honest morals.” The girls were entrusted to the strict su-

pervision of matrons, who taught them the principles of Islam and trained them to be refined courtesans, skilled in sewing, embroidering, dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, storytelling, and reading. The organization and training for both sexes was essentially the same; the two institutions paralleled and complemented one another.⁵

Bobovi, a former page of Polish origin in the seventeenth century, says that the emphasis of the palace school was on religious indoctrination and instruction in court etiquette, the liberal arts, sports, and crafts, not on the training of distinguished scholars. Some of the pages studied more than others, each according to his own ability; but the sultan did not demand of them anything more than a great respect for books—especially the Koran, of which each of them owned a copy. The primary aim was to educate Christian-born slaves (now converted to Islam) destined for high office in a commonly shared Ottoman court culture and to instill complete obedience and loyalty to the sultan. The French translator of Bobovi's account compares the strict discipline of the palace school to "a Pythagorean school, where one learns silence; a Lacedaemonian school, where one learns austerity and wisdom, both in terms of good precepts and in the rigor of punishments; and a Spartan school, where one does not apply oneself to the sciences but rather to observing temperance and modesty and to rendering oneself capable of obeying and commanding."⁶

According to Deshayes de Courmenin, who wrote in 1621, the school and its pupils were completely isolated from the rest of society, like an independent republic with its own peculiar customs and way of life.⁷ Throughout their education, the pages were never allowed to forget that they were slaves. The majority of them rarely had contact with the sultan. As a badge of their bondage they wore long tresses hanging from both sides of their caps, said to have been inspired by the long locks of hair Joseph wore during his years of slavery.⁸ These tresses were seen as a symbol of rendering service to the person of the sultan. No page was permitted to grow a beard, because it was regarded

as a mark of freedom.⁹ According to Courmenin, even royal princes who governed provinces had to shave and send their beards to the sultan at frequent intervals to show that they were still under his custody, too young to govern by themselves.¹⁰

An initiation ceremony was held when a page first entered the inaccessible inner court and was sealed off from the outside world. Another ceremony marked his discharge back into the world, where he was finally allowed to grow his beard and take up the post for which he had been trained. The initiation ceremony, called *pārs* (probably also derived from *pārsā*, in the sense of a ritual of purification and abstinence), began when the novice entered the third gate where he stood all alone for three days in silence with nobody addressing him. At the end of his three days of solitude, the gate's leading eunuch announced that he had joined the ranks of the ruling elite and reminded him that he had entered the "gate of nobles" (*erkān kapısı*). Then he dressed the novice in the page's uniform.¹¹ Early sources fail to mention this initiation ceremony, but it may well have originated in the fifteenth century, when the palace school was founded.

While they lived in the sultan's palace, the pages' relations with the outer world were completely severed; they could not even leave the third court. Servants called "gate boys" (*kapı oğlanları*) were stationed at the third gate to run their outside errands. They relayed the wishes of the royal pages to novices (*acemi oğlanları*) in the first court— young slave boys attached to the outer palace's services—who then brought whatever was required from the city.¹² In the second half of the sixteenth century the ideal page system began to degenerate. The number of pages was increased drastically and they were no longer selected with care. Muslim-born pages whose relatives lived in the city began to infiltrate the system, which had originally been limited to Christian converts cut off from family ties to guarantee loyalty to the sultan. They began to find ways to communicate with the outside world through the latticed "cage" that the early sultans had once used to observe meetings in the Old Council Hall, or by pretending sickness, in

order to visit the first court's hospital (Pl. 11 [31]).¹³

The page's daily schedule was strictly disciplined and regulated. Each one was assigned a small place on the platform in his dormitory, where he slept at night and studied during the day. Pages living in different dormitories came into contact with one another only in the communal mosque of the third court, where they prayed four times a day. In the interval between the fourth and fifth prayers, pages were allowed to talk quietly in their dormitories, where they also performed the last prayer. Before going to bed, roll was called, and then the chamber master struck the floor with his walking stick to signal the hour of repose. In all the dormitories, the pages slept in small beds in long rectangular halls that were illuminated the whole night with torches, so that the gate boys and eunuchs could monitor their behavior.¹⁴

Institutional Organization of Pages

The pages were organized into dormitories called chambers, or *oda*. The exact number of pages varied: in 1475 Promontorio mentions 400, his contemporary Angiolello counts 340, and Spandugino, also a contemporary, 300. In the mid sixteenth century their numbers had reached 500, and by the early seventeenth century, 700.¹⁵ Wage registers of Mehmed II's court from 1478 to 1480 indicate that the royal pages (*gilmân-i enderûni*) were organized into five chambers: the Corps of the Chamber (*bölük-i oda*), the Corps of the Treasury (*bölük-i hazîne*), the Corps of the Commissary (*bölük-i kilâr*), the Corps of Royal Falconers (*bölük-i şahinciyan-i enderûn*), and the Corps of the Gatekeepers (*bölük-i rikâbiyan* or *bölük-i rikâbdârân*).¹⁶ A similar classification appears in Promontorio's description, which mentions five leading eunuchs, the cupbearer (*şarâbdâr*), who was in charge of the Privy Chamber, the head treasurer (*hazîne-dârbaşı*), the head of the commissary (*kilârcıbaşı*); the head falconer (*çakırcıbaşı*); and the head gatekeeper (*rikâbdârbaşı*).¹⁷

The nomenclature varied over the years, but the organization remained almost unchanged from that established in Mehmed II's reign. By Âli's time the

five chambers were called the Privy Chamber (*hâşş oda*), the Treasury Chamber (*hazîne odası*), the Privy Commissary (*kilâr-i hâşşa*), the Large Chamber (*büyük oda*), and the Small Chamber (*küçük oda*) (Pl. 11 [30, 33, 46, 47, 53]).¹⁸ The Large and Small Chambers were the names given in the sixteenth century to two preparatory schools for the novice pages, housed in two dormitories that flanked the third gate. Together they comprised the Corps of the Gate (*bölük-i der*), placed under the head gatekeeper's control.¹⁹ The head gatekeeper had a special room of his own, adjacent to the Small Chamber, to the left of the third gate's vestibule (Pl. 11 [29]).²⁰ His room, shown on Bobovi's plan, is mentioned earlier, in a repair document of ca. 1528–29, as “the room of the Agha of the Gate at the Small Chamber” (Pls. 16a,b [3], 17 [32]).²¹ As early as 1475 Promontorio observes that the head gatekeeper was the palace's highest-ranking eunuch, in whose chamber the largest group of novice pages was lodged.²²

The Corps of Falconers had, by the sixteenth century, ceased to be one of the five chambers. A book of royal donations from the last quarter of the century indicates that its members were dispersed in different dormitories, including the Privy Chamber, the Treasury, and the Large Chamber. The seventeenth-century author Hezarfen mentions thirty falconers, three belonging to the Privy Chamber, seven to the Treasury, and twenty to the Large Chamber. Clearly the function still existed, but the falconers were among the pages known as “chamberless” (*odasız*).²³ Most of the chamberless pages were attached to the Large Chamber, and are mentioned in a treatise on the Ottoman court's organization from Mehmed III's reign.²⁴ One of these groups was called the “Expeditionary Pages of the Large Chamber” because its members followed the sultan to wars. There was also a group of chamberless falconers under the head falconer.²⁵ Still another group were the stokers, or *külhâncıs*, whose duty it was to stoke the furnace for the sultan's bath.²⁶

All these chamberless pages attached to the Large Chamber were eventually grouped together, and were given their own dormitory in 1606 by

Ahmed I (Pl. 11 [38]). It was known as the Chamber of the Expeditionary Force (*seferli odası*), and housed not only the expeditioners, but stokers, bath attendants, and some musicians. It was enlarged by Murad IV, and rebuilt in its present form by Ahmed III, in 1718–19.²⁷ The falconers were not included; instead, a new dormitory was built for them near the Privy Chamber in the mid seventeenth century.²⁸ It is shown as a freestanding structure on Bobovi's plan (Pls. 16a,b [41], 17 [16]).

In their novice years the pages concentrated on studying, unlike the members of the three higher chambers, who were in active service to the sultan. When the youngsters reached puberty, they were assigned to the higher chambers, which were for the most part populated by pages in their mid to late teens. The details of the system of promotion from one chamber to the other are not known. The novices appear to have moved to the higher chambers according to merit; they could be both promoted and demoted, so the progression from the commissary to the Treasury and, finally, as the culmination of their training, to the sultan's Privy Chamber, was not routine for all. Untalented novices could be sent out of the palace to minor positions in the army, and not everyone who reached the upper chambers completed the full curriculum or was chosen in the end to serve in the prestigious Privy Chamber. Sometimes the less ambitious pages themselves requested to be assigned to lesser bureaucratic posts, not having the patience to endure the rigid lifestyle. Since promotion was not automatic, the pages had to attract the attention of the sultan or of their superiors with their talent, a system that turned the Ottoman political order into a meritocracy quite different from the aristocratic order in the West. The most talented slave pages eventually rose to the highest nonhereditary positions in the government and the military. Enjoying considerable freedom and opportunities denied to the general populace, they could get married and have offspring, but their legal status as slaves required that the lands they were given by the sultan and most of their accumulated property revert back to the state when they died or were demoted. Their freeborn Muslim chil-

dren had no automatic rights to the high positions normally reserved for the household slaves.

Dormitories of Pages

The two preparatory schools for the novices were located on both sides of the third gate's vestibule, a position signifying the transitional status of the new arrivals who occupied them (Pls. 11 [30, 33], 16a,b [4,6], 17 [21, 22]).²⁹ The low rank of novices was expressed in the wages and robes they were issued by the sultan. Unlike the pages of the three upper chambers, who wore precious atlas, silk, or brocade caftans, and were called *kaftanlı* ("with caftans"), the novices, who wore simple wool robes, were called *dolamalı* ("with dolmans").³⁰ They were kept separate as a group from the pages promoted to the upper chambers and had little contact with them.

Promontorio explains that the novice was trained in religious doctrines, virtue, and—according to his talents—either singing, playing instruments, dancing, archery, or some other dignified activity.³¹ His contemporary Angiolello says that the novice received his religious and cultural indoctrination while learning to read, write, and speak Turkish, after which he was placed in the sultan's service, depending on circumstances.³² Menavino, a former page, writes that the novice had to learn to speak Turkish, to read the Koran and understand its prescriptions, and to read books in Arabic and Persian, for which purpose teachers were brought into the palace.³³

Later, writing in the seventeenth century, the Polish page Bobovi provides a list of books included in the curriculum, starting with the Koran, and including books of Arabic grammar, Turkish books dealing with the Islamic faith and law, and Persian literary classics, including the works of Sa'di and Hafiz. He adds: "But they also read others in *mülemma* form. *Mülemma* is written in an ornate way and is the combination of Turkish, Arabic, and Persian words. It is used as much in prose as in verse, and is very elegant and filled with beautiful and rich thoughts." These *mülemma* works included such story collections as the *History of the*

chosen group of companions, were given their lessons with the novices. A wage register of Mehmed II's court from 1478 to 1480 lists under the "Corps of Gatekeepers" a subgroup called "Novices of Princes."³⁶ Bobovi's plan of the Large Chamber indicates a special two-storied stall with an upper gallery, where the princes once used to sit for instruction (Fig. 69 [12]). Bobovi says that this practice ended when the potentially rebellious princes were no longer sent to govern provinces. From the end of the sixteenth century onward, they were kept in the harem, under close supervision, and a separate school was built for them in the quarter of the black eunuchs.³⁷

The next rank up from the novices was that of the commissary pages, under the custody of the head of the commissary. Mehmed II's *kanunname* states that their master was in charge of setting the royal table.³⁸ Their dormitory occupied the right half of the third court's north wing (Pls. 11 [46], 17 [14]).³⁹ According to Promontorio its pages cared for the royal tableware of gold and silver studded with jewels and prepared delicacies served at the sultan's table.⁴⁰ We learn from Menavino that they were in charge of the nectars, juleps, confections, spices, and medicines stored in the commissary. They also continued their studies at a higher level, read books, and practiced archery.⁴¹ Their dormitory is referred to in the sources as the inner commissary, or privy Commissary, to distinguish it from the other commissary, attached to the royal kitchens in the second court.⁴² It had a separate storage area, used as a treasury for the objects needed for the royal table. Most of these were borrowed from the Inner Treasury, where unused objects were stored for safekeeping. Registers from 1546 to 1558, for example, list vessels loaned to the inner commissary by the head treasurer, and articles returned to the Inner Treasury from use in the inner commissary. They were gold or silverware, some of it jeweled, including trays, bowls, dishes, spoons, cups, colanders, frying pans, and grilling skewers.⁴³ Among the officers attached to the commissary's service were a napkin master, a master of candles, officers in charge of pickles, fruits, and

tableware, and a guard for the storage area.⁴⁴ The gold, silver, and porcelain vessels, spices, syrups, and confections were entrusted to the head of the commissary, together with other edible items including drugs, aphrodisiacs, teriacs, and antidotes.⁴⁵ Atâ, who lived in this building as a page in the mid nineteenth century, says that gold, silver, and metalwares, celadons, and Chinese and European porcelain vessels were stored there.⁴⁶

An account book of 1527–28 lists expenses for making large trunks (*anbâr*), cupboards (*dolâb*), and chests (*şanâdık*) for storing objects in the Inner Commissary.⁴⁷ These objects were sometimes exhibited during festivities. After his accession ceremony in 1595, Mehmed III toured the Commissary, which had been decorated for the occasion, distributing largesse to its pages and officers. A later document, from 1791, reports that the sultan paid a visit to the ornamented commissary on the occasion of a royal birth.⁴⁸ Seventeenth-century sources describe the customs of the commissary corps pages, which probably originated earlier. One of these was to collect rain and rosewater during the month of April, which was offered in small bottles to the sultan in return for a reward.⁴⁹ Another ceremony involved carrying the sultan's drinking water from the inner commissary to the Privy Chamber door. When the sultan complained of thirst, his attendants signaled two commissary pages; one would run to the head of the commissary, shouting "water!" while the other rushed to the Privy Chamber door, where he was paid ten sequins. The water itself was brought by the head of the commissary, in a gold or porcelain bowl placed on a jeweled tray, as pages in his custody followed behind. Two of his retinue guided him by the arm, for etiquette dictated that he carry the water vessel above his head, and he could not see where he was going.⁵⁰ Âli says that, in addition to carrying water, confections, and food to the sultan, and setting the royal table, the duties of the head of the commissary included feeding the sultan his bone marrow—considered a delicacy worthy of the royal palate, but extremely difficult to serve.⁵¹

The Treasury Chamber was the third step up for

the page in training; its inhabitants were, according to Mehmed II's *kanunname*, under the command of the head treasurer. As the name implies, they were in charge of the sultan's Inner Treasury, as opposed to the outer one in the second court. The Inner Treasury itself was not attached to the pages' dormitory, which occupied the left half of the third court's north wing (Pls. 11 [47], 17 [13]).⁵² According to Angiolello, jewels, objects of gold and silver, textiles, robes of silk, precious artifacts, and the sultan's petty cash were entrusted to the head treasurer. Menavino confirms that the Treasury pages also continued their education while they maintained the royal vestments, jars of gold and silver, jewels, and money. They were required to carry to the sultan whatever he demanded from the Treasury.⁵³

The Inner Treasury occupied the far right corner of the third court (Pls. 11 [39–45], 12 [21], 17 [15]). It was cleaned twice a year and the imperial clothes were laundered and left to dry in the sun.⁵⁴ Otherwise it was locked, and could be opened only by the head treasurer, in the company of pages, when an object was required by the sultan. Its leading officers included a bucket carrier, who was in charge of the imperial laundry, a superintendent of furs, scribes of registers and inventories, and a librarian in charge of royal books stored there.⁵⁵ The Treasury pages were also taught some art, depending on their talent or inclination. They were trained to be *valets de chambre*, and learned to wrap a turban, shave the sultan, cut the royal nails, wash and fold clothes neatly, and wait on the royal table. They were also taught how to train hunting dogs and falcons, and to be stable squires. By the time they were through, they were specialized in one of the services required for the sultan's Privy Chamber, to which they were then promoted.⁵⁶

The Privy Chamber (*hâşş oda*) was the fourth and most prestigious service (Pls. 11 [48–53], 16a,b [31], 17 [12]). Four of the most favored of its pages accompanied the sultan wherever he went, carrying his royal insignia. They also cleaned the royal bedchamber, lighted its fire, made the sultan's bed, and stayed inside the royal bedchamber at

night, taking turns guarding the sleeping sultan in pairs.⁵⁷ Others slept in an antechamber containing the royal wardrobe, close to the royal bedchamber, from where they too guarded their master.⁵⁸ They took care of the royal vestments and carried the sultan's food to his table. Mehmed II's *kanunname* lists the titles of these four favored pages, the other pages of the chamber (*oda oğlanları*), and the head of the chamber (*odabaşı*).⁵⁹

When those pages who had completed their training in the various chambers and proved their skill and loyalty in service to the sultan were finally ready to take up distinguished administrative posts in the outside world, a discharge ceremony marked this honored event. Menavino describes how the successful graduating pages submissively kissed the hand of the sultan, enthroned in front of his Privy Chamber. After a brief speech, in which they were exhorted to serve well in their new posts, the sultan gave each a vestment of honor, a horse, a turban, and some money, before they paraded out of the third court: "Approaching the grand gate [that is, the Gate of Felicity] to exit from it, dressed in brocade, each one of them carries a gold ornament on his forehead, studded with jewels worth three hundred scudi, and each holds a handkerchief in his hand, in which are about one thousand aspers, and at the gate they find horses on which they mount in great triumph, scattering the coins that they carry in the handkerchiefs as they ride ... carrying with them all the articles that they have acquired in the Seraglio."⁶⁰ By contrast, any disgraced page was unceremoniously chased away through another gate, communicating with the outer gardens.⁶¹

Bobovi describes the page's discharge ceremony as it was elaborated in the seventeenth century, using his floor plan as a reference (Pls. 16a, b [42, 43]):

And after he [the discharged page] obtains leave from His Majesty, it is the custom to have two large silver basins, filled with aspers and sequins, carried by the eunuchs, and to display them, one at the gallery of the audience chamber [the Chamber of Petitions, 42], at the spot

marked E, and the other at the mark F, which is on the other side of the said chamber, and as soon as the martial musicians hit the drums and play the oboes and trumpets, the novices of the two chambers, the Large Chamber at the Section F, and the Small Chamber at the side E, come out, and the eunuchs throw down from the gallery the coins and the basins. It is then a marvelous pleasure to watch them scramble for the coins and fight with one another for the basin, which passes from hand to hand until one of them captures it and is able to throw it to the pages of the caftan [*kaftanlı*] who, having come out of their chambers, stand in front of the gate as spectators; they note the boy who throws it and safeguard it in order to return it to him after the fight.⁶²

The graduating page was conducted to the Middle Gate with trumpets and drums as novices and his companions enviously watched him depart. This was one of the few festive occasions when the perfect silence in the third court could be broken. Ordinarily the pages not only had to remain silent, but at the sound of the whistle that announced the approach of the sultan or a high-ranking eunuch, they had to hide inside dormitories or behind columns until he passed by. This silence led to the invention of a sign language that was used in the palace after the middle of the sixteenth century.⁶³ Bobovi explains that during the religious holidays or celebrations of military victories the pages were permitted to play, chat, sing, freely visit all of the chambers, and amuse themselves with “all sorts of foolery which they can dream up.” These games included boxing with handkerchiefs wrapped around the fists, dressing up in masks of fur and pretending to be some animal, and playing chess, backgammon, or other board games. Otherwise, Bobovi continues, “pages of one chamber do not dare to mix with pages of another chamber. Indeed, they can communicate with those of other chambers only by speaking with the sign language of mutes. Those in the Privy Chamber are always forced to communicate by signs and gestures, maintaining complete silence at all times in the sultan’s presence.”⁶⁴

The dormitories, like all the buildings in the third

court, were organized according to the increasing status of their occupants: the two preparatory schools flanked the third gate, followed, in a counter-clockwise direction, by the dormitories of the Commissary, Treasury, and Privy Chamber pages. The further along they were in their training, the closer was the building in which the pages lived to the Privy Chamber, with the four favorites lodged in the royal bedchamber itself. The degree of spatial proximity to the sovereign dictated not only a page’s status, but the size of his salary and his type of dress.

Bobovi’s plan of the Large Chamber shows clearly how these dormitories were laid out (see Fig. 69).⁶⁵ Two long, raised platforms placed across from one another along the length of the chamber, were partitioned off into fourteen stalls, each stall accommodating ten novices. These stalls were separated by twelve raised daises (*kerevet*), upon each of which were two stations for surveillance, occupied by eunuchs. The pages were assigned stalls closer to or farther from the entrance gate according to seniority, so that the last stall (*no. 2* on Bobovi’s plan) was occupied by the newest recruits. In addition to the entrance from the vestibule of the third gate, there was another gate in the center of the facade facing the third court. Across from it was the centrally placed double-storied stall (*no. 12*) with an upper gallery (*şirvan*) that had at one time been reserved for the royal princes, when they came for their lessons with the novices. The stall numbered 9 on the plan was occupied by the novices who stoked the furnace of the neighboring royal bath and tended the fire of the Large Chamber’s fireplace. The spaces at the right (*nos. 17, 20, 21, 23*) were ablution fountains (*gusulhane*), a furnace, and latrines.

Novices inhabiting the Large and Small chambers were more closely guarded, by white eunuchs called gate boys (*kapı oğlanı*), than pages of the higher chambers. Âli confirms that they were subdivided into companies of ten, each watched over by a eunuch: “In the venerable palace are chambers, one of which is called the Small Chamber, and the other the Large Chamber, and

each has daises, that is, flat estrades on which crowded flocks of novices are stationed. On each estrade sleeps a gate boy, in order to guard and watch over them, while oil lamps burn from night until morning to prevent and to hinder them from abominable temptations.”⁶⁶ The vulgarity of the names by which several of the stalls were known “smacks of an army camp or barracks,” just as the organization into groups of ten was reminiscent of the arrangement of the Janissaries.⁶⁷

This system encouraged the development of an *esprit de corps* and comradeship, just as it reaffirmed status distinctions. Bobovi writes: “Most pages show great modesty and sweetness. When they chat together, they always show a great deal of affection. They usually call each other *kardeşim*, “my brother,” or *canım*, “my soul,” but they do not often have the chance to talk. They mostly remain seated in total silence with some book or writing in their hand and more often resemble statues rather than living figures.”⁶⁸ This setting reinforced the ties among the pages, who were bound together as a group by their common relationship to the sultan, the symbolic father in whose name they would rule the empire. Their barracklike dormitories imposed behavioral routines and framed interpersonal relations. Architecture served as a circumscribed stage for fixed patterns of conduct, reflecting the concern to set rigid boundaries, to control, and to monitor actions.

Each rectangular dormitory was an autonomous, self-sufficient unit. A description by Abdullah bin Ibrahim Üsküdari, who was a page between 1651 and 1655, shows that, with the exception of the dormitories for the Falconers and the Expeditioners, which were not built until the seventeenth century, all the dormitories founded by Mehmed II were more or less alike. They were uniform in width (ten cubits [*zirâc*] or 7.58 meters), but varied in length. Each had two sofas running the length of the room and raised half a cubit above the ground. Each had windows facing the courtyard and blind walls toward the outside world, accentuating the isolation of the pages.⁶⁹

The Large Chamber, to the right of the third gate,

measured 65 by 10 cubits (49.27 by 7.58 meters) and featured twelve large windows, four facing the third court, the other eight overlooking the royal bath’s furnace. The Small Chamber, to the left of the gate, measured 30 by 10 cubits (22.74 by 7.58 meters), about half as long as the Large Chamber. It had five large windows looking out onto the courtyard.⁷⁰ Its size was probably dictated by the placement of the royal loggia adjacent to the back wall of the Old Council Hall, from the iron-latticed window of which Mehmed II watched council meetings (Pl. 11 [31]). The Small Chamber may have gotten its name either from its small size, or because the youngest pages were lodged there. The latter possibility is suggested by Marc’Antonio Pigafetta’s description in 1567: “It is called *küçükoda*, that is, small chamber, in which live fifty small youngsters.... These boys, being too young, never leave the palace, neither do they follow the person of the sultan in war, nor in other voyages of any sort, as do the others.”⁷¹

The dormitory of Treasury Pages, adjacent to the Privy Chamber along the north wing of the court, measured 25 by 10 cubits, or 18.95 by 7.58 meters, and also featured large windows onto the court. The adjacent dormitory of commissary pages, near the Inner Treasury, was an exact replica of the former, except for a separate compartment to the east, where the sultan’s valuable tableware was stored.⁷² Tavernier, who obtained his information from two former treasurers, says that these two dormitories occupying the north wing each had an arcade of eight white marble columns, with checkered black-and-white marble pavements.⁷³ This arcade of sixteen columns, which still exists, is also described by Flachet in the mid eighteenth century: “The buildings that form the north facade are regular and uniform. This portion of architecture would be admired by all. A large number of isolated columns form a beautiful peristyle, which extends along all the apartments.”⁷⁴ This continuous marble portico at the north wing is depicted in one of the *Hünername* miniatures. It accentuated the prestige of the higher-ranked dormitories, since the preparatory schools at the south wing were characterized by

simple, uncolonnaded facades (see Fig. 56).

The original dormitories founded by Mehmed II were massively built structures, and survived to the middle of the nineteenth century, though with continual repairs and some minor changes. At that time they were replaced by the structures seen today, but the original basements still remain. Two nineteenth-century plans show these new structures (Pl. 18).⁷⁵ Tavernier describes the dormitory of Treasury pages before it was rebuilt as

a long chamber, where one sees [running] from one side to the other a sort of estrade one and a half feet high, seven or eight feet wide. Each page has a place no more than four feet wide for the morning as well as the night.... Above the beds of pages one sees a gallery that extends around the chamber and is supported by wooden pillars, all painted with a red varnish, and this is where they keep their coffers.... At one end of the chamber there is a door that leads to the fountains where those attached to the treasury go to wash when they want to perform their prayers. There are seven yellow brass taps, and both the pavements and the walls of this place are of white marble. The places used as toilets follow at the right-hand side, divided into four small rooms, which are always clean and paved with white marble squares.⁷⁶

Although Mehmed II's dormitories all had much the same layout — long daises, internal wooden galleries, a surveillance station with windows for privileged officers, latrines, and a paved court for ablution fountains, which was also used as a recreation space⁷⁷ — the higher the rank of its inhabitants, the more elaborately decorated its interiors were. Atâ, who lived in the first quarter of the nineteenth century in the Commissary dormitory, just before it was demolished and rebuilt, says that it had been built by Mehmed II in a solid manner and decorated with “very ornate gilt carvings.”⁷⁸ After all, these spaces were frequently visited by the sultans, especially in the early years. Bayezid II, for example, took a great interest in his pages' education and sometimes visited them in their dormitories. Süleyman I also frequented the dormitories of pages while they were studying.⁷⁹ Before these an-

nounced visits, the pages would usually decorate their dormitories with precious textiles and carpets, and provide a royal throne. A book of royal donations from Murad III's reign records that the Small and Large chambers were decorated several times for that purpose. On these visits the leading eunuchs received gifts.⁸⁰

The Mosque

Pages living in separate dormitories came into contact with one another on a regular basis only in the communal mosque of the third court, but even there, each group was allotted its own distinct space. The main mosque of the third court is a freestanding structure aligned toward Mecca (Pls. 11 [36], 12 [17], 15 [11], 18). It has been extensively renovated, but the original building dates from Mehmed II's time. It is built of alternating courses of brick and stone, and consists of a large rectangular prayer hall with a central mihrab flanked by two windows. The prayer hall is still attached to two smaller ones at either end, to which it was once connected with windows and doors. Several restorations have transformed its upper structure. Its walls have been raised and its double-tiered windows enlarged. Nineteenth-century plans of the third court indicate that partition walls once subdivided the two smaller, annexed halls (Pl. 18).

The unusual, asymmetrical layout of this mosque has led some scholars to suggest that the annexed subsidiary chambers, which have a lower elevation than the raised central hall, must have been added later, but the archaeological evidence of the mosque's outer masonry shell does not support this. The *Hünername* miniature shows the central hall with a high, pyramidal, pitched roof — which probably had a wooden dome underneath — and clearly indicates the annexed halls as part of the original structure (see Fig. 56). The reconstruction suggested by some scholars, showing a domed, single-unit mosque, is therefore not supported by the evidence. One of the small, annexed halls, which has a mihrab of its own (today it is the reading room of the Topkapı Palace manuscript library), is not an

eighteenth-century addition, as some have argued, for its interior is still faced with original tile panels dating from a renovation during the reign of Ahmed I. Some of the calligraphic tiles carry the date 1017 (1608) and are signed by the palace steward *Kemankeş Mustafa*. This must be the palace steward's prayer room, which Üsküdarı and Tavernier describe as an annexed room communicating with the main hall of the mosque by windows. Among the separate rooms (*odalar*) reserved for privileged individuals was that of the swordbearer and the prayer space of the sultan and the harem ladies, all of which overlooked the central prayer hall through latticed windows—an arrangement that stressed the hierarchical organization of the royal household within the structure of the mosque.⁸¹

Each morning, as soon as the Imperial Gate was opened to the public, forty reciters, called *en'amcılar*, came to this building, identified as a "royal chapel" by Menavino, to read the long sixth Sura of the Koran to ensure the sultan's success and well-being. For an hour, seated in a circle with books in their hands, they recited that particular sura, which praises the absolute power of God and ends with a divine legitimization of the sultan's power: "It is He who has appointed you viceroys on earth and has raised some in rank above the others [6:165]." ⁸² According to Spandugino, thirty Koran reciters also performed before the sultan himself at designated hours. Mustafa Safi, the imam of Ahmed I, points out that this sultan's predecessors used to perform the first morning prayer in their bedroom, since the Imperial Gate was locked at that hour. The religious Ahmed ordered the gate opened earlier, so that the royal imam could enter the palace and the morning prayer could be performed communally.⁸³

The royal pages and eunuchs entered the mosque four times a day, in a fixed order reflecting their hierarchical organization, marching in pairs; the fifth prayer was performed in the dormitories. In this parade

the pages of the Privy Chamber, the Treasury, the Com-

missary, and the Falconers enter from the left gate [while] pages of the Expeditionary Force and the Small Chamber enter from the right gate, forming a numerous crowd, following the imam, and performing the obligatory prayers. And these pages have special places and areas within the masjid, and are not allowed to perform prayers beyond those assigned boundaries. At the left of the mihrab the Treasury and Commissary pages pray, mingling together; at the right of the mihrab pages of the Expeditionary Force and Falconers pray together, with pages of the Small Chamber at their right; and in the back row the white eunuchs pray. Hidden beyond the veil is a prayer space reserved for the World-sheltering Sovereign, to which he comes from the harem side, conforming to the imam's motions behind a curtain.... And there is a large window at the royal prayer space screened by silver lattices, which communicates with this masjid's interior. A special area at its right is reserved for the Queen Mother, and at its left is another area for the Haseki Sultan [i.e., the favorite wife], with large windows screened by lattices. Since the gate of this prayer space opens into the harem, the leading black eunuch and close companions of the ruler pray next to the sovereign. Since the special rooms of the swordbearer and the palace steward are adjacent to this masjid, communicating with it through windows, they can follow the imam while performing the prayers from their rooms. In this masjid, the Friday prayer is not permitted. Sixteen masjid servants from the Small Chamber are charged with serving and sweeping it. The servants of the royal praying space are eunuchs of the harem, who are responsible for its service.⁸⁴

Members of the Large Chamber were excluded from this mosque, known as the Masjid of the Small Chamber, whose pages were attached to its service. They had their own smaller mosque, called the Masjid of the Large Chamber, which appears on Bobovi's plan adjacent to the furnace of the royal bath, near the Large Chamber (Pls. 16a,b [C], 17 [20]).⁸⁵ Both the date and layout of this small masjid, which no longer exists, are unknown, but it too was probably founded in the fifteenth century.

Today the royal prayer space is still connected to the main prayer hall by latticed windows and can

be reached by a door from the harem. Although this annexed royal sanctuary was extensively rebuilt and redecorated over the centuries, it was probably included in Mehmed II's original mosque. Its curtained royal window, which reminded Tavernier of those in the chapels of Christian princes (it is a

common feature of Byzantine royal chapels, seen in the twelfth-century Capella Palatina in the Norman palace of Palermo) does recall the one from which Mehmed II used to watch over council meetings. Its design showed that the sultan preferred seclusion even within the confines of his private household.