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WHITE INK



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“Among the secrets of the Ottoman palaces”

We have always seen the palaces of the Ottoman sultans in their capital, Istanbul, clearly visible to everyone, telling us the story of the Ottoman history mixed with the appearance of pomp and magnificence. They were trying to keep pace with European capitals during the nineteenth century, as the capital of a major empire at that time.

These palaces were left to become one of the most prominent tourist attractions, and a source of income for the Turkish state at the present time. When tourists from all over the world come to the historical capital, they are drawn to the manifestations of those palaces, until they are fascinated. They are impressed by the amount and forms of exaggerated luxury experienced by some sultans and their lifestyles that were completely different from the reality of the population societies that were subject to the empire, which indicates the existence of a great state of complete dissociation between the reality of the ruling class and the people.

Perhaps one of the most famous of these palaces is Tolma Baghja (Dolmabahçe). It was built by Sultan Abdul Majeed (1861-1839) AD, and it was completed in 1856 AD. He made it his residence with his entourage, and his official residence to receive foreign government guests.

The palace was built under the Western European engineering style, and came out as an architectural masterpiece in the mid-nineteenth century. This masterpiece reflects the Sultan's strong influence on European thought and culture, in addition to his penchant for worldly luxury.

The palace included several buildings, including; The main building, the clock tower, the Haremlik Palace, the Crown Prince's Palace, the palace located between the Haremlik and the outer borders, and the private theater. The palace is decorated with a number of lush gardens.

The cost of building the palace reached millions of Ottoman gold liras. It severely affected the state budget and put it under the pressure of large debts.

Going back again to talk about the Haremlik; that palace was the residence of the Sultan's wives, daughters and concubines. Those concubines were brought by slave traders during their adolescence, or were given to the Sultan as a gift. In choosing the concubines of the Haremlik; beauty, attractiveness, body shape and beautiful facial features were often taken into account, regardless of their origin, lineage and from where they were brought. Girls of extreme beauty were presented to the sultan, and one of them might reach the rank of "Gözde", meaning the sultan's favorite girl, thus raising her status and fame and becoming a special concubine.

In reality, these palaces were nothing but an appearance and a kind of splurge, ostentation, and luxury. In connection with this, I remember the famous saying of Ibn Khaldun, "If money becomes great, then luxury spreads, which leads to the collapse of the state". Therefore, the sultans committed the same mistakes as others, so lusts, pleasures, and taboos dominated them. This is what was confirmed by the Turkish historian "Yılmaz Öztuna" when he said about Sultan Abdul Majid that he was preoccupied with women and wine, and he admired blonde women with blue eyes. The palace became teeming with European concubines of different nationalities and races, who had been stolen from their homelands or kidnapped. Their role in the palace was to entertain the sultans and to hold fun and promiscuity parties. This was followed by the stages of loss of prestige and power for the Sultan and the state together. For example, some of the sultans spent his days among the concubines and musicians until he became like a plaything among them.

He was succeeded by Sultan Abdul Aziz (1876-1861) AD. The number of concubines in his palace reached about four hundred, at least, until the palace rooms became crowded with them. The number of eunuch Aghas increased greatly with them until the number of the palace's population reached more than two thousand people, excluding the guards and soldiers.

What financial budget can cover the size of that spending and waste on the manifestations of luxury and decadence experienced by the sultans? We can add to this the fulfillment of the state of the sultan's regulations and protocols in the management of the palace and the personal requirements of the sultan, his family and his servants. Medhat Pasha, the Grand Vizier, was aware of this. He tried to put an end to such extravagance and waste that has been inherited since the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, and control financial matters, including his attempt to abolish the slavery system and free slaves and maidservants of the palace.

Of course, these attempts never worked, but later caused his death. Other than that, we can mention the extent of the influence that the Haremlik's soft power of concubines, maidservants, mistress and others had on state policy and management. The negative influence on the decisions of the Sultan and his government increased, so the state was lost between luxury and concubines. These things led to the rapid collapse of the state.