Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire

Madeline Zilfi’s latest book examines gender politics through slavery and social regulation in the Ottoman Empire. In a challenge to prevailing notions, her research shows that, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, female slavery was not only central to Ottoman practice but also a critical component of imperial governance and elite social reproduction. As Zilfi illustrates through her accounts of the particular vulnerabilities of slave women, the failures of abolitionism in the Ottoman Middle East were due in large part to the overwhelmingly female character of the slave institution in the later centuries. The book focuses on the experience of slavery in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul, also using comparative data from Egypt and North Africa to illustrate the regional diversity and local dynamics that were the hallmarks of slavery in the Middle East during the early modern era. This is an articulate and informed account that sets the Ottoman system in the context of more general debates on women, slavery, and the construction of social dependency.

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Preface and acknowledgments

*Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire* is a study of slavery in a particular time and place. It is in some respects, then, a local history. At its center is the city of Istanbul, capital of the Ottoman Empire, with the period of the eighteenth century through the 1830s as the time line for slavery’s portrait there. Although the book has a specific geographical anchoring, any consideration of social practice in an imperial capital of Istanbul’s size and stature is ultimately about more than the habits and byways of the city and its residents. To be sure, the capital cannot stand for the entirety of the empire, but as its largest city and administrative center, it was deeply implicated in the life and well-being of Ottoman subjects elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the book’s microhistorical features, it is also intended to add to farther-reaching discussions regarding the place of slaveholding in human affairs beyond the Ottoman center and even beyond the Middle East. By exploring the social contours of the Ottoman trade as it functioned in the region of the capital, I have been interested in reconstructing this piece of the past for its distinctive roots, context, and temporal shifts, in short, for its own history. As with any history of “its own,” however, the study is also implicitly—and here, sometimes explicitly—comparative. This is especially the case with regard to previous generations and other regions of the Mediterranean over which the Ottoman Empire was sovereign. The purpose of comparison, however, is not to provide a parallel story. Rather, it is to underscore the singular and not-so-singular features of this Ottoman Middle Eastern example of the practice of slavery.

I have also sought to engage with the growing body of historical writing on slavery in the Middle Eastern and Islamic past. In addressing the political dimensions of Ottoman slavery in the long eighteenth century, the book takes issue with two related histories, that of Middle Eastern and Ottoman slaveries, which foregrounds male and ethnic categories, and that regarding the Ottoman reform era, which, in neglecting the gendered parameters of Ottoman politics and early reformism, arrives at another, fundamentally male, story. The centrality of women and female slavery, as social realities and as representations of Ottoman sovereignty and its vulnerabilities in the period of
the study, constitutes the core argument of the book and the main counterpoint to the conventional wisdom.

In arguing for the importance of gender – indeed, for its overriding importance in the place and period of the study – I also take issue with some of the perspectives of world-history narratives. The greater inclusiveness of world history and maritime and transnational formulations has shed welcome light on intercontinental linkages and legacies, nowhere more so than in the history of trade and the circulation of valued commodities in the early modern era. The study of slave trading has arguably been the primary beneficiary of world perspectives. Historians of Africa and the Americas especially have been involved in mapping and assessing the linkages and reciprocities among Africa and the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean trades. Significant findings have crowded their inquiries but not without cost to local context and conjunctural change.

An insistence on detail and specificity is the usual historian’s riposte to any attempt at universal history. Nonetheless, it speaks to abiding epistemological concerns. The privileging of continuities and commonalities tends to reinforce Eurocentric categories and premises or, in the case of slavery studies in particular, Atlantic-derived categories, most notably those of race and Africanness. Color was undeniably important in Middle Eastern and North African slavery in the period. Still, it did not hold the same value as in the Atlantic context, nor did race play the structuring role that it did in the Americas. In any case, blackness and Africanness are and remain unstable and subjective descriptors. Middle Eastern and North African bodies did not and do not comfortably fit the Atlantic frames of reference that characterize much of the conversation about world slavery inside and outside academe. Although Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire disputes such racial framing, its larger purpose is to attend to historical complexity in context and to the contingencies of social values and organization within that context.

I am indebted to the University of Maryland General Research Board for its generous and timely awards in support of the research for this book. I am most deeply appreciative of a yearlong grant from the National Humanities Center and the Tri Delta Foundation in 2005–6. The grant provided me with uninterrupted writing time at the National Humanities Center, the wonderful luxury of expert and attentive support staff, and the warm and vibrant community of fellow scholars in the humanities. My earlier work on social regulation and women in the Ottoman Empire, both of which are foundational to the present study, was made possible by grants from the U.S. Fulbright Program, which has been for me, since my graduate-student days, an indispensable portal to the study of the Middle East.
Modern Turkish usage has been followed here for Ottoman Turkish terms and names. Exceptions are made for words in the text that have been absorbed into English. Thus, when the choice has been mine to make (as opposed to bibliographical citations, quotations, and the like), *pasha* is written rather than *paşa*, *agha* rather than *ağa*, and so on. Otherwise, the spelling of Turkish words generally conforms to that employed in the *Redhouse Yeni Türkçe-İngilizce Sözlük* / *New Redhouse Turkish-English Dictionary* (1968; repr., Istanbul, 1979). The number of diacritical marks has been further reduced, however, in the interests of readability but without, it is hoped, loss of meaning. For Arabic and Persian names and terms that are not a part of quoted material or bibliographical citations, a simplified system of romanization has been used.
Chronology

1703–30  Reign of Ahmed III
1711–18  Seesaw warfare with Russia, Venice, and Austria in Morea and the Balkans; Belgrade lost but later recovered in 1739
1718–30  Tulip Era, coinciding with grand viziere of Nevşehirli, İbrahim Pasha, ends in deposition of Ahmed III and execution of Ibrahim
1730–54  Reign of Mahmud I
1730–6  Loss of western Iran and Azerbaijan to Iran
1736–9  War with Russia and Austria
1743–6  War with Iran
1754–7  Reign of Osman III, focus on social regulation
1757–74  Reign of Mustafa III
1768–74  War with Russia
1772  Mansfield Decision in England: slaves brought to England by masters could not be taken back to the colonies as slaves or sold for export
1774–89  Reign of Abdülhamid I
1774  Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca with Russia. Independence of Crimea and northern shores of Black Sea from Ottoman rule. Russia formally annexes Muslim Crimea in 1783
1787  Renewal of war with Russia
1787  Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded in Britain
1789–1807  Reign of Selim III
1798–1801  Invasion of Egypt by Napoléon Bonaparte; French occupation
1804  Serb revolt
1805  Mehmed Ali as governor of Egypt
1807  Rebels in Istanbul and environs depose Selim, crushing his New Order army
1807  British Parliament votes to abolish the African trade
1807–8  Reign of Mustafa IV
1808–39  Reign of Mahmud II
1821–30  Greek insurrection and creation of independent Greece
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