One of the most legendary women of early modern history, known in Turkey as Hurrem Sultan and in Europe as Roxolana, has always been and still remains a controversial figure. While controversies surrounded other powerful and famous women of her time — such as Catherine de Medici, Queen Margot, or Queen Elizabeth I — Roxolana’s precipitous career from a harem slave to the queen of the Ottoman Empire made her particularly fascinating, yet vulnerable to the judgment of many a historian and writer. Kidnapped from the Ukraine and sold into the Ottoman imperial harem in the early sixteenth century, Roxolana quickly became the favorite concubine (*haseki*) of Sultan Suleiman I, the Magnificent (1520–1566), and later, his beloved wife, the powerful sultana. In the course of their four-decade-long romance until her death in 1558, Roxolana reigned supreme not only in Suleiman’s heart, but also in his court, as his chief political advisor. The former slave exerted immense influence over imperial affairs and left an indelible mark on both Ottoman history and European imagination.
was allowed to give birth to more than one son was a stark violation of the old royal harem principle, “one concubine mother — one son,” which was designed to prevent both the mother’s influence over the sultan and the feuds of the blood brothers for the throne. The violation of this principle signaled to the outside world the emergence of a powerful female in Suleiman’s court.

As Samuel Twardowski, member of the Polish Embassy to the Ottoman court in the years 1621–1622 maintained, Turks told him that Roxolana was the daughter of an Orthodox priest from Rohatyn, a small town in Podolia not far from Lviv. The old folk song from the region of Bukovina that tells the story of a beautiful young Nastusenka (diminutive from Anastasia), who was kidnapped by the Tatars from Rohatyn and sold into the Turkish harem, confirms this information. According to the old Ukrainian tradition, Roxolana’s name was Anastasia Lisowska, daughter of Gavriil and Leksandra Lisowski, although many argue that this name is fictive and was invented in the nineteenth century.

Venetian reports maintain that she was not particularly beautiful but rather small, graceful, elegant, and modest. Yet her radiant smile and playful temperament made her irresistibly charming and won her the name of “Hurrem” (“Joyful” or “Laughing One”). She was known for her singing and musical ability, as well as for her skillful embroidery. But most important, it is Roxolana’s great intelligence and willpower that gave her an edge over other women in the harem. As all contemporary European observers testified, the Sultan was completely smitten with his new concubine. She quickly ousted the mother of the Sultan’s first-born son, the beautiful Circassian Gulbehar (Mahidevran, in other sources), from the position of favorite concubine. Suleiman’s love for Hurrem found powerful expression in his poetic letters to her. When both Navagero and Trevisano wrote in their 1553 and 1554 reports to Venice that she was “much loved by her master” (“tanto amata da sua maestà”), Roxolana was already in her fifties, long past her prime. After her death in April 1558, Suleiman remained inconsolable for a long time. She was the greatest love of his life, his soulmate and lawful wife, and a woman of extraordinary character.

Suleiman’s great love for Roxolana was manifest in his exceptional treatment of his hasseki. To her benefit, the Sultan broke a series of very important traditions of the imperial harem. In 1533 or 1534 (the exact date is unknown), Suleiman married Hurrem in a magnificent formal ceremony, violating a 300-year-old custom of the Ottoman house according to which sultans were not to marry their concubines. Never before was a former slave elevated to the status of the sultan’s lawful spouse. Moreover, upon marrying hasseki Hurrem, the Sultan became practically monogamous, which was unheard of in Ottoman history. As Trevisano wrote in 1554, once Suleiman had known Roxolana, “not only did he want to have her as a legitimate wife and hold her as such in his seraglio, but he did not even want to know any other
woman: something that had never been done by any of his predecessors, for the Turks are accustomed to take various women in order to have children by them, or for carnal pleasure.”33

Roxolana became the first woman to remain in the Sultan’s court for the duration of her life. In the Ottoman royal family tradition, a sultan’s concubine was to remain in the harem only until her son came of age (around 16 or 17), after which he would be sent away from the capital to govern a faraway province, and his mother would follow him.34 She would return to Istanbul only in the capacity of valide sultan (mother of the reigning sultan). In defiance of this age-old custom, Hurrem stayed behind in the harem with her hunchback son Jihangir, even after her three other sons went to govern the empire’s remote provinces.35 Moreover, she moved out of the harem located in the Old Palace (Eskiserai) to Suleiman’s quarters located in the New Palace (Topkapi) after a fire destroyed the old palace.

... As [Leslie] Pierce persuasively argues, the roots of the Ottoman public’s dislike of Hurrem lay in Suleiman’s breaking three important harem traditions for Hurrem: the concubine status of royal mothers, the reproductive principle of “one concubine mother — one son,” and the presence of a prince’s mother at her son’s provincial post.37 Traditionally, the two roles of the sultan’s concubines — the sultan’s favorite (a sexual role) and that of mother of the prince (a post-sexual role) — were separated in the imperial harem, the separation made at the moment when the woman left the harem to follow her adult son to a province. In Hurrem, however, “these two functions were collapsed for the first time in the career of one woman,” as she was “caught between two conflicting loyalties: mother to the prince, and wife to the sultan.”38 As a result, the Ottomans could not come to terms with Hurrem’s ambiguous status in the harem.

When critics accuse Roxolana of manipulating and plotting against her harem rivals — Gulbahar, Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha, Prince Mustapha, and Grand Vizier Ahmed Pasha — they tend to overlook the fact that she had to fight for her own survival and the survival of her children in the very competitive world of the imperial harem, which was populated by hundreds of beautiful women and able men and ruled by the fratricide law. Hurrem was thus unjustly and harshly judged by her contemporaries for surviving and doing so brilliantly. Her rise from slave to sultana was not only the result of Suleiman’s love and benevolence, but also the result of her own intelligence, effort, and extraordinary political skill. Hurrem knew the Sultan’s nature very well39 and skillfully used that knowledge to her advantage. On one occasion, Gulbehar, mother of the first-born Mustafa, overcome by jealousy, called Hurrem “sold meat” (“carne venduta”) and scratched Hurrem’s face very badly. When the envoy came to summon Hurrem to Suleiman’s quarters for the night, she refused to go on the grounds that she did not dare offend the Sultan’s
eyesight with her disfigured looks. Suleiman insisted and upon seeing Hurrem’s bruised face, sent Gulbahar away to join her son Mustafa in the province of Magnesia.40

Unlike other harem concubines before her, who had never risen above the level of harem rivalry, Roxolana had political ambition and was, it seemed, determined to achieve as much power and independence as a woman possibly could within the Ottoman slave system. She dared to have a voice in the government. She played an important role in Suleiman’s diplomatic dealings and correspondence, often acting on the Sultan’s behalf, when an assurance of his peaceful intentions and an exchange of gifts were necessary.43 She also influenced the Sultan’s diplomatic relations with other sovereigns and foreign embassies. . .