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978-0-521-51583-2 - Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference

Madeline C. Zilfi

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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.

MADELINE C. ZILFI is Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland. Her previous publications include *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Post-Classical Age* (1988), and she is also the editor of *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Middle East* (1997).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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University of Maryland



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Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page vii
<i>Preface and acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Note on transliteration</i>	xiii
<i>Chronology</i>	xv
1 Empire and imperium	1
2 Currents of change	22
3 Women and the regulated society	45
4 Telling the Ottoman slave story	96
5 Meaning and practice	153
6 Feminizing slavery	189
7 Men are <i>kanun</i> , women are <i>shari'ah</i>	216
<i>Abbreviations</i>	237
<i>Selected works</i>	239
<i>Index</i>	271

List of illustrations

- Cover: “Souvenir of Scutari [Üsküdar],” by Edward Armitage. Courtesy of Tyne & Wear Museums, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom.
1. “Fountain and Market at Tophane [in Istanbul].” Julia Pardoe, *The Beauties of the Bosphorus. Illustrated in a Series of Views of Constantinople and Its Environs, from Original Drawings by W[illiam] H. Bartlett* (London: Virtue and Co., 1838). page 2
 2. “A Scene in the Tcharchi [Covered Bazaar].” Julia Pardoe, *The Beauties of the Bosphorus: Illustrated in a Series of Views of Constantinople and Its Environs, from Original Drawings by W[illiam] H. Bartlett* (London: Virtue and Co., 1838). 25
 3. “Two Janissaries in Their Dress of Ceremony.” Octavian Dalvimart, *The Costume of Turkey* (London: William Miller, 1804). 27
 4. Sultan Mahmud II, 1808–1839, by Henri Schlesinger. Mahmud in a portrait commissioned after his clothing reforms. Photo, Jean-Gilles Berizzi. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York. Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France. 33
 5. “Mustapha III (1757–1774).” William J. J. Spry, *Life on the Bosphorus: Doings in the City of the Sultan* (London: H. S. Nichols, 1895). 53
 6. Ornate head dressing of imperial women, seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. Cornelis de Bruyn, *A Voyage to the Levant or, Travels in the Principal Parts of Asia Minor, the Islands of Scio, Rhodes, Cyprus, &c*, trans. W. J. Reizen (London: Jacob Tonson and Thomas Bennet, 1702). 81
 7. “Musicians at the Asian Valley of Sweet Waters.” Women’s entertainment at the excursion spot of Göksu on the Asian coast of the Bosphorus. Julia Pardoe, *The Beauties of the Bosphorus: Illustrated in a Series of Views of Constantinople and Its*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51583-2 - Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference

Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii List of illustrations

- Environs, from Original Drawings by W[illiam] H. Bartlett*
(London: Virtue and Co., 1838). 84
8. “A Turkish [Muslim] Woman in the Dress Worn at Constantinople.” The *ferace*, standard outdoor female dress for Muslim women until the late nineteenth century. Octavian Dalvimart, *The Costume of Turkey* (London: William Miller, 1804). 87
9. Greek Islands dress, Isle of Symi. Octavian Dalvimart, *The Costume of Turkey* (London: William Miller, 1804). 88
10. “A Sultana or Odalisk.” In indoor dress. Octavian Dalvimart, *The Costume of Turkey* (London: William Miller, 1804). 89
11. “Sultan Osman II (1618–1622) with His Vezir Davud Pasha.” With Janissaries and slave captives. Edwin Binney III, Collection of Turkish Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA/Art Resource, New York. 105
12. “The Aurut [Avrat] Bazaar, or Slave Market.” Mistakenly labeled “Women’s Market.” Robert Walsh and Thomas Allom, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, Illustrated in a Series of Drawings from Nature by Thomas Allom*, 2 vols. (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., n.d.). 110
13. Town market scene in Larisa, Ottoman Thessaly, with African free man of middling class. J. L. S. Bartholdy, *Voyage en Grèce, fait dans les années 1803 et 1804*, trans. from German by A. Du Coudray, 2 vols. (Paris: Dentu, 1807). 121
14. “Mosque and Tomb of Süleyman [the Magnificent, 1520–66].” Viewed from the site of what is now Istanbul University. Julia Pardoe, *The Beauties of the Bosphorus: Illustrated in a Series of Views of Constantinople and Its Environs, from Original Drawings by W[illiam] H. Bartlett* (London: Virtue and Co., 1838). 154
15. Grave of the female slave, Zekiye, at Süleymaniye Mosque. Photo by Muhammet Sait Yavuz, with my sincerest gratitude for his efforts to relocate the stone, which I had identified in the 1980s. The facing stone has suffered damage in the interim, although the inscription remains intact. 156
16. “Women Going to the Public Bath.” A slave or servant carries the bathing accoutrements. Franz Taeschner, *Alt-Stambuler Hof- und Volksleben, ein türkisches Miniaturenalbum aus dem 17. Jahrhundert* (Hannover: Orient-Buchhandlung H. Lafaire, 1925). 160
17. “The Mosque of Osmanié [Nur-i Osmaniye] from the Slave Market.” Julia Pardoe, *The Beauties of the Bosphorus: Illustrated in a Series of Views of Constantinople and Its Environs, from Original Drawings by W[illiam] H. Bartlett* (London: Virtue and Co., 1838). 190

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51583-2 - Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference

Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of illustrations ix

18. “An Attendant of the Harem of the Grand Signior [Sultan].” A senior slave assigned to keep order among the women of the imperial harem. Octavian Dalvimart, *The Costume of Turkey* (London: William Miller, 1804). 201
19. “Circassian Slaves in the Interior of a Harem.” With black eunuch. Robert Walsh and Thomas Allom, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, Illustrated in a Series of Drawings from Nature by Thomas Allom*, 2 vols. (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., n.d.). 218
20. “The Sultana in the State [Araba], Constantinople.” Said to represent Esma, the sister of Mahmud II, departing with retinue from her palace at Eyüp on the Golden Horn. Robert Walsh and Thomas Allom, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, Illustrated in a Series of Drawings from Nature by Thomas Allom*, 2 vols. (London: Fisher, Son, & Co., n.d.). 228

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51583-2 - Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference

Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface and acknowledgments

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 crowned 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.

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Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Note on transliteration

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 vizierate of Nevşehirli, İbrahim Pasha, ends in deposition of Ahmed III and execution of İbrahim
- 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

Cambridge University Press

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Madeline C. Zilfi

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi Chronology

- 1826 Destruction of Janissaries
- 1833 Great Britain abolishes slavery in its Caribbean territories
- 1839–61** **Reign of Abdülmeçid I**
- 1839 Gülhane Rescript and inauguration of Tanzimat Reform Era, 1839–76
- 1846 Ahmad Bey, Ottoman governor of Tunis, proclaims end of slavery in his realm in January
- 1846 Closure of Istanbul's Esir Pazarı, or central Slave Market, in December
- 1847 Ottoman decree abolishes African slave trade in Persian Gulf
- 1853–6 Crimean War: Britain, France, and Ottomans versus Russia
- 1856 Imperial Decree of 1856, with equalizing provisions for religious minorities
- 1857 Ottoman prohibition on African slave trade, but uprisings in Hijaz result in exemption for much of Arabian Peninsula
- 1861–76** **Reign of Abdülaziz**
- 1862–8 Hundreds of thousands of Circassians, many of them slaves, flee Russian conquest of Caucasus to settle in Ottoman Empire
- 1863 Emancipation Proclamation in United States, effective January
- 1865 Thirteenth Amendment to U.S. Constitution bans slavery
- 1870 Fifteenth Amendment to U.S. Constitution extends voting rights to males of all races
- 1876 Proclamation of First Ottoman Constitution, with electoral rights for Muslim and non-Muslim males
- 1876** **Reign of Murad V, deposed**
- 1876–1909** **Reign of Abdülhamid II**
- 1877 British-Egyptian Convention for the Suppression of the Slave Trade
- 1880 Anglo-Ottoman Convention to end the African trade
- 1890 Ottoman Empire signatory to International Brussels Act forbidding African trade
- 1909–18 Young Turk era
- 1914–18 World War I and dismemberment of Ottoman Empire
- 1923 Establishment of Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk) as first president