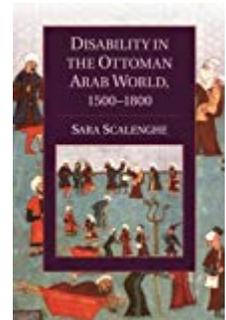


Sara Scalenghe. *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500-1800.* Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 220 pp. \$32.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-62279-1.



Reviewed by John Little

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Even an exhaustive study of disability literature demonstrates a heavy focus on modern Western European and North American history. For this reason alone, Sara Scalenghe's *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500-1800* is worthy of attention. She sets no easy task for herself; she is "interested in recovering and documenting the lived experiences of people who had impairments" in the early modern Ottoman Arab world (p. 10). Using biographical dictionaries, chronicles, travelogues, and legal and medical texts, in addition to dream manuals, belles-lettres, and anecdotal writings, Scalenghe puts together an intriguing portrait of Ottoman conceptions of disability and the people who lived with impairments.

Each of the four main chapters deals with a particular impairment: deafness and muteness, blindness, impairments of the mind, and intersex, and each follows a similar pattern, making Scalenghe's research easily accessible to researchers interested in particular impairments. Three of these chapters begin with anecdotes, fol-

lowed by definitions, and then an examination of how these perceived impairments were or were not considered disabilities in the Ottoman Arab world. Throughout her monograph, Scalenghe chooses her words very carefully, defining not only unfamiliar Arabic or Turkish words but also the terminology she employs. She uses the social model of disability, maintaining a careful distinction between impairments—physical or mental abnormalities as defined by Ottoman society—and disability, or "the systemic societal response to perceived impairments" (p. 10). These clarifications are invaluable in the context of Scalenghe's work, particularly in her fourth chapter on intersex.

In the first chapter, which addresses deafness and muteness, Scalenghe argues that deafness, particularly postlingual deafness, was not necessarily a disability. Deafness was a misfortune, but not "an insuperable impediment to participation in social and economic life. The inability to speak, on the other hand, was by all indications just such an impediment" (p. 33). The disabling social factor

of muteness was that someone with impaired speech was limited when participating in religious and legal activities. Nonverbal believers were unable to function as imams, even if they were the most intelligent people in the room. Marriage and divorce were permitted for the deaf and mute, and a man could act as a mufti “if he can write or if his signs can be understood” (p. 50). Although a source of distress, deafness alone was not necessarily a disability. However, muteness was—with important consequences for the non-verbal.

Like deafness, blindness in the early modern Ottoman Arab world was so prevalent that it was the subject of remarks by both Ottoman officials and travelers to the empire. After an anecdotal introduction, Scalenghe explains the different Arabic words for blindness. At no point do these words imply lessened mental abilities, and one (*başîr*) refers to “sighted,” but seeing with the heart and mind, rather than the eyes (pp. 60-61). Blind people were often treated the same as sighted individuals in legal matters, though crucial differences remained, the most important of which was that the testimony of a blind man relied solely on sound, which made his evidence hearsay, and thus inadmissible in court.

Scalenghe’s third chapter, “Impairments of the Mind,” begins with definitions rather than anecdotes, examining the disabling nature of mental illness—melancholia, madness, and “holy folly”—in the Ottoman Empire. All of the schools of Islamic law agreed that individuals without the capacity for reason held no personal responsibility before the law. They were considered minors, were not required to follow religious tenets, and were not allowed to testify in court. Guardians handled their legal affairs, but individuals regained their full rights “in periods of lucidity” (pp. 117-118). Of all of Scalenghe’s research, this chapter presents perhaps the closest parallel to Western practices regarding disability, highlight-

ing the infantilization of people with mental illness and their lack of agency in legal matters.

Legal issues predominate throughout Scalenghe’s work with good reason. Disability as a social construct relies on demonstrating how people with impairments were included or excluded. Thus, her chapter on intersex is particularly enlightening. Ambiguous genitalia were not viewed with fear or revulsion, and the question of male or female was often answered by the time a child reached maturity. Scalenghe outlines the multiple ways in which an individual’s biological sex was determined and makes it clear that biological sex in the early modern Ottoman Empire assigned a specific gender. It was advantageous—and generally preferred—if that gender was male, due to the privileges accorded by Islamic law. Regardless, transitions or continued indeterminacy were accepted rather easily. Scalenghe notes only one exception: Muhammad b. Salama al-Nabulusi’s wife, who claimed to be a *khuntha* (intersex), was discovered to be a boy rather than a girl, but the negative social reaction appears to be because the boy was an imposter rather than a *khuntha*.

Disability in the Ottoman Arab World contains both a conclusion and an epilogue. Scalenghe concludes that the Ottoman approach to disability was “*relatively benign*” because Ottoman Arab society sought “a balance between the rights and duties of the individual and the interest of the community” (p. 164). In her epilogue, Scalenghe quickly outlines how the approach to disability in the Arab world changed due to its experiences with colonialism, the Ottoman reform movement, industrialization, and Christian missionaries in the twentieth century.

Throughout her monograph, Scalenghe refers to the humoral medical tradition and its influence over the understanding of impairments. Whether it was deafness, blindness, mental illness, or intersex, the body’s humors were out of balance. Islam lacks the concept of original sin, so impairments were not attributed to God and were not consid-

ered punishments or gifts. The exception was holy fools, who were greeted with a great deal of reverence from all levels of society. Deafness, blindness, mental illness, and intersex were otherwise only occasionally disabling.

One potential reason that these impairments did not automatically equal disability was their prevalence. Scalenghe employs a wide variety of sources, from small villages to the sultan's court, that reference impairments. Impairments were so prevalent that jurists, muftis, and foreign visitors repeatedly referenced them in their personal and public records. She highlights examples from beyond Ottoman borders to emphasize the differences between the empire and Western Europe.

Where contemporary Europe appears, it is to emphasize the differences between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the perception and inclusion of people with disabilities. Overall, Scalenghe does an excellent job of balancing the European foreign and Ottoman domestic, using predominantly Ottoman sources. Foreign, in other words, Western European, sources are used sparingly and are very critically "the Other" in Scalenghe's narrative. This is not to say that Ottoman sources do not have their weaknesses: Scalenghe readily addresses the shortcomings of the travelogues, legal texts, and anecdotal references she employs. Most obvious is the general focus on men, not only because the available sources refer almost exclusively to men, but also because, as Scalenghe explains in her chapter on intersex, the Ottoman understanding of humoral theory allowed for only one sex, with men as a perfect form and women as an imperfect form. The European concept of sexual dimorphism did not exist in the Ottoman Empire.

These explanations of concepts and terminology are extremely useful, but there are some questions about connotations. Scalenghe asserts that there are no implications of reduced mental faculties in the chapter on deafness and muteness, nor in the chapter on blindness. Are there

any implications of fear? Did any of the Ottoman Turkish or Arabic words or phrases suggest fear of disability through impairment, as we find in many Western sources in the early modern era?

Additionally, Scalenghe refers to Western Europe, but not Ottoman Europe or Eastern Europe. How does the narrative change when Islamic jurisprudence is compared to Orthodox Christian traditions in the empire? As there were large concentrations of Orthodox Christian and Jewish populations throughout the Ottoman Empire, were there conflicts between these groups based on conceptions of disability? Was it advantageous for a deaf, blind, mentally impaired, or intersex person to be Muslim rather than Orthodox or Jewish? It would undoubtedly be difficult to piece together these sources, but these experiences would provide an even more revealing picture of the lives of those who lived with impairments in the multi-ethnic, multireligious Ottoman Empire.

Disability in the Ottoman Arab World offers unique perspectives on both Ottoman history and disability history. It challenges preconceived and Western-conceived notions about disability in the early modern period, detailing complex societal relationships in an underexplored discipline. It is an enjoyable read, and Scalenghe's writing ensures sophisticated ideas are easily understood, whether one is an expert or beginner in Ottoman or disability studies.

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