

# Slavery in the Ottoman World: A Literature Survey

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**Images on the cover:** *top:* Aqueduct of Mustafa Pasha, (late 1490s), near Skopje  
Photo © Machiel Kiel, 2005.  
*below:* Entrance to the “Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften” formerly called Orientalisches Seminar, Bonn  
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# Slavery in the Ottoman World: A Literature Survey

Suraiya Faroqhi

Just as in clothing or home decoration, there are fashions in historiography. In the past, most historians would not have put it quite this way, dwelling instead on the—supposedly profound—differences between the realm of consumption and that of writing history. Usually males, scholars in the field would have been willing to accept that political or economic concerns might shape the historiography of a given period, whether they approved of this situation or not. By contrast, these historians used to think that fashions in clothing or home decoration were mainly the product of—predominantly feminine—caprice, and of course, the marketing interests of the manufacturers. Sartorial fashions thus did not seem to merit serious consideration.

However, during the past forty years or so, attitudes have changed. Historians of consumption have analysed the social messages that for instance in eighteenth-century England, a man or a woman might relay by drinking Chinese tea from Chinese porcelain cups. Or a century later, wealthy people might advertise monetary resources and social distinction by means of Parisian-style clothing, both French originals and local imitations.<sup>1</sup> Thus, social and sometimes even political reasons might determine fashions in consumer goods; and the same thing is likely to happen in historiography. Therefore, the intellectual snobbery of historians is often quite misplaced.

At the same time, it is not so easy to explain why domestic slavery in the Ottoman world has become a popular topic in recent years. After all,

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, it is not possible to even superficially discuss research on early modern consumption. As an indication of current trends see Giorgio Riello, “Things Seen and Unseen: The material culture of early modern inventories and their representation of domestic interiors,” Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500–1800*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 125–150.

this type of servitude, as opposed to the near-slave status of the sultans' servitors, also known as the *kul*, had not aroused much interest before Ehud Toledano's first monograph of 1983 and Halil Sahillioğlu's seminal article of 1985.<sup>2</sup> What are the social motivations for this interest? Put differently, how do trends within society-at-large give direction to the study of Ottoman slavery? On the other hand, do shifts of interest within Ottoman historiography itself, or to use a different terminology, scholarly considerations in the narrow sense of the term, have a role to play as well? We may surmise that the emergence of feminist concerns is of relevance here, as sources on Ottoman women, not very numerous even though we would all like it to be otherwise, do refer to female slaves, especially when the latter were sold or manumitted. Feminist scholars have also wondered about the manner in which the presence of slave concubines affected the status of elite wives. Interestingly, the musician and poet Leyla Hanım (later: Leyla Saz, 1850–1936), a slave owner, has been one of the first writers to draw attention to this issue, when commenting with much sympathy on the plight of African slave women in Istanbul elite homes and with much more reserve when it came to women from the Caucasus. After all, the Africans usually were

<sup>2</sup> Ehud Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and its Suppression*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983; Halil Sahillioğlu, "Slaves in the Social and Economic Life of Bursa in the late 15th and early 16th Centuries," *Turcica*, XVII (1985), pp. 43–112; Stefan Hanß and Juliane Schiel (eds.), *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800) – Neue Perspektiven auf mediterrane Sklaverei (500–1800)*. With editorial assistance from Claudia Schmid, Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2014. However, earlier on Ömer Lütfi Barkan, Halil İnalcık and the Beldiceanus did make important contributions on mostly rural serfdom/slavery: Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "XV ve XVI Asırlarda Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Toprak İşçiliğinin Organizasyonu Şekilleri: I Kulluklar ve Ortakçı Kullar," İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası, 1/1 (1939), pp. 29–74; 1/2 (1940), pp. 198–245, Nicoara Beldiceanu and Irène Beldiceanu Steinherr, "Recherches sur la province de Qaraman au XVIIe siècle: Étude et actes," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, XI/1 (1968), pp. 1–129 and Halil İnalcık, "Servile Labor in the Ottoman Empire," Abraham Ascher and Béla Király (eds.), *The Mutual Effects of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian World: The East European Pattern*. New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1979, pp. 25–52. Furthermore, discussions of slavery also occurred within general treatments of trade; see for example Terence Walz, *The Trade between Egypt and Bilad as-Sudan 1700–1820*, Cairo: IFAO, 1978. In this context, it is noteworthy that of the roughly 80 items in the present bibliography, about fifty per cent have appeared in or after the year 2000.

and remained servants, while Circassian or Georgian concubines could threaten the status of a legal wife.<sup>3</sup>

Quite possibly, a growing interest in the working world as a social, rather than a merely economic, phenomenon has contributed toward the emergence of domestic slavery as a favoured research topic; for as long as historians were interested mainly in taxation and production slaves were not really part of the picture. The latter after all were not especially prominent in Ottoman agriculture and manufacturing. On the other hand, once social history came to occupy centre stage, from the 1980s onward, the situation changed; for cleaners, gardeners, or children's nurses in elite households, who also worked, albeit in the service sector, were quite often enslaved men and women. Ultimately, these people might obtain their freedom, but even as freedmen and –women they retained social and legal connections to the households of their former owners. How much physical labour these slaves needed to perform depended on their position in the household, where in the absence of electricity, cooking and cleaning demanded much more physical effort than they do today. Furthermore, we might consider the concubines serving a well-to-do master as performing an early modern version of 'sex work'; but the prevalence—or else rarity—of such concubinage is quite difficult to assess.

In a different vein, once historians realized that elite households were among the central building blocks of the Ottoman regime, the question to what extent slaves staffed these households doubtless increased the interest in enslavement as a research topic. Military slaves have attracted attention, especially the young men recruited into the fifteenth-century janissary corps as the sultan's share of war booty (*pencik oğlani*). In addition, senior office-holders purchased Mamluks, who received military training as elite soldiers. Later on, these owners

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<sup>3</sup> Leyla Saz, *The Imperial Harem of the Sultans: Daily Life at the Ciragan Palace during the 19th Century: Memoirs of Leyla (Saz) Hanımefendi*. Istanbul: Peva Publications, 1994, p. 65; for a view from the perspective of the slave women see Madeline Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 162–178.

manumitted their slaves. The most successful among these freedmen went on to govern early modern Egypt and eighteenth-century Baghdad on behalf of the sultans. In these localities, liberated slaves might even marry the daughters of their former owners and succeed to positions in the governing elite.<sup>4</sup>

More indirectly, concerns important to European historians of the early modern and modern periods have ‘spilled over’ into the Ottoman field. Once the findings of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* had entered the mainstream not only of Middle East studies, but also the consciousness of Europeanists concerned with the formation of ‘imperial identities’ in England, France, and elsewhere, people began to reread the numerous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of captivity and enslavement in the Ottoman world and Morocco from a new perspective.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, there was the ‘Saidesque’ concern with the social and literary constraints that determined the composition of such accounts. Particularly significant were the expectations of publishers and reading publics, to which former captives, especially women, needed to conform if they wanted to get their stories into print – these concerns might make for accounts of forced conversions and lurid harem scenes. In addition, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, such tales might serve to justify military intervention in North Africa, especially where French and American literary productions were concerned. In a different perspective, the literary scholar Gerald Maclean has pointed out that for quite some time, Englishmen visiting the Ottoman Empire were rather overawed by what they saw there; and in response they developed what Maclean has described as ‘imperial envy’, and which we might perhaps also call an

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<sup>4</sup> For *pencik ođlanı* see Anonymous author, *Memoiren eines Janitscharen oder türkische Chronik*, ed. and tr. by Renate Lachmann. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010, p. 131. I owe this reference to Nida Nebahat Nalçacı, a doctoral student at Bilkent University, Ankara. See also Thomas Lier, *Haushalte und Haushaltspolitik in Baghdad 1704–1831*. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004, pp. 75–80.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.



‘imperial inferiority complex’.<sup>6</sup> Such sentiments were likely to colour the reports of travellers, especially when slavery was at issue.

At the same time, male and female ex-slaves of French, Italian, or even English backgrounds who had served in Ottoman North Africa and elsewhere did exist, and were not merely a figment of the colonialist imagination. This inextricable knot of intersecting research concerns likely has contributed to the attraction of our topic; for it is a challenge to avoid the Scilla of orientalist stereotypes while steering clear of the Charybdis, namely an all too rosy picture of any slavery, including the Ottoman variety. However, further motivations may be involved that we have not yet detected.

Since the slavery issue has thus become a topic of some interest for social and political historians of the Ottoman Empire, a summary of what we have learned to date will, as I hope, show the state of the art and point out the gaps in our knowledge. Thus, this article should serve as a research tool. Firstly, scholars especially of the younger generation will—at least I hope so—find some indication of the questions that the present researcher considers to be in need of further investigation. In addition, there is the secondary but important consideration of providing a ‘workaday’ bibliography. Given the vastness of the literature and its dispersal over several fields with very different approaches, any such ‘reading list’ will be woefully incomplete, but hopefully still full and up-to-date enough for practical use.<sup>7</sup>

To keep the present survey within manageable limits, I have not included the important studies concerning Ottoman subjects who became slaves in Malta, the Papal States, Naples and Sicily, France, or the German-speaking territories. Long neglected, a good deal of research on this issue has appeared in the last quarter-century or so; and a parallel survey is thus a desideratum for the near future. For reasons of space, I have also included only brief references to the many studies that deal

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<sup>6</sup> Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> While all publications used here appear in the footnotes, the bibliography contains only those relevant to Ottoman slavery.

with the ransoming and re-integration of former captives returning from Ottoman territory into their European homelands.<sup>8</sup>

We will begin by discussing the motivations of Ottoman slaveholders, insofar as we can tentatively reconstruct them, and try to figure out what kinds of agency might remain available to their slaves. As the next step, we will briefly survey the regions from which Ottoman slaves most frequently arrived on the slave markets. Our first major concern will be the fate of domestic slaves in non-elite households before the nineteenth century; I have given this issue special prominence because it had remained in the shadow for a very long time, but has recently emerged as a significant research issue. Perhaps I should also admit that my own work focuses on this issue. The next two sections will deal with slaves who laboured for the sultans and their grandees, on the landed estates belonging to the latter, or else to pious foundations; for these issues, some of the available evidence pertains to the formative period of the empire, about which we otherwise know very little. In North Africa, with its corsair societies, slavery was widespread from the sixteenth to the later eighteenth century. However, to the historian's misfortune, the evidence is very one-sided, as the documentation generated in Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli is not very prolix, while European sources are abundant and often strident. We will then return to Istanbul and take a very brief look at 'elite slavery': this term has recently come to designate upwardly mobile slaves who might wield substantial power, either in the service of the sultan or in that of a high official; once again, these enslaved or else slave-like servitors of the sultan merit a separate survey. Quite a few 'elite slaves', if lucky, in their turns became Ottoman grandees; and in the altered circumstances of the nineteenth century, high-profile personages of this kind, on whose activities documentation is often relatively abundant, were almost the only people who could

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<sup>8</sup> However, I want to at least mention the massive work of Magnus Ressel, *Zwischen Sklavenkassen und Türkenpässen: Nordeuropa und die Barbaren in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012, which deals with Denmark and the trading ports of northern Germany.

afford to own slaves. The fates of these enslaved men and women will occupy us in the last section.

### The choices open—or not—to slave owners and slaves

Very difficult of access to the researcher, but important nevertheless, are the personal factors inherent in the relationships of masters/mistresses to their slaves. On the one hand, these owners, who might be part of the elite but also ordinary members of the tax-paying population, had a variety of aims in mind. Some of them probably wished to acquire faithful long-term servitors. Others planned to educate a young boy or girl to the point that he/she might be a suitable gift to the sultan, thus enhancing the position of the giver. Yet others might not have had any specific aims in mind, but simply inherited a slave or two from a deceased relative. Or else when slaves were plentiful after sultanic campaigns in the Balkans, a soldier might be eager to turn his share of the booty into cash, and a relative or neighbour might oblige him by a purchase. In such cases, the new owners might arbitrarily decide whether they were going to keep the slave or else sell him/her. Last but not least there were the professional slave traders, both male and female, plying their trade in the Esir Hanı of Istanbul but also in the homes of wealthy customers: they bought slaves for resale.

On the other hand, while the agency of slaves was severely limited, in certain cases it was not absent. Some slaves possessed good health, stamina, intelligence, and adaptability, which might allow the most fortunate among them to achieve quite prominent positions, particularly if in the service of a high-ranking pasha. As most evidence concerns elite slaves both male and female, it is unfortunate but true that even in the present survey, ordinary labourers and maids-of-all-work will receive less prominence than their numbers and labour input surely warrant.

Among the 'ordinary' slaves, there was doubtless a tiny minority whose choices and motivations we can sometimes discern, albeit 'through a glass darkly', namely the men of Italian-, Spanish-,