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Review of Robert C. Davis, *Holy War and Human Bondage: Tales of Christian-Muslim Slavery in the Early-Modern Mediterranean*

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To cite this article: Smiley, Will, review of Robert C. Davis, *Holy War and Human Bondage: Tales of Christian-Muslim Slavery in the Early-Modern Mediterranean*, (Santa-Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 2 (2012), <<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1086>>.

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1086>

Online Publication Date: 20 December 2012

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Holy War and Human Bondage: Tales of Christian-Muslim Slavery in the Early-Modern Mediterranean

Robert C. Davis

Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2009, xi + 316 pp., £44.00, Hardback.

ISBN: 978-0-275-98950-7

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In this book Robert C. Davis sets out to reconstruct what he calls “faith slavery”: the widespread captivity of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish men, women and children by corsairs and slave raiders in the Mediterranean during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The word “tales” in the book’s title captures both its strengths and its weaknesses: Davis’s narrative is most compelling and illuminating when he retells and discusses an astonishingly wide selection of Christian captives’ stories. But at the same time, Davis’s focus on these tales sometimes prevents him from engaging with the considerable secondary literature on the subject, and the absence of Muslim sources impedes the work’s aim of painting a comprehensive picture of Mediterranean slavery.

Davis’s titular tales are drawn from a variety of published works and from British, Neapolitan, Venetian and Roman archives. He weaves these stories through the narrative, alternating between stories and discussion, and using tales to frame each of his broader points. He begins by illustrating the experience of capture with the story of an American, John Foss, enslaved in the 1790s. The book is thereafter divided into sixteen chapters of varying length, most of which are based on one story or group of stories. Their topics range from an exploration of the trade in British and Italian slaves, to the calculation of the numbers and economic significance of European captives in North Africa, the role of ransoming religious orders, the experiences of male and female slaves in private and state custody, and the situation of Muslim captives in Livorno.

Davis has turned up a sparkling array of captivity narratives, including the depositions of the survivors of an Algerian slave raid on the Italian village of Pratica in 1588; the story of René du Chastelet des Boys, a French nobleman captured at sea and enslaved in Algiers in the mid-seventeenth century; and the convoluted tale of Mustafa, a Cypriot Muslim who, after allegedly converting to Christianity and emigrating to Sicily, returned to Cyprus, converted his family, and tried to bring them with him to his new home, only to be captured by Maltese corsairs along the way and abandoned on a deserted island while his family were taken to be sold in Malta as “Turks.” Davis emphasizes the individuality of these stories, capturing the experiences of particular people at particular times, but he also deftly uses them to make larger points: the impotence of Italian coastal defense systems; slave raiders’ tactics and priorities; how captives’ identities and abilities affected their fates; and the temptation to dispute captives’ religious identities in order to enslave them. Academic historians will be intrigued by the relationships he draws between such stories and themes, while lay readers—seemingly Davis’s main intended audience—will likely find the book an engaging read.

Unfortunately, Davis, aiming at a popular audience, does not engage with the considerable academic literature on slavery, ransom and related topics in the Mediterranean world. Most notably, he does not discuss previous scholars’ questions about the reliability

and intended audience of these rich captivity narratives. Even those scholars who have recently drawn upon such narratives have been careful to explain their decisions in relationship to previous scholarship.¹ Davis, however, does not engage with this literature, instead largely accepting captive narratives at face value. He acknowledges that other scholars are less sanguine, but dismisses such concerns as the product of the postcolonial guilt of a scholarly community which provides “little or no place for White Europeans as victims, powerless and at the mercy of those whom scholars now prefer to call ‘The Subaltern Other’” (p. 12). This seems an oversimplification, but because of the book’s sparse footnoting, it is impossible to discern precisely which secondary works Davis objects to.

Similarly, Davis takes issue with a scholarly assumption—again without providing examples—that “faith slavery” was “somehow less brutal or dehumanizing” than other forms of bondage (p. 13). However, he does not engage with the work of scholars such as Ehud Toledano and Hakan Erdem, who have recognized the historical particularity of Atlantic plantation slavery, while still challenging assumptions that slavery in the Islamic world was “mild.”² Likewise, Davis commendably considers the experiences and role of female slaves in North Africa and Istanbul, critiquing sensationalized views of sexual depravity and exploitation within “the harem.” However, he touches little on the work of other scholars who have written about the institution and about western European travelers’ views of it.³

Perhaps more importantly, it is unclear how Davis conceptualizes and delineates the phenomenon he seeks to describe. What sets these captives’ tales apart from others, and what unifies them with each other? Davis begins by dismissing familiar (though anachronistic) categories, suggesting that these captives were not “POWs—men taken in combat, legitimate enemies of their captors—but also men who had rights to eventual redemption or exchange under the laws of nations.” But they were also not “kidnapped,” he argues, because that term “implies that they were taken for ransom or for political reasons rather than for sale into slave labor—bandits and freedom fighters kidnap their victims, not corsairs or slavers.” The better analogy, Davis contends, is that of the “open-ended enslavement” of Africans by Europeans (pp. 12-13).

While this call for both scholars and the general public to look beyond plantation slavery as the universal archetype of unfree labor is timely and thought-provoking, the dichotomy between “race slavery” and “faith slavery” seems artificial. Were not many sub-Saharan Africans considered “infidels,” and thus liable to enslavement, by both Muslims and Christians? Thus religion may not neatly divide Atlantic from Mediterranean slavery. If anything, Davis overemphasizes the role of religion; he recognizes that the “imperatives of profit” were perhaps more important in motivating individual corsairs than “visions of conversion,” but still sees religious hostility as the fundamental organizing principle of the Mediterranean world, describing both Christians and Muslims as engaged in “jihad” (p. vii).⁴

¹ See Claire Norton, “Lust, Greed, Torture, and Identity: Narrations of Conversion and the Creation of the Early Modern Renegade,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29 (2009), pp. 259-68; Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), pp. 13-15.

² See Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1998); Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University, 2007).

³ See especially Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993).

⁴ It is important to note that, since the publication of Davis’s work, Molly Greene has problematized the role of religion even as the primary theoretical and legal justification for enslavement and corsairing. She explores the complicated interrelationship between religious definitions of identity, and the political system of subjecthood-based definitions created by treaties; see Molly Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants*

Davis's temporal and geographic boundaries are also unclear at times. He argues that "faith slavery" increased dramatically after the late fifteenth-century Spanish conquest of Granada, but he does not fully explain—or cite literature to support—his view that slavery was merely a "constrained and localized social curiosit[y]" before this date (p. 24). Geographically, while Davis says initially that "[i]t is enough...just to restrict ourselves to the slavers based or prowling in the Mediterranean," he nonetheless sometimes references slavery in the Ukrainian steppes, the Balkans and the Ottoman-Habsburg frontiers in Hungary, as parts of the same story. Moreover, he rarely differentiates between government policies, market realities, and slave experiences in Morocco as opposed to the Tunisian, Libyan, and Algerian regencies, or the Ottoman Empire's central provinces.

With regard to the human boundaries of his book, Davis admirably attempts to reconstruct the experiences of enslaved Muslims, as well as captured Christians, emphasizing that both religions had their own victims and victimizers—indeed, sometimes the same people. Unfortunately, his use of only European and American sources limits this perspective to only one chapter, dealing with Muslim captives in Livorno, which does not entirely fit with the remainder of the book. For the most part, the story told here is, as Davis noted of his previous book *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters*, a "mostly Muslim story [with regard to the captors]." ⁵

While these theoretical ambiguities may perplex academic readers, Davis's final chapter, "The Lucky Ones," will likely be of more interest. Building on a previous article focused on Venice, ⁶ Davis examines the mechanics of ransom, including the incentives of owners and ransomers, the latter's funding sources, and the negotiating strategies used by both sides. He pays particular attention to the policies of the British and of several Italian states, and makes intriguing efforts to compare different policies, suggesting that "Catholic nations were quicker to respond than Protestant" when it came to setting up centralized ransom systems. Davis pays particular attention to the Catholic monastic order of Trinitarians, who worked throughout the Mediterranean, and to the ways they legitimated their activities and reintegrated returned captives. ⁷

This chapter, in particular, will advance academic understandings of slavery and ransom in the Mediterranean, breaking new ground beyond Davis's earlier work, despite the theoretical drawbacks found in other parts of the book. At the same time, *Holy War and Human Bondage* will be an entertaining and enlightening read for many non-academic readers, providing an accessible and engaging introduction to the experiences of Mediterranean slaves, which have made little impact on the public consciousness until recent years.

(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010). Greene focuses especially on the ambiguous position of Greek Christian Ottoman subjects, who appear rarely in Davis's book.

⁵ Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 2.

⁶ Robert C. Davis, "Slave Redemption in Venice, 1585-1797," in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, ed. John Jeffries Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 454-87.

⁷ Unfortunately he misses the chance to compare his findings with those of Gillian Weiss, who has focused on redemption, and especially the Trinitarians, in France: Gillian Weiss, "Barbary Captivity and the French Idea of Freedom," *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005), pp. 232-64; Gillian Lee Weiss, "Back From Barbary: Captivity, Redemption and French Identity in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Mediterranean," PhD diss., Stanford University, 2002.