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Delegitimizing Sultan Ibrahim: Administrative Practice, Moral Accusations, and Contested Legitimacy in the Ottoman Court

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Abstract

This article offers a source-critical reassessment of the reign of Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1640–1648), long portrayed in Ottoman historiography through narratives of irrationality, excess, and political incapacity. Reading Ottoman chronicles and European accounts alongside imperial decrees, marginal notes, fiscal registers, and palace inventories, it tests familiar accusations against the surviving administrative record. First, it argues that the archive does not sustain the strongest later claim that Ibrahim's reign was defined by a compulsive and fiscally ruinous obsession with sable furs; instead, sable appears within broader circuits of diplomatic exchange, palace procurement, ceremonial redistribution, and elite bestowal. Second, Ibrahim's own orders reveal sustained engagement with monetary regulation, taxation, provisioning, administrative reporting, public order, and moral oversight, articulated through legality, precedent, and distributive justice. Third, the article shows that accusations concerning luxury, women, and incapacity derived much of their force from retrospective narrative construction and from the altered political conditions of the later reign. Without seeking simply to rehabilitate Ibrahim as a successful ruler, the article reframes his reign as a case of contested legitimacy in which governance, court politics, mediated sovereignty, and historiographical convention converged to produce one of the most enduringly negative images in Ottoman dynastic history.

Keywords: Sultan Ibrahim, Ottoman Historiography, Political Legitimacy, Administrative Practice, Moral Discourse, Delegitimation.

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Sultan İbrahim'in Gayrimeşrulaştırılması: Osmanlı Sarayında İdari Pratikler, Ahlâkî Suçlamalar ve Tartışmalı Meşruiyet

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Öz

Bu makale, Osmanlı historiografisinde uzun süredir akıldışılık, aşırılık ve siyasal yetersizlik anlatılarıyla çerçevelenen Sultan İbrahim'in saltanatını (1640–1648) kaynak-eleştirel bir yaklaşımla yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Osmanlı kronikleri ile Avrupa kaynaklarını hatt-ı hümâyunlar, fermanlar, mali defterler ve saray envanterleriyle birlikte okuyan çalışma, literatürde tekrarlanan suçlamaları mevcut idari kayıtlar ışığında sınamaktadır. İlk olarak, arşiv malzemesinin Sultan İbrahim'in saltanatının samur kürk etrafında şekillenen patolojik ve mali bakımdan yıkıcı bir "takıntı" ile tanımlandığı yönündeki güçlü geç dönem anlatısını doğrulamadığı; samurun daha çok diplomatik hediyeleşme, saray tedariki, törensel yeniden dağıtım ve seçkin çevrelere ihsan bağlamlarında göründüğü ileri sürülmektedir. İkinci olarak, Sultan İbrahim'in hatt-ı hümâyunları ve emirleri para düzenlemeleri, vergilendirme, iaşe, idari haberleşme, kamu düzeni ve ahlâkın korunması alanlarında süreklilik gösteren bir yönetsel müdahilliğe işaret etmektedir; bu müdahillik kanunilik, emsal ve dağıtıcı adalet diliyle kurulmaktadır. Üçüncü olarak, çalışma, lüks, kadınlar ve siyasal yetersizlik etrafındaki suçlamaların açıklayıcı gücünü büyük ölçüde geriye dönük anlatı inşasından ve saltanatın son evresinin değişen siyasal koşullarından aldığını göstermektedir. Makale, Sultan İbrahim'i basitçe başarılı bir hükümdar olarak rehabilite etmeye yönelmeden, onun saltanatını yönetişim, saray siyaseti, aracılanmış egemenlik ve tarih yazımsal teamüllerin birleşerek Osmanlı hanedan tarihinin en kalıcı olumsuz imajlarından birini ürettiği tartışmalı bir meşruiyet vakası olarak yeniden yorumlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sultan İbrahim, Osmanlı Tarih Yazımı, Siyasal Meşruiyet, İdari Pratik, Ahlâk Söylemi, Gayrimeşrulaştırma.

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Introduction

Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1640–1648) occupies an uneasy place in Ottoman historiography, where his reign has often been explained through moralized motifs of sexual excess, uncontrolled luxury, and impaired judgment. Such accounts have endured because they offer an immediately legible script in which political strain is recast as personal pathology. Yet they also risk obscuring what the Ottoman administrative record makes visible: not only a ruler as narrated, but a ruler as documented through directives, marginal notes, fiscal registers, and inventories that record the routines, constraints, and pressures of governing.

Modern scholarship has not been silent on Ibrahim. M. Çağatay Uluçay, for his part, had already published a number of Ibrahim's mektup, ferman, telhis, and hatt-ı hümâyûn texts in his dispersed Tarih Dünyası series "Sultan İbrahim Deli mi, Hasta mıydı?"; however, his discussion remained centered primarily on whether the sultan was mentally unstable or ill, rather than on the broader questions of governance, mediated sovereignty, and retrospective delegitimation that guide the present study (Uluçay, 1950–1951). Feridun Emecen later emphasized both the psychological strain of Ibrahim's princely years and the stabilizing role of Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha during the first phase of the reign, while also noting that Ibrahim's own hatt-ı hümâyûns point to sustained involvement in matters such as coinage, taxation, provisioning, and market control (Emecen, 2016, pp. 321–350). More recent chronicle-centered work such as Bekir Gökpınar's has likewise underlined the relative stability of the first four years and the significance of actors such as Kösem Sultan, Koçi Bey, and Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha (Gökpınar, 2020, pp. 1–22). The present article therefore does not claim to uncover an entirely unknown evidentiary field. Its contribution lies in re-reading Ottoman chronicles, European accounts, and administrative materials together in order to ask more precisely how political conflict, mediated sovereignty, and retrospective moralization interacted in the making of Ibrahim's posthumous image. In this respect, it also integrates European diplomatic and narrative accounts more fully into the discussion than chronicle-centered studies have generally done, while bringing them into more systematic dialogue with administrative materials than earlier document-based scholarship.

Against this historiographical background, the article reassesses Ibrahim's reign by placing narrative authority in sustained tension with administrative practice. Drawing on contemporaneous archival documentation—especially imperial decrees, handwritten imperial degrees, fiscal materials, and palace inventories—alongside Ottoman chronicles and European accounts, it reconstructs Ibrahim's governing role as it appears in administrative form. Its argument is not that narrative sources are simply false or that archival materials transparently disclose political reality. Rather, it treats reputation as a historical artifact with its own political history and asks how recurrent accusations against Ibrahim acquired authority across different genres, chronologies, and evidentiary settings.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it brings together archival materials—especially inventory registers (müfredat defterleri), fiscal ledgers, and decrees with marginal annotations—in order to reassess emblematic claims such as Ibrahim's alleged "sable fur obsession" and other accusations sustained largely through narrative repetition. Some of these materials, particularly within the Topkapı Palace archive, were already known to earlier scholarship; the contribution of the present study

lies not in claiming their absolute novelty, but in recontextualizing them within a broader source-critical inquiry. Second, the article situates Ibrahim's reign within wider debates on political legitimacy, mediated sovereignty, and the uses of moral discourse in Ottoman historical writing. In this reading, accusations of vice function less as neutral descriptions than as explanatory idioms through which political conflict was rendered morally intelligible. Third, it advances a comparative method that treats archival density itself as a form of evidence. By contrasting the limited and episodic documentation for certain accusations directed at Ibrahim with the much denser records generated by Murad IV's structured resource extraction and Mehmed IV's institutionalized hunting culture, the article clarifies a broader asymmetry: some royal practices became administratively legible, while others survived primarily as retrospective narrative constructions.

This approach responds to a persistent imbalance in the treatment of Ibrahim's reign, where hostile chronicles—especially Naima, Kâtib Çelebi, and Silahdar—have often served, implicitly or explicitly, as authoritative diagnoses, even though their accounts were shaped by factional politics, moral rhetoric, and retrospective justification. Rather than dismissing such texts, the article reads them as politically situated narratives whose explanatory force must be tested against contemporaneous administrative traces and against the changing political environment of the reign itself. In this respect, it is essential to distinguish between the relatively more stable first years of Ibrahim's rule, when figures such as Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha remained decisive, and the later phase of the reign. In that later phase, shifting court alignments, growing factionalism, and the increasing prominence of palace intermediaries gave hostile narratives greater plausibility and force (Emecen, 2016, pp. 321–350; Gökpınar, 2020, pp. 1–22).

Ultimately, this article contends that Ibrahim's posthumous image was less the inevitable outcome of individual behavior than the product of political necessity and discursive construction. Read through the archives, the reign appears as a case of contested legitimacy in which narrative frameworks concentrated blame and translated structural strain into character judgment. This reassessment does not treat Ibrahim as an isolated actor. His reign unfolded within a courtly and administrative constellation shaped by figures such as Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha, Kösem Sultan, and other palace, military, and religious intermediaries whose roles could stabilize, redirect, or intensify the exercise of power. Accordingly, the article does not deny the importance of these actors in shaping the course of the reign. Rather, it asks how their interventions interacted with sultanic oversight and with the retrospective construction of failure. The sections that follow trace this process across accession and early governance, fiscal discipline, and gendered politics. They conclude by examining the documentary conditions under which luxury—above all the sable trope—was transformed into a condensed explanation for deposition and regicide.

1. Method

To examine the tension between narrative authority and administrative practice outlined above, this study adopts a source-critical historical approach grounded in systematic document analysis. The research corpus consists of two broad but internally differentiated bodies of evidence: Ottoman archival records and narrative texts. At its core are contemporaneous Ottoman administrative materials, especially imperial decrees and edicts, imperial marginal notes (hatt-ı hümâyûn) written in the sultan's own hand, fiscal registers and ledgers, and palace inventories. These materials are read alongside Ottoman narrative histories—both near-contemporary and later—as well as European

diplomatic and historical accounts that circulated parallel explanatory tropes about Ibrahim's rule. The aim is not to oppose one genre to another, but to assess how far recurrent accusations can be traced in administrative practice and under what conditions mismatch, evidentiary thinness, or differences in archival density become historically meaningful within a bureaucratic polity.

This approach also builds on earlier scholarship and source publications concerning Ibrahim's reign. The evidentiary value of Ibrahim's own hatt-ı hümâyûns and related administrative writings has already been noted, and some relevant documents were published earlier in dispersed form. The contribution of the present study lies not in the absolute novelty of every cited document, but in the systematic re-reading of administrative materials, Ottoman chronicles, and European accounts within a single analytical frame. In contrast to studies grounded primarily in Ottoman chronicle material, it incorporates European diplomatic and narrative accounts as an integral part of the comparative evidentiary field.

The archival materials used here were identified through targeted catalog and series-based searches, especially in BOA, TS.MA.e, TS.MA.d, TS.MA, MAD.d, and HAT. They were selected for their relevance to the article's central problem: claims of moral and fiscal disorder—above all the oft-repeated "sable fur obsession"—and the broader question of how legitimacy was narrated into failure. Priority was given to documents that (a) can be securely attributed to Ibrahim's reign, (b) preserve the sultan's direct voice through marginal notes or explicit commands, and (c) concern domains repeatedly moralized in the narrative tradition, including luxury goods, provisioning, coinage, extraordinary taxation, public order, and sexual morality. Where possible, claims drawn from chronicles and European observers are matched against administrative decision-sites where corroborating traces would normally be expected, including appointments, procurement and distribution registers, fiscal movements, policing orders, and provincial enforcement. For comparative control, the analysis also draws on selected documentary clusters from the reigns of Murad IV and Mehmed IV, treating differences in archival density and administrative legibility as interpretive evidence rather than neutral background.

The analysis unfolds through three closely related operations. First, narrative claims are decomposed into testable propositions: what is alleged to have been demanded, by whom, through which channels, and with what political, fiscal, or symbolic consequences. Second, the administrative corpus is examined for corresponding traces, including direct references, procurement and distribution entries, enforcement orders, fiscal movements, and repeated documentary patterns that would be expected if a practice were routine or politically consequential. Third, where narratives and archives diverge, that divergence is analyzed as a problem of political language, mediated sovereignty, and post-depositional memory: how moral vocabularies convert structural strain into character judgment, concentrate blame in the ruler's person, and retrospectively render political conflict intelligible. Credibility is strengthened through source criticism, triangulation across archival series, and transparent citation of shelfmarks so that claims can be rechecked and extended.

This approach has limits that shape the scope of inference. Administrative survival is uneven, catalog descriptions may obscure relevant materials, and the absence of a dense paper trail cannot be equated mechanically with the absence of a practice. Documentary silence or evidentiary thinness becomes meaningful only under carefully

specified comparative conditions, especially when comparable royal pursuits or administrative routines would normally be expected to leave repeated and bureaucratically visible traces. Ottoman and European narrative sources alike are likewise shaped by retrospective framing, factional positioning, and representational conventions that intensify moral explanation. The method therefore distinguishes documented governing practice from the later narrative frameworks through which rule was redescribed as moral failure in the years surrounding and following deposition and regicide. With these constraints in view, the analysis begins by reassessing the accession of 1640 as a baseline against which later crisis narratives may be evaluated.

2. Reassessing a Turning Point: Accession, Consensus and Retrospective Crisis Narratives

Against this evidentiary background, the political and institutional circumstances surrounding Ibrahim's accession in 1640 warrant reassessment beyond the moralizing tropes that have long organized his reputation. His enthronement is best understood within a conjuncture of dynastic vulnerability, factional fatigue, and institutional continuity in the early 1640s. Seen in this context, the succession did not itself inaugurate crisis, as later narratives often imply, but marked a comparatively rare moment of alignment within the imperial center that briefly stabilized the dynasty after decades of volatility.

Ottoman narrative accounts and later historiography have often treated the accession as a prelude to decline, retroactively filtering the transition through assumptions about Ibrahim's emotional fragility and social isolation. Peçevi, for example, describes him as possessing a "lightness of mind" (*hiffet-i aklı olmağla*), a characterization presented as disqualifying him from earlier succession scenarios (Şimşek, 2005, p. 48). Yet even if prolonged confinement and the fear of death had left deep marks on Ibrahim, his accession must also be understood in dynastic terms. He was not simply an unlikely candidate, but the sole viable bearer of continuity at a moment when the ruling house faced an existential problem.

That background helps explain why fear appears so prominently in both Ottoman and European accounts of the succession. Years of confinement and uncertainty undoubtedly shaped Ibrahim's disposition. For an extended period, he lived under a credible threat of execution, a reality acknowledged in multiple traditions, though not always narrated in identical terms. According to the French envoy Sieur du Loir, Kösem Sultan intervened by misleading the dying Murad IV into believing that his brother's execution had already been carried out, thereby preserving Ibrahim's life (Sieur du Loir, 1654, pp. 111–112). Other Western observers, including Vanel, likewise emphasize Ibrahim's reluctance to leave his quarters and his fear of assassination, reporting that he accepted the throne only after personally confirming Murad's death (Vanel, 1697, pp. 545–546). Such accounts register situational fear at a moment of dynastic transition rather than, by themselves, demonstrating mental incapacity as a stable governing condition.

Ibrahim's own imperial marginal notes, however, complicate any reading of confinement as producing lasting discursive rupture. Despite the years he spent under the shadow of coercion, he repeatedly invokes Murad IV in affirmative, even reverential terms. In one note he recalls that "in the time of my late, warrior brother, they took [men] as extraordinary troops (efrâd)" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/8, 4); in another he asserts, "I shall campaign like my late brother" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0793/64, 12); elsewhere he refers

to him simply as “my late brother—may God’s mercy be vast” (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/2, 9). Material reproduced by Uluçay points in the same direction, likewise suggesting that Ibrahim’s references to Murad IV were not confined to formulaic reverence but could also serve as a way of framing present conduct through remembered precedent. Read against interpretations that frame the accession primarily through trauma or incapacity, these formulations point instead to an idiom of dynastic piety, political memory, and rhetorical continuity within the sultanic voice. At the same time, such language remained compatible with dynastic decorum, in which reverent reference to a predecessor also served to uphold imperial tradition and protect the symbolic dignity of the house.

The Ottoman narrative sources largely corroborate the atmosphere of fear surrounding the transition while diverging in emphasis. Naima rejects the claim that Murad IV was preoccupied with executing his brother and instead portrays him as focused on his own impending death; nevertheless, he records Ibrahim’s initial refusal of power and his subsequent acceptance of the throne once Murad’s death was confirmed, accompanied by prayers for the well-being of the Muslim community (Naima, 2007a, p. 942). Solakzade likewise depicts the succession as orderly, recounting that Murad summoned Ibrahim and acknowledged him as successor; in this account, Ibrahim’s participation in Murad’s burial appears as dynastic reverence rather than trauma-induced withdrawal (Solakzade Mehmed Hemdemi Çelebi, 1880, pp. 766–777).

Taken together, these materials converge on a point often obscured by later polemic: Ibrahim’s accession occurred without significant opposition and in a climate of relative consensus. This stands in marked contrast to most other seventeenth-century accessions. Osman II ascended as a minor and was ultimately overthrown by the janissaries; Mustafa I, widely regarded as incapable of rule, was deposed twice; Murad IV, enthroned at eleven, required nearly a decade to consolidate authority; and Mehmed IV came to power at seven under full regency. Ibrahim alone assumed the throne as an adult amid institutional continuity and elite acquiescence. This matters because later narratives repeatedly recast this stabilizing transition as an early symptom of dysfunction, converting a moment of dynastic consolidation into retrospective evidence of illegitimacy.

Reconsidering the accession as a moment of stabilization does not deny the tensions that intensified later in the 1640s. It does, however, establish a more proportionate baseline for interpreting the trajectory of the reign. The early convergence of dynastic survival, adult rulership, and elite acquiescence is difficult to reconcile with claims of immediate incapacity, and it underscores how later narrative traditions projected the logic of deposition backward onto the moment of succession. At the same time, this initial stabilization also depended on powerful intermediaries, above all Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha, whose political weight helped structure the earlier phase of the reign, even if, as later sections will show, this did not preclude continued sultanic intervention in subsequent years.

This stabilizing accession also helps explain why the early months of Ibrahim’s reign are better approached through administrative practice than through retrospective diagnosis alone. With succession secured and elite acquiescence in place, the imperial center initially moved toward routine governance. Inherited disputes had to be managed, external relations reaffirmed, and political order stabilized within a wider courtly and administrative setting. The next section therefore turns to that early phase of rule and

asks how Ibrahim's governing role appears when read through the archive rather than through the explanatory shortcuts of later narrative tradition.

3. Reframing Governance: Executive Agency under Sultan Ibrahim

Despite his enduringly negative reputation, Sultan Ibrahim's reign reveals a ruler who participated actively in governing the empire, even if that participation is most clearly recoverable in the earlier phase of the reign. The available evidence suggests that his initiatives, diplomatic posture, and responses to crisis can be read not simply as aberrations or passive reactions, but as part of a broader effort to preserve continuity, stabilize inherited arrangements, and maintain political order. Read in this way, the reign points less to withdrawal than to a form of mediated political agency exercised within an active courtly and administrative environment.

A first indication of this orientation appears in the rapid normalization of diplomacy after 1640. Contemporary diplomatic traffic treated the accession less as a rupture than as a moment to reaffirm existing arrangements and manage inherited disputes. As later summarized by Hammer-Purgstall, the Porte moved quickly to notify major European courts, reiterate the continuation of peace, and address frontier concerns. Renewals of capitulations and assurances of treaty continuity with Venice, together with the routine succession of French and English representatives, likewise point to an early diplomatic agenda focused on stabilization through protocol and continuity rather than confrontation (Hammer-Purgstall, 1829, vol. V, pp. 301–302).

From the outset of his reign, the same orientation is visible in Ibrahim's effort to remain informed on matters of state. His engagement with Koçi Bey—one of the most prominent political commentators of the period—suggests not reformist originality so much as an attempt to anchor decision-making within established norms of advice, fiscal prudence, and administrative continuity. Modern scholarship has likewise emphasized that the earlier phase of the reign was structured not only by Ibrahim's own concern with rule, but also by the stabilizing presence of powerful intermediaries, above all Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha (Emecen, 2000, pp. 274–275; Gökpınar, 2020, p. 4). The early reign is therefore best understood not in terms of either autonomous sovereignty or passive dependence, but as a mediated field in which sultanic authority and ministerial execution operated together.

Contemporary observers reinforce this image. Topçular Kâtibi, for example, portrays Ibrahim as attentive to appropriate policy directions and broadly aligned with core priorities of the state. This orientation is especially apparent in Ibrahim's response to crisis. In the summer of 1640, when a hurricane and subsequent fire devastated parts of Istanbul, he reacted swiftly, mobilizing relief and overseeing measures intended to mitigate the consequences (Topçular Kâtibi, 2003, pp. 1133–1147). Such intervention underscores responsiveness to public welfare—an essential criterion of legitimate rulership in Ottoman political thought—and sits uneasily with later portrayals of irrational detachment. In this episode, Ibrahim appears as a ruler attentive to urban stability and social order.

Developments in the following year further illuminate the political environment of Ibrahim's early reign, though not always in ways that permit a straightforward attribution of initiative. In June 1641, Ibrahim renewed an existing treaty with a Safavid envoy dispatched to congratulate him on his accession, thereby reaffirming diplomatic continuity on the eastern frontier. The Emîrgûneoğlu affair, however, requires more

careful treatment. Emîrgûneoğlu, who had surrendered the Revan fortress to the Ottomans in 1635 and converted to Sunni Islam under Murad IV, later became implicated in attempts to secure repatriation to Iran, allegedly through contact with the Safavid envoy İbrahim Kaçar. According to one account, after Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha reported that the initiative had originated with Emîrgûneoğlu himself rather than with the Safavid court, Ibrahim treated the attempt as a breach of loyalty and ordered his execution, which was carried out after the envoy's departure (Solakzade Mehmed Hemdemi Çelebi, 1880, pp. 553–554). Yet this episode is difficult to interpret as a simple case of newly formulated sovereign decision-making, since the punitive outcome may already have been under consideration and the envoy's presence may merely have postponed its implementation. Güngörürler, moreover, offers a different reading, suggesting that the Safavid envoy formally requested Emîrgûneoğlu's return and that the Ottoman court used the occasion to remove a diplomatically sensitive figure without appearing to act under external compulsion (Güngörürler, 2016, pp. 126–127). The case is therefore best understood not as unambiguous proof of Ibrahim's independent initiative, but as evidence of how the Ottoman court under his reign managed loyalty, punishment, and diplomatic protocol in tandem.

Ibrahim's conduct toward the Safavids was not an isolated success but part of a broader pattern of strategic restraint. Aware of the wider European context shaped by the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), he also pursued renewal of the Treaty of Zsitvatorok with the Habsburgs in 1642. Although Ottoman demands for tribute were rejected and no tangible concessions secured, the preservation of peace and symbolic hierarchy nevertheless constituted a diplomatic gain (Köhbach, 1984, pp. 239–240). Throughout Ibrahim's reign, relations with the Habsburgs remained peaceful, ceremonial exchanges continued, and imperial prestige was maintained without resort to costly warfare.

Across both eastern and western theaters, Ibrahim's early foreign policy thus reflects a strategy of preservation rather than expansion. Faced with a volatile geopolitical landscape and significant internal pressures, he favored stability over risk and negotiation over confrontation. Maintaining peace with the Habsburgs while cautiously managing Safavid relations allowed the empire to safeguard its interests without sacrificing dignity or authority. At the same time, this diplomatic picture should not be detached from the broader structure of the reign. The same years that reveal Ibrahim's participation in policy also reveal the importance of figures such as Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha and Koçi Bey in shaping the channels through which that participation was articulated. If the later years of the reign became increasingly troubled, that shift should be understood not simply in terms of personal incapacity, but in relation to a changing political and military conjuncture that altered the conditions under which court politics, expenditure, and royal conduct were judged. Chronicle-centered studies have likewise associated this transition with the opening of the Cretan war and the breakdown of the earlier phase of relative stability (Gökpınar, 2020, pp. 4, 12–14). The clearest basis for reassessing Ibrahim's political role therefore lies not in diplomacy alone, but in the archival record of fiscal governance and administrative oversight, where his interventions become most consistently legible. The next section turns to those materials and asks how far Ibrahim's own governing presence can be reconstructed from the documentary record.

4. Fiscal Governance and Administrative Discipline under Sultan Ibrahim

Sultan Ibrahim's fiscal and administrative interventions complicate the entrenched image of a ruler detached from governance. The archival record instead reveals a mode of rule grounded in delegation, repetition, and documentary oversight. Read through imperial notes (hatt-ı hümâyûn) and formal decrees (fermânlar), Ibrahim appears less as a sovereign acting through episodic coercion than as one seeking to stabilize procedure by identifying delay, demanding written accountability, and insisting that fiscal correction be reconciled with justice. This administrative register sits uneasily with narrative portrayals that reduce his reign to passivity, irrationality, or excess, and it invites a reconsideration of how political capacity has been measured in the historiography.

Any reassessment of Ibrahim's administrative role must nevertheless take account of the early political constellation of his reign, in which Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha and Koçi Bey exercised considerable influence. It would be difficult to deny that the relative stability of the first years rested in part on strong ministerial leadership, experienced administrative guidance, and reformist advice. At the same time, the surviving imperial notes and decrees do not support describing Ibrahim as a passive bystander to policies formulated by others. They instead show a ruler who repeatedly monitored implementation, corrected instructions, demanded further reports, and sought to ensure that his orders were neither ignored nor delayed. The point, therefore, is not that Ibrahim acted independently of powerful advisers, but that the documentary record does not permit his reduction to a merely receptive sovereign.

A useful point of comparison is Murad IV, who, like Ibrahim, drew on the nasihatname tradition, particularly Koçi Bey. Koçi Bey first presented his treatise to Murad IV in 1631 and later revised it for Ibrahim in the early 1640s. Murad engaged such counsel selectively and forcefully, adapting it to urgent military and political circumstances; his discipline of the Janissaries and interventions in the timar system exemplify a more visibly interventionist model of sovereignty (Gündoğdu, 2025, pp. 617–631). In Ibrahim's case, by contrast, advice appears to have been mediated through established administrative channels and through the prominent role of leading statesmen, above all Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha. Yet the archival record suggests that this advisory framework did not displace the sultan from the process of rule. What emerges instead is a pattern in which counsel and ministerial execution remained subject to repeated sultanic oversight, corrective annotation, and demands for documented implementation.

This procedural mode is particularly visible in Ibrahim's handling of monetary policy. Koçi Bey identified the regulation of coinage as among the most vital affairs of state, warning that debasement disrupted fiscal order and imposed hardship on the population (Koçi Bey, 1972, p. 101). Ibrahim responded by instructing Grand Vizier Mustafa Pasha to address the matter, initiating not a single reform but an extended sequence of interventions designed to keep the issue administratively active. Across multiple imperial notes, he returned to the same concerns: delay, inadequate reporting, and the absence of visible progress. In one directive he demanded an explanation of what had been done regarding the sultanic coinage; in another he complained that, despite the passage of a full year, the matter remained unresolved. In these texts, elapsed time itself becomes an index of responsibility: delay is treated not as a neutral technical obstacle

but as a political and moral failure (BOA, TS.MA. 7022/556; BOA, TS.MA.e. 800/4-19).

The same idiom appears in Ibrahim's treatment of provisioning, prosperity, and public perception as criteria of legitimate rule. When rumors of scarcity circulated in Istanbul, he ordered inquiry and correction rather than dismissal: "Be informed that it is said there is truly… scarcity in Istanbul; it must be examined properly" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/3-28). He then linked provisioning to reputational legitimacy, insisting that he wished to be recognized as a just ruler: "so that we may merit good prayers; so that it may be said: 'we have fallen to a just sultan and a good vizier'" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/3-28). Elsewhere, the same concern is condensed into a maxim: "Let our time be governed with justice" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/3-13). These expressions do not merely ornament rule; they articulate a political grammar in which justice, provisioning, and public perception were mutually constitutive.

The repetition of this language across the archive is analytically significant. Rather than indicating inconsistency or distraction alone, it also reflects sustained intervention and mounting frustration with bureaucratic inertia. In further decrees, Ibrahim rejected excuses and demanded concrete accounts of outcomes rather than mere statements of intent. These admonitions were accompanied by direct involvement. He personally inspected sample coins—five- and ten-akçe denominations—approved their continued minting according to revised specifications, and ordered that seized gold and silver be struck accordingly for both Janissary stipends (ulufe) and public circulation (BOA, TS.MA. 7022/374; BOA, TS.MA. 7022/602). Reports submitted by the grand vizier were acknowledged with handwritten confirmations indicating that the information had been brought to the sultan's attention, signaling ongoing supervision rather than ceremonial assent (BOA, TS.MA. 7022/190; BOA, TS.MA. 7022/269; BOA, TS.MA. 7022/291; BOA, TS.MA. 7022/537; BOA, TS.MA. 5207/16; BOA, TS.MA. 5207/23). The documents do not always allow us to determine who first formulated each measure, but they show how Ibrahim endorsed, corrected, and repeatedly reactivated policies once they entered the sphere of imperial decision.

Crucially, Ibrahim's insistence on monetary correction extended beyond the capital. In separate imperial decrees addressed to provincial governors and judicial officials, including those in Temeşvar, Belgrade, and Semendire, he demanded strict enforcement of revised coin values (BOA, TS.MA. 5207/16; BOA, TS.MA. 5207/23). The recurrence of enforcement language across multiple provinces frames monetary stabilization as an empire-wide corrective rather than a localized intervention. The administrative record thus presents a ruler contending not with indifference, but with the practical limits of implementation across a geographically expansive and uneven bureaucratic system.

A comparable concern with procedural correction and fiscal equity appears in Ibrahim's handling of taxation, particularly the emergency levy (avârız). Koçi Bey warned that extracting five riyâl kuruş per household was excessive and oppressive for poorer subjects, insisting that "the established law has long been three hundred akçes" (Koçi Bey, 1972, p. 92). Ibrahim's own marginal practice closely mirrors this logic of precedent. After initially writing "five kuruş," he later amended the directive in a corrective note: "Although I said five kuruş, if it is oppression, let it be collected according to what has been taken from earlier times" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 797/66). This revision is revealing not because it guarantees implementation, but because it shows a

ruler willing to revise fiscal instruction in the name of continuity, legality, and distributive legitimacy rather than persist in a merely performative command.

Building on the same advisory framework, Ibrahim judged a rate of five riyâl guruş per household to be excessive and unjust, particularly for poorer subjects, and ordered the levy reduced to 300 akçes. If, as Topçular Kâtibi records, one riyâl guruş equaled eighty akçes, this represented a substantial reduction, implemented despite its negative implications for the treasury (Topçular Kâtibi, 2003, p. 1149). More revealing still is his interrogation of precedent: he questioned whether such a levy had ever been imposed in earlier periods or whether this burden was peculiar to his own reign. Fiscal governance is articulated here through legality, continuity, and moral economy rather than short-term expediency alone (BOA, TS.MA.e. 800/8).

This concern with precedent and equitable exaction also helps situate Ibrahim within a broader documentary record that does not fit the image of a merely passive ruler. Earlier scholarship had already noted that his own orders reveal sustained engagement with the practical governance of the capital, including public order, price regulation, moral policing, and the regular reporting of officials (Uluçay, 1950, pp. 657–658). The importance of that observation lies less in the interpretive framework through which it was first presented than in its recognition that Ibrahim's documentary voice remained actively involved in the everyday administration of rule.

His interventions therefore extended beyond monetary and tax policy to broader questions of administrative discipline. The decrees convey repeated frustration with silence, delay, and bureaucratic negligence, treating the flow of information as a condition of effective rule. In one directive he warned that the absence of reliable reports left him effectively isolated; if news from the frontiers ceased, he declared, his heart was filled with sorrow, since he desired that the Muslim community live in peace and prosperity under his protection. He demanded that officials exert themselves "five times more" than during the reign of his brother, explicitly linking diligence to moral and religious responsibility (BOA, TS.MA.e. 800/4). In another decree, his impatience was sharper: from one day to the next, no response had arrived and "not a single matter had been reported." He ordered immediate disclosure of provincial correspondence and warned unequivocally that he did not consent to granting respite to oppressors (BOA, TS.MA.e. 800/4, 20).

Ibrahim likewise delegated surveillance of the capital as a continuous administrative duty. In two emphatic directives he ordered his chief minister to patrol and secure the city at all hours: "Walk the city night and day" and "Be vigilant for the city's control, night and day" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/3-27). This insistence on uninterrupted monitoring reinforces the broader logic of the decrees: discipline was to be achieved through constant attention, the circulation of information, and visible enforcement rather than episodic spectacle. Nor was this logic confined to the capital. In a decree dated 12 March 1641, Ibrahim reproached the grand admiral for failing to report after the departure of the imperial fleet. Despite the time that had passed, neither the sultan nor the grand vizier had received any information regarding naval operations. He therefore demanded a comprehensive account, stressed cooperation among senior officials, and ordered that all significant developments be communicated without delay (BOA, TS.MA.e. 793/54). Here too, the document registers vigilant supervision rather than detachment.

A closely related group of directives further reveals how Ibrahim fused fiscal extraction with an explicit anti-oppression ethic. In one decree he instructed the grand vizier to pursue revenue conscientiously while avoiding waste—"Strive to secure the revenues of my imperial treasury and in spending, beware of extravagance"—but then added the governing constraint in unmistakable terms: he would not tolerate unjust exaction from any individual, warning that "I do not consent, even by a hair's breadth, to oppression; its burden will be upon your neck… strive for good works and avoid evil" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/3-19). Fiscal correction, in other words, was not separable from moral accountability; legitimate extraction was defined not only by necessity but also by its limits.

These fiscal and administrative interventions point to a coherent mode of governance grounded in procedural discipline, repetition, and documentary oversight. They do not negate the importance of influential figures such as Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha or Koçi Bey, especially in the first phase of the reign. Nor do they resolve the broader question of Ibrahim's psychological condition, which belongs to a different evidentiary and historiographical register. They do, however, complicate any model that attributes the relative effectiveness of the early reign exclusively to advisers while assigning later disorder solely to the sultan's person. The archival record examined here instead suggests a more interactive structure of rule in which ministerial guidance and sultanic supervision worked together, even if not always successfully, to produce fiscal correction, administrative follow-up, and a language of justice embedded in the everyday mechanics of governance. In this sense, the difficulties of the 1640s should not be reduced simply to personal irrationality. They must also be situated within the broader conditions of early modern rule, in which administrative and moral order were conceptually linked, and in which the same documentary voice that insists on fiscal discipline also helps explain why sexuality and gendered morality could later be mobilized as criteria of political legitimacy.

5. From Vice to Virtue? Gender, Morality and the Politics of Authority under Sultan Ibrahim

Gendered moral discourse played a central role in shaping the political evaluation of Ibrahim's rule by recoding dynastic necessity as personal vice after 1648. Harem politics, reproductive anxiety, courtly influence, and retrospective narrative construction should therefore be read not as separate themes but as mutually reinforcing mechanisms through which authority was first sustained and later delegitimized. One influential charge in both Ottoman and European traditions casts Ibrahim as excessively attached to women and sensual pleasure, a portrayal that has strongly conditioned later interpretations of his reign. Yet the source record is far less uniform than such retrospective depictions suggest. Near-contemporary Ottoman chroniclers, later Ottoman narrative historians, and European writers neither speak with one voice nor carry the same evidentiary weight. Some stress dynastic continuity and princely succession; others emphasize the political influence of female favorites and court intermediaries; still others recast these themes in an explicitly moralizing language of indulgence, female domination, and incapacity. The discussion that follows therefore reconstructs these claims in roughly chronological and evidentiary order before turning to archival materials that test their force.

At the moment of Ibrahim's accession, dynastic continuity was exceptionally urgent. As the sole surviving male of the House of Osman, he occupied a position in

which death without heirs would have raised the specter of dynastic extinction. Under such circumstances, procreation was not a private preference but a matter of state. Sexuality was therefore embedded in the logic of dynastic preservation and could be actively encouraged by the imperial elite as a condition of political continuity. Kösem Sultan appears to have played a decisive role in this process. Near-contemporary Ottoman narratives reinforce the same logic by registering the political significance of succession. Vecihi records that the birth of the heir Mehmed on 3 January brought public relief precisely because Ibrahim was the last surviving male descendant of the dynasty and that the event was celebrated for three days (Atsız, 1977, p. 15). Topçular Kâtibi likewise presents the birth of Şehzade Mehmed as a moment of collective rejoicing, marked by illuminations, artillery salutes, and festivities in the palace, the arsenal, and the fleet, while "the people of the world" were gladdened and entered into rejoicing (Topçular Kâtibi, 2003, pp. 1160–1161). Read together, these notices show that reproductive success was understood not merely as a matter of harem intimacy, but as a question of dynastic continuity and public stability. In this context, Ibrahim's engagement with the harem cannot be reduced in advance to personal vice.

Later writers, though already more interpretive in tone, preserve traces of the same dynastic logic. Kâtib Çelebi remarks that, in order to prevent the extinction of the House of Osman, Ibrahim took numerous concubines and official consorts and thereby ensured the birth of several princes, an act presented not simply as indulgence but as a service to the Ottoman state (Aycibin, 2007, p. 1049). This matters not because it carries the same evidentiary weight as near-contemporary records, but because it shows that even later narrative writing could frame Ibrahim's reproductive conduct in terms of dynastic necessity rather than sheer sensuality. Practices later narrated as evidence of excess thus originated, at least in part, in a political context structured by the imperative of succession.

The administrative record strengthens this interpretation by anchoring reproductive politics in Ibrahim's own documentary voice rather than in retrospective commentary alone. In one imperial note (hatt-ı hümâyûn), he relays a report that a sayyid had seen the Prophet in a dream and transmits instructions framed explicitly as dynastic supplication: he orders that "all my servants should fast for three days," instructs the grand vizier to notify "all the viziers" accordingly, and commands the recitation of "three thousand blessings" (salavât) "with the intention that my child may come" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 0800/3, 15). Even allowing for the conventional idiom of piety, the document is difficult to reconcile with portrayals that reduce reproductive politics to sensual indulgence. Rather, it registers procreation as dynastic anxiety, devotional practice, and collective courtly mobilization. A comparable expectation appears in official correspondence, where the grand vizier opens one submission with a prayer not only for Ibrahim's health and sovereignty, but also that God might "grant the young princes" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 794-9). As a formula, this places dynastic reproduction within the normative language of statecraft rather than treating it as a private appetite later rebranded as vice.

At the same time, criticism of Ibrahim's relations with women did not always take the form of direct accusations of erotic excess. Mehmed Halife's Tarih-i Gılmânî, for instance, says relatively little about Ibrahim's supposed womanizing as such. Instead, it highlights the prominence of Şekerpare, who is described as rising to extraordinary visibility and favor at court, acquiring recognition comparable to that of Cinci Hoca (Mehmed Halife, 1975, p. 45). Elsewhere, Mehmed Halife presents Cinci Hoca and

Şekerpare together as figures who gained great intimacy with the sultan, became notorious within the polity, and turned into feared agents of bribery and corrupt mediation (Mehmed Halife, 1975, pp. 47–48). In this register, the problem is not primarily sensuality itself, but the political consequences of intimate access, court favoritism, and corrupt patronage. Such testimony is analytically important because it shows that discourse surrounding Ibrahim and women was not uniformly sexualized: in some narratives, the principal anxiety concerned influence, mediation, and the disruption of administrative order.

Vecihi sharpens this line of criticism by moving from dynastic relief to political complaint. On the one hand, his chronicle registers the reassuring significance of princely birth. On the other hand, it suggests that Varvar Ali Pasha, governor of Sivas, objected to the fact that the sultan had come under the influence of his women or that they effectively ruled themselves (Atsız, 1977, p. 27). Elsewhere, Vecihi links the deterioration of government more directly to Ibrahim himself, asserting that the ruler no longer retained the capacity to manage affairs and had effectively left the business of the state to women (Atsız, 1977, 37v). The issue here is no longer reproduction but the conversion of courtly intimacy into a language of governmental failure. Female proximity to the ruler is re-signified as political incapacity. This shift is crucial: it shows how a dynastic and reproductive imperative could, under altered political circumstances, be transformed into evidence of illegitimacy. From 1644/45 onward, mounting fiscal strain, intensified court rivalry, and the pressures of prolonged war gave accusations of female influence a sharper political charge than they had borne at the moment of accession.

By the later narrative tradition, Ibrahim's relations with women had come to bear a heavier explanatory burden. Naima presents Ibrahim's zen-dostluğu not merely as sensual indulgence, but as a condition in which state revenues were dissipated on women and political order was undermined (Naima, 2007c, pp. 1785, 1813). In this account, sexual conduct, female influence, and fiscal or administrative failure are bound into a single explanatory scheme. The result is not simply criticism of conduct, but the production of a legible narrative in which failed rule can be explained through the ruler's relations with women.

Under these altered wartime and political conditions, such accusations acquired greater force within an environment shaped by war finance, factional struggle, and the weakening of stable grand-vizierial authority. Following the regicide, defamatory narratives proliferated, many shaped by actors directly or indirectly implicated in Ibrahim's downfall. Silahdar Fındıklılı Mehmed Ağa, who participated in the deposition, accused him of excessive favoritism toward harem women and cited lavish grants, including the assignment of provincial revenues, as evidence of misrule (Türkal, 2012, p. 256). Kâtib Çelebi, writing several years later in the Fezleke, intensified this line of criticism by portraying Ibrahim as consumed by indulgence and labeling him zen-dost, a term that compresses attachment to women into a broader judgment of political incompetence (Aycibin, 2007, pp. 1035–1036, 1015–1016). He also transmits the story that Ibrahim ordered the governor of Sivas, Varvar Ali Pasha, to deliver Perihan Hanım, the lawful wife of İpşir Mustafa Pasha, to the palace, a request reportedly refused on moral grounds. Naima, writing later, radicalized this accusatory pattern still further by claiming that Ibrahim then ordered Varvar's widow to be stripped naked and crucified publicly, a punishment allegedly prevented only through grand-vizierial intervention (Naima, 2007c, p. 1134). The escalation across these retellings is analytically significant:

each new version amplifies sexual deviance and moral violence in order to consolidate the image of a ruler whose removal could be narrated as political necessity.

European accounts written at a considerable remove intensified the same pattern. Du Loir claims that, upon entering the palace, Ibrahim found his greatest pleasure and amusement in women (Sieur du Loir, 1654, p. 131). Rycaut goes further, portraying him as pathologically dependent upon women, alleging that treasury resources were lavished upon them, and describing this attachment in the language of incurable "disease" (Rycaut, 1701, pp. 96–99). He supplements this accusation with sensational anecdotes, including the claim that Ibrahim pursued Murad IV's widow and the daughter of the şeyhülislam despite resistance (Rycaut, 1701, pp. 106–108). These texts matter not because they speak with the same evidentiary authority as near-contemporary Ottoman records, but because they reveal how sexuality came to function as an increasingly condensed explanation for failed rule. Shaped by temporal distance, court rumor, and established conventions of representing oriental despotism, they do less to document verified palace life than to reproduce and embellish an image of sovereignty already moralized in hostile narrative traditions.

The report associated with Johann Rudolf Schmid offers an especially vivid example of this process. Rudolf describes Ibrahim as repeatedly frequenting a pleasure garden in which one chamber had allegedly been adorned with sable furs and mirrors; there, after undressing in a neighboring room, the sultan and his women were said to dance naked, before Ibrahim selected one of them for sexual intercourse in the presence of the others (Strohmeyer & Vogeler, 2019-2021, pp. 181–183). Yet the analytical value of the report lies less in the literal verifiability of these scenes than in the representational logic they reveal. Rather than functioning as transparent observation of confirmed palace practice, the account is better read as part of a wider repertoire in which misgovernment was encoded through erotic spectacle, luxury, and bodily excess. Its emphasis on sable furs, mirrors, nudity, and theatricalized sexual display belongs to a political language in which contested sovereignty is translated into a morally legible narrative of corruption. Rudolf's material thus participates less in documenting conduct than in constructing unfitness to rule.

Read against this layered narrative record, portrayals that collapse reproductive urgency, female influence, and moral corruption into a single story of vice become more difficult to sustain. As Leslie Peirce notes, Ibrahim's procreative efforts were "perhaps the only sultanic duty" he fulfilled with diligence (Peirce, 1993, pp. 259–260). The point is not to deny that later narratives associated him with sexual excess, but to stress that dynastic necessity and moralized accusation were not identical from the outset.

Set beside these moralizing narratives, Ibrahim's own imperial writings preserved in the Ottoman archives suggest a different and more complex picture. These sources do not merely reflect administrative routine; they also illuminate his moral outlook and preoccupation with public order. An imperial note dated 8 August 1648, for example, reveals a forceful concern with public morality, especially with regard to adultery and prostitution. In this note, likely addressed to the grand vizier, Ibrahim orders an investigation into a case of sexual misconduct uncovered by the bostancıbaşı, who had accused a woman in Üsküdar of adultery. The sultan warns explicitly that "the act of adultery brings swift ruin upon the realm" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 800/3). Sexual misconduct here is framed not as a private sin but as a threat to imperial durability.

This concern recurs elsewhere in the archive. In another imperial note, Ibrahim reports that eight women and five men had been apprehended for prostitution and orders that appropriate punishments be imposed and fully reported back to him, demanding detailed information on legal ruling, procedure, and outcome (BOA, TS.MA.e. 800/2, 20). In a further decree issued at Davudpaşa, he forwards a petition submitted directly to him and warns the grand vizier that failure to protect the justice and welfare of common subjects would leave responsibility squarely with him (BOA, TS.MA.e. 801/1). Read together, these materials show a ruler who repeatedly linked morality, legality, and governance, presenting himself not as a detached monarch of sensual indulgence but as a moral guardian for whom both sexual and administrative disorder posed risks to the state.

In sum, the gendered accusations leveled against Sultan Ibrahim function less as transparent descriptions of conduct than as instruments of political delegitimation. Once near-contemporary Ottoman chronicles, later Ottoman narrative histories, European accounts, and archival evidence are read in relation to one another rather than as evidentially interchangeable, the record appears less uniform than a simple story of woman-obsession would suggest. Some texts foreground dynastic reproduction and the relief generated by the birth of a prince; others emphasize the political influence of favorites such as Şekerpare; still others, especially hostile or externally mediated narratives, recast intimacy, luxury, and courtly rumor in the idiom of sexual scandal. The point is therefore not to deny that Ibrahim was associated with women in the political imagination of his age, but to show that the meaning of that association was historically unstable and politically productive. In the aftermath of 1648, gendered moral discourse did not merely describe his rule. It became part of the justificatory machinery through which deposition, regicide, and retrospective condemnation were rendered morally intelligible.

6. Framing the Sultan: Archival Evidence and the Construction of Ibrahim's Fall

Sultan Ibrahim's deposition and execution in 1648 marked a profound rupture in Ottoman dynastic politics. Contemporary narratives and later historiography have often explained his fall through claims of mental instability, sexual excess, and irresponsible luxury. Yet such explanations, however influential, are not self-interpreting. They must be examined in light of the political circumstances of deposition, the genres through which accusations were circulated, and the evidentiary limits of the surviving archive. This section therefore reconsiders how Ibrahim's removal was justified by tracing the interaction of political, religious, and military actors—above all the ulema, the imperial corps, and hostile court circles—in producing and amplifying delegitimizing narratives. Rather than accepting charges of personal dysfunction at face value, it asks how political conflict was transformed into a morally intelligible case for deposition through rhetorical escalation, selective memory, and post hoc moralization. In this respect, the growing emphasis on incapacity in the last phase of the reign should be read not simply as a reflection of Ibrahim's mental state, but also in relation to the altered circumstances under which his conduct was judged. The archival record does not eliminate the possibility of courtly luxury or disorder under Ibrahim, but it complicates the reduction of his fall to personal vice by revealing a much less conclusive evidentiary picture than later narrative traditions suggest.

The making of Ibrahim's fall cannot be reduced to the sultan alone, for the crisis of 1648 emerged within a wider field of palace and imperial actors. Grand viziers, palace figures, members of the ulema, military leaders, and harem-centered intermediaries all formed part of the political environment in which authority was exercised and judged. In the earlier phase of the reign, Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha and established administrative elites could help sustain effective governance; later, shifting alignments among court actors—including Kösem Sultan, Hezarpare Ahmed Pasha, and other palace and bureaucratic intermediaries—helped harden accusations that recast contested rule as moral unfitness. This hardening was further intensified by prolonged war, mounting pressure on the treasury, the weakening of stable grand-vizierial authority after Kemankeş, and the fact that the birth of male heirs reduced Ibrahim's earlier indispensability as the sole surviving Ottoman prince. Seen in this way, Ibrahim's downfall was not the simple result of private vice, but the product of a broader political process in which multiple actors participated in both governing and delegitimizing the sultan.

Among the most durable accusations in the historiographical tradition is Ibrahim's alleged obsession with material luxury, especially sable furs. In these accounts, sable is not presented merely as a costly commodity or elite gift item, but as a sign of misrule, fiscal irresponsibility, and moral excess. The afterlife of this accusation in modern historiography is also revealing. So enduring did the association between Ibrahim and sable become that Ahmed Refik, in his well-known study of the reign, chose to title the period "Samur Devri," thereby transforming a narrative motif into a historiographical frame (Altınay, 2010). This point matters because it shows that the sable issue has not remained confined to Ottoman chroniclers, but has continued to shape the modern understanding of Ibrahim's reign. The question, therefore, is not whether the accusation existed, but how far it can be sustained when tested against the surviving administrative record.

Naima's influential account gives the accusation its most fully developed political form. He presents sable not merely as a luxury good, but as a mechanism of fiscal harm and political resentment. According to his narrative, Ibrahim increasingly refused to make appointments unless sable garments were provided, thereby raising demand for an expensive commodity obtained largely from Muscovy, draining wealth outward, and provoking objections from both the ulema and military elites. Naima further reports that Şeyhülislamzade Mehmed Çelebi warned against seizing the property of the ulema through such demands, while janissary aghas eventually refused to provide sable once prices had become exorbitant. What begins, in this narrative, as luxurious preference culminates in widening hostility toward the sultan and grand vizier and becomes part of the moral prehistory of sedition (Naima, 2007b, pp. 1144–1147). Such an account remains highly valuable, but primarily as evidence of the way luxury was narratively transformed into a condensed explanation for political collapse.

The force of such accusations derives in part from repetition across genres rather than from independent documentary corroboration. Yet repetition alone does not explain why they became so effective. Once war, expenditure, and factional rivalry sharpened elite anxieties, courtly consumption and favoritism came to appear more damaging than they had in the earlier phase of the reign. Retrospective judgments often condense broad political failure into totalizing moral diagnosis. Kâtib Çelebi, for instance, states categorically that "the sultan did not know good from evil, nor what would benefit or harm the state" (Aycibin, 2007, p. 845). Assertions of this kind are significant precisely

because they function as summary verdicts. Modern scholarship has often engaged these accusations either by reproducing their explanatory force or by treating them as plausible indices of courtly excess; the present discussion instead asks how far the surviving archival record supports the strongest version of the claim. At this point, however, methodological caution is essential. The surviving Ottoman documents for Ibrahim's reign are selective rather than exhaustive. They illuminate specific circuits of purchase, ceremonial distribution, diplomatic exchange, and palace storage, but they do not provide a comprehensive reconstruction of all luxury consumption in the reign. For that reason, the present argument does not claim definitively to disprove every allegation concerning Ibrahim's relation to sable, women, or courtly expenditure. Its aim is narrower: to distinguish between what the extant administrative record actually confirms and the stronger retrospective claim that Ibrahim's reign was uniquely defined by a compulsive and fiscally ruinous obsession with sable and related luxuries.

When examined in this light, the surviving Ottoman documentation neither fully corroborates nor simply invalidates the later sable-fur accusation. Instead, it places sable within a broader material and symbolic economy of the court. A register of gifts sent by the Safavid shah's envoy on 20 January 1643 includes sable among a much wider range of diplomatic offerings—textiles, weapons, perfumes, animals, and luxury goods—presented to the sultan (BOA, TS.MA.d. 7998). In this context, sable appears not as evidence of private compulsion, but as one prestigious item within the conventional repertoire of interstate gift exchange. A further record dated 16 September 1645 documents the cost of seven sable furs acquired on imperial order and confirms payment through the treasury apparatus (BOA, TS.MA.d. 10457). This entry is important because it demonstrates that sable was indeed the object of direct expenditure during Ibrahim's reign. Yet taken on its own, it does not establish the more expansive later claim of pathological fixation; it shows procurement, but not obsession. Another palace register, associated with the court of Ibrahim, records sable-covered and sable-lined garments among a broader inventory of valuable goods, including items purchased for the sultan himself, gifts bestowed upon Haseki Sultan, and furs distributed to senior palace and military-administrative figures, including the Kapudan Pasha and various viziers, in connection with accession-related ceremonial bestowal (BOA, TS.MA.d. 551). Read together, these materials place sable within recognizable ceremonial, diplomatic, and redistributive circuits of the court rather than isolating it as evidence of singular personal fixation.

Once the accusation is tested against the surviving administrative record, its strongest form becomes more difficult to sustain. Across multiple edicts, Ibrahim appears more often as a distributor than a demander of luxury goods. In a series of marginal notes, the bestowal of fur coats is framed as a reward and a prompt for prayer: "I have bestowed a fur upon you—wear it and remain in prayer," "I have sent you a fur," "I have bestowed a fur—wear it," and similar formulations recur across a cluster of documents (BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 10; BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 15; BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 12; BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 14; BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 2; BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 3; BOA, TS.MA.e. 799/36, 13; BOA, TS.MA.e. 793/63, 6; BOA, TS.MA.e. 797/69). These entries do not suggest austerity, but they do invert the dominant narrative trope. Where later chroniclers emphasize compulsive acquisition, the archival voice more often records gifting embedded in reciprocity, loyalty, and pious idiom. Only one document might plausibly be read as a request, and even here the logic remains administrative rather than obsessive. In an arz reporting the estate of a deceased kapıağası, it is noted that there were no new furs and only three old ones; Ibrahim's marginal response is brief:

"Let them send what is available" (BOA, TS.MA.e. 797/69). The note neither specifies sable nor indicates repeated insistence. Read alongside the more frequent language of bestowal, it suggests availability-based redistribution rather than a personalized fixation on luxury goods.

These materials are significant precisely because they refine the terms of the debate. They confirm that sable had a visible place in Ibrahim's courtly world and that it circulated through multiple institutional channels: diplomatic exchange, palace procurement, ceremonial gifting, and elite redistribution. At the same time, the currently available documentation does not demonstrate, in any cumulative or quantitatively compelling way, that Ibrahim's government was uniquely structured by repeated demands for sable or that such consumption by itself explains the crisis of 1648. The evidentiary gap between documented courtly usage and later moralizing accusation therefore remains substantial. This matters because the rhetoric of deposition transformed such practices into condensed symbols of failed kingship.

The same caution applies to the larger linkage of luxury, women, and political collapse. In the hostile narrative tradition, these elements are repeatedly woven together: proximity to harem women, the circulation of costly goods, and favoritism toward palace intimates become mutually reinforcing signs of illegitimate rule. Yet the archive, insofar as it survives, does not present these themes in such a unified moralized form. It shows instead discrete acts of expenditure, gifting, and inventory management whose political meaning was later intensified by chroniclers writing in the aftermath of regicide. The transformation of courtly luxury into moral explanation was thus not automatic; it was narrative work.

More broadly, surviving imperial decrees and marginal notes attest Ibrahim's engagement with highly specific—and at times seemingly trivial—administrative matters, ranging from dietary concerns to palace maintenance. Yet outside a limited set of references to procurement, inventory, gifting, and redistribution, they do not reveal the sort of repeated and escalating pattern of demand that the later narrative tradition would lead one to expect. This relative documentary thinness is significant. Within the bureaucratic culture of the Ottoman court, a sustained and exceptional fixation on a luxury commodity might be expected to leave a denser and more repetitive paper trail. The discrepancy between scattered administrative traces and expansive historiographical accusation raises the possibility that the sable motif was magnified in order to make Ibrahim's fall morally and politically intelligible.

Comparison with other reigns remains useful only if employed carefully. Material from Murad IV's reign shows that sable could appear not only in documented gift and tributary contexts, but also in ways more directly tied to imperial expectation. One record reports that the Voivode of Moldavia's representatives delivered cash together with a sable fur coat to the sultan and indicates that such transfers were to continue under official supervision (BOA, TS.MA.e. 809/57). Another notes that, in 1639, alongside transferred treasury assets, "a sable fur coat and six purses of coins" were sent to the ruler in preparation for the Baghdad campaign (BOA, TS.MA.e. 753/20). These examples do not by themselves establish a personal fixation on Murad IV's part, but they do show that sable could be explicitly embedded in tributary, fiscal, and political exchange. In that respect, they provide a sharper archival contrast to the more limited and episodic traces available for Ibrahim.

A somewhat different comparison may be drawn with Mehmed IV's hunting culture, not in order to disprove allegations concerning Ibrahim, but to illustrate what a genuinely institutionalized royal inclination looks like in archival terms. The examples cited here are only a small sample of a much broader documentary trail, yet even this limited selection is sufficient to show how readily Mehmed IV's attachment to hunting can be traced across the reign. A palace kitchen register dated 9 December 1661, for example, records in detail the provisioning of food for Mehmed IV, the viziers, palace personnel, and military staff during a hunting expedition from Edirne; related materials also document the procurement of tents, furnishings, ceremonial structures, and temporary residences, including a purpose-built installation at Beyşehir (BOA, MAD.d. 7400). The pattern continues into the later decades of the reign. A register of the imperial stable dated 28 January 1679 lists daily feed allowances for horses, mules, and camels assigned to the sultan, his consorts, and senior officials (BOA, MAD.d. 7732). A provisioning record from 4 March 1681 documents the large-scale distribution of barley, straw, firewood, and other supplies across districts such as Çatalca and Silivri through coordinated supply networks (BOA, MAD.d. 4339). A further fiscal register covering the period from September 1681 to March 1682 tracks flour and barley allocations to members of the hunting entourage, including the imperial harem, through formal receipts (BOA, MAD.d. 7132). Most revealing is an imperial decree dated 29 June 1685, in which Mehmed IV explicitly authorizes the use of state funds for hunting expenditures, grouping them alongside military and infrastructural expenses (BOA, TS.MA.e. 528/106).

Taken together, these records show not merely that Mehmed IV enjoyed hunting, but that hunting had become legible as a long-term administrative enterprise supported by fiscal allocation, provisioning systems, transport arrangements, and bureaucratic oversight. The comparison is instructive because the archival traces relating to sable under Ibrahim, though real, are far more limited and episodic. This does not exonerate Ibrahim, but it underscores the difference between a royal practice that is demonstrably embedded in a broad documentary infrastructure and one that survives only in scattered references later elevated into a master explanation for dynastic collapse.

Ibrahim's downfall, then, cannot be adequately explained by tropes of eccentricity, luxury, or personal dysfunction alone. The administrative record does not invalidate every accusation made in the narrative tradition, but neither does it sustain the strongest version of those accusations. What it reveals instead is a more uneven evidentiary terrain: sable and other luxury goods certainly circulated within the court of Ibrahim, but the presently known documentation does not yet justify reducing the political crisis of 1648 to a single logic of personal obsession. The explanatory power of the later narrative tradition lies not in its documentary completeness, but in its capacity to transform contested authority into moralized biography. That transformation became especially potent once the final phase of the reign altered the standards by which courtly conduct, expenditure, and royal capacity were judged. By exposing the gap between selective administrative traces and expansive retrospective accusation, this section underscores the role of historiographical framing in shaping Ibrahim's posthumous image. His vilification was not simply the memory of misconduct; it was also the outcome of a political and narrative process through which regicide had to be rendered intelligible within the moral language of empire.

Conclusion

A re-reading of Sultan Ibrahim's reign through the archival record complicates the long-dominant narrative tradition that portrays him as irrational, decadent, and unfit to rule. At the center of that tradition stand recurring accusations—most notably those concerning women, luxury, and sable furs—that have circulated widely in both Ottoman and European historiography. By applying a source-critical methodology that places contemporaneous imperial decrees, marginal notes, inventories, and fiscal records in dialogue with Ottoman chronicles and European accounts, this article has tested how far such claims can be sustained against the surviving administrative documentation.

The results call not for simple reversal, but for analytical recalibration. Dominant depictions of Ibrahim were shaped above all by retrospective accounts that moralized governance and translated structural pressures into personal pathology. Contemporary and near-contemporary materials complicate that image considerably. At the outset of his reign, Ibrahim was not uniformly represented as erratic or incapable; early responses were often cautious, at times even hopeful, and his accession took place amid a notable degree of elite acquiescence in an otherwise unstable political century. The consolidation of a decisively negative reputation occurred instead alongside intensifying factional rivalries, mounting political strain, and escalating instability at the imperial center—conditions that rendered the sultan increasingly vulnerable to criticism and, ultimately, deposition. In this context, the explanatory power of "personal dysfunction" appears less as neutral diagnosis than as a morally legible narrative solution to the problem of regicide.

Read through the archival materials, Ibrahim emerges not as a passive or wholly disengaged sovereign, but as a ruler whose governing presence remained visible in supervision, communication, repetition, and procedural insistence. His imperial decrees and marginal notes repeatedly return to the quotidian mechanics of rule: the demand for timely reporting, the punishment of wrongdoing, the protection of subjects, the regulation of taxation and coinage, and the maintenance of public order. These materials do not justify describing him as an autonomous reformer acting independently of powerful advisers such as Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha or of the wider administrative apparatus. They do, however, complicate any account that reduces early successes entirely to ministers while reserving later failures exclusively for the sultan's person. What the documents reveal is a more interactive and mediated structure of rule, in which ministerial guidance, bureaucratic implementation, and sultanic oversight operated together, though not always effectively.

The same source-critical perspective also reframes the gendered and moralized charges that later came to dominate Ibrahim's image. Narrative sources repeatedly represented his relations with women as the root of misrule, yet the broader evidentiary record is less uniform. Some sources foreground dynastic urgency and the political necessity of reproduction; others emphasize the influence of courtly favorites and the disruptive effects of intimate access; still others, especially hostile or externally mediated narratives, recast these dynamics in the idiom of sensual excess and moral collapse. Ibrahim's own imperial writings, by contrast, repeatedly register concern with public morality, prostitution, adultery, legality, and social order. Read together, these materials suggest that sexuality and harem politics were politically consequential, but that their meaning was neither fixed nor self-evident. It was, above all, in the aftermath of 1648 that such themes were consolidated into a powerful discourse of delegitimation.

A similar conclusion applies to the question of luxury and sable furs. The surviving administrative record does not justify the strongest later claim that Ibrahim's reign was uniquely defined by a compulsive and fiscally ruinous obsession with sable. At the same time, the archive confirms that sable circulated within the material economy of his court through diplomatic gift exchange, palace procurement, ceremonial redistribution, and elite bestowal. The evidentiary problem, then, is not one of absolute presence or absence, but of scale, emphasis, and interpretive inflation. Compared with royal practices that are densely and continuously documented elsewhere in the archive, the traces relating to sable under Ibrahim remain limited and episodic. The later transformation of those traces into a master explanation for dynastic collapse therefore reveals less about administrative reality than about the narrative mechanisms through which political blame was condensed and personalized.

Collectively, these findings reposition Sultan Ibrahim not as an aberration outside Ottoman political culture, but as a ruler whose authority became increasingly precarious under conditions of structural strain, factional competition, mediated sovereignty, and contested legitimacy. His reign demonstrates how the afterlife of rule—how governance is remembered, narrated, and morally framed—can become as politically consequential as rule itself. Ibrahim's vilification was not simply the product of remembered conduct, but the outcome of competing interests and the need to translate political crisis into a comprehensible moral narrative. This dynamic also carries implications beyond Ibrahim's case. In early modern empires, sovereign legitimacy could be undermined not only through rebellion, fiscal disorder, or military failure, but through narratives that rendered rule ethically disordered and therefore politically disposable.

Approaching Ibrahim's reign through the archival record does not amount to rehabilitation, nor does it deny the volatility of the late 1640s. Rather, it restores analytical proportionality by distinguishing administrative practice from retrospective accusation, mediated governance from personalized blame, courtly consumption from moralized exaggeration, and documented political process from post hoc diagnosis. Struggles over authority were waged not only through institutions, armies, and fiscal systems, but also through the contested power to define what rule meant—and who would be remembered as having failed.

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Extended Abstract

This article reconsiders the reign of Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1640–1648) through a source-critical reassessment of the narratives that have shaped his posthumous reputation in Ottoman historiography. Rather than reproducing entrenched portrayals of Ibrahim as irrational, sexually excessive, morally deficient, or politically incapable, it examines how such images were produced, stabilized, and transmitted across Ottoman chronicles, European accounts, and later historiography. It argues that Ibrahim's negative image emerged less as a transparent reflection of administrative reality than as the outcome of a broader political and discursive process in which structural strain, factional rivalry, mediated sovereignty, and retrospective moralization converged to render deposition and regicide intelligible.

Methodologically, the study adopts a source-critical and comparative approach grounded in systematic document analysis. Its evidentiary core consists of contemporaneous Ottoman administrative materials, especially imperial decrees, handwritten marginal notes (hatt-ı hümâyûn), fiscal registers, palace inventories, and related archival series. These are read alongside Ottoman narrative histories—both near-contemporary and later—as well as European diplomatic and historical accounts. Rather than treating one genre as inherently "true" and another as "false," the article asks how far recurrent accusations can be traced in administrative practice, whether corresponding documentary patterns appear where one would expect them, and how mismatches between narrative and archive become historically meaningful in a bureaucratic polity. It also employs a comparative use of archival density, contrasting the limited and episodic traces relating to accusations against Ibrahim with the much denser documentation for Murad IV's resource extraction and Mehmed IV's hunting culture.

A first contribution lies in reassessing Ibrahim's accession and early reign. Against later portrayals that retroactively cast the succession of 1640 as a prelude to crisis, the study argues that Ibrahim's enthronement should instead be understood as a moment of dynastic stabilization. As the sole surviving male of the Ottoman house, he represented continuity at a moment of acute dynastic vulnerability. Near-contemporary narrative sources and his own marginal notes suggest not a ruler immediately incapacitated by trauma, but one who came to the throne amid relative elite acquiescence and initial institutional normalization.

A second contribution concerns governance. The article shows that Ibrahim's reign cannot be reduced to passivity or ceremonial kingship, even if his governing presence is most clearly recoverable in the earlier phase of the reign. Archival evidence reveals repeated intervention in fiscal regulation, provisioning, coinage, extraordinary taxation, administrative reporting, public order, and moral oversight. His decrees and marginal notes show a ruler demanding implementation, monitoring delay, correcting instructions, and articulating governance through the language of justice, legality, precedent, and anti-oppression. At the same time, the study does not deny the importance of powerful actors such as Kemankeş Kara Mustafa Pasha, Koçi Bey, Kösem Sultan, and other palace, military, and religious intermediaries. Rather, it argues that sovereignty in this period was mediated and interactive: early stability rested partly on strong administrative actors, while later shifts in those alignments contributed to the hardening of accusations that recast contested rule as moral unfitness.

A third contribution concerns sexuality, gendered moral discourse, and luxury. The article demonstrates that the source record is less uniform than the later stereotype of Ibrahim as simply woman-obsessed would suggest. Near-contemporary Ottoman materials often register the dynastic logic of reproduction and the political significance of princely birth, while some sources focus less on erotic excess than on the influence of court favorites and the political consequences of intimate access. Later Ottoman writers and European observers increasingly bind sexuality, female influence, luxury, and governmental disorder into a single accusatory frame. Similarly, the famous charge of Ibrahim's "sable fur obsession" is reassessed against archival evidence. Sable furs do appear in Ibrahim's reign, but within broader circuits of diplomatic gift exchange, palace procurement, ceremonial bestowal, and elite redistribution. What the surviving administrative record does not sustain is the strongest later claim that his reign was uniquely structured by a compulsive and fiscally ruinous obsession with sable.

Ultimately, the article argues that Ibrahim's reign should be understood less as an anomalous descent into irrationality than as a revealing case of how sovereign failure was narratively constructed in the

early modern Ottoman world. By distinguishing administrative trace from retrospective accusation, mediated governance from personalized blame, courtly consumption from historiographical exaggeration, and documented political process from post hoc diagnosis, it offers a more historically grounded interpretation of one of the most contested reigns in Ottoman history.