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**Gary Leiser**, *Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World. The Economics of Sex in the Late Antique and Medieval Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2017, 332 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1784536527.

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In the last two decades, sex work in the Middle East has become a vibrant field of research, with a number of publications that situate sex work within the field

of social and labor history.<sup>1</sup> These works showed that, far from being the “oldest profession” in the world, sex work covers a wide variety of practices in different historical periods. However, much less has been published on sex work in the pre-modern Middle East. Gary LEISER’s book is one of the first attempts to address this research gap.

The book is structured in six chapters, each of them starting with a historical overview of the main political events that took place in the region under examination, followed by an overview of the main sources dealing with prostitution LEISER was able to identify. The first chapter is devoted to the Eastern Mediterranean world in late antiquity, while the remaining chapters look at different regions of the Middle East in the medieval era (Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Anatolia). The book is concluded by an excursus on prostitution as an incentive to long-distance trade, and a summary.

As pointed out by the author in his preface, there are two underlying themes in his book: “... first, the remarkable continuity, in general, in the practice of prostitution in the transition from Christian to Muslim rule; and second, the necessity of prostitution as an institutionalized service industry which took various forms at different times and places in our region” (xii). LEISER defines prostitution as “the frequent and indiscriminate sale by women of their sexual favors to men” (xiii), but also argues for the use of the term “public women” instead of referring to prostitutes, a term that is, according to him, “loaded with negative baggage, which can be a distraction and obscure what is going on apart from the sale of sex” (xiii). This definition and the usage of “public women” show a clear focus on female prostitution without taking other genders into consideration.

While we agree on the necessity of looking for an alternative to the term prostitution, the authors of this review wonder if “public women” was really the right choice. Why not use “sex workers” instead? Even though the term is strongly connected with the (modern) movement that seeks equal rights for people involved in the sex industry, the term still has the advantage of being less morally charged and allows sex workers to be situated in the wider category of working women, reducing the exceptionalism associated with the sex industry. Indeed, as LEISER

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1 See, for example, Hanan HAMMAD and Francesca BIANCANI, “Prostitution in Cairo”, in: Magaly Rodríguez GARCÍA, Lex Heerma VAN VOSS and Elise VAN NEDERVEEN MEERKERK (eds), *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s–2000s*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 233–260; Liat KOZMA, *Global Women, Colonial Ports. Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017; Francesca BIANCANI, *Sex Work in Colonial Egypt: Women, Modernity and the Global Economy*, London: I.B Tauris, 2018; Hanan HAMMAD, *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016.

points out “[T]he chief motivation to become a public woman was, as in any job, to earn a living – in some cases specifically to escape poverty or to provide for one’s family” (46).

In the first chapter, LEISER summarizes the main political changes that took place in late antiquity in the Eastern Mediterranean, focusing in particular on the spread of Christianity. Looking at Byzantine chronicles, early Christian writings, archaeological sources, and Roman as well as Byzantine law books (5), LEISER attempts to reconstruct the life of public women in several urban settings (Alexandria, Jerusalem, Tyre, Damascus, Palmyra, Emesa, Dura-Europos, Edessa, Amida, Antioch, Tarsus, Sykeon, Constantinople), as prostitution was flourishing in particular in areas close to ports and trade centers. While procuring was sometimes subject to punishment, prostitution per se was legitimate, tolerated, and “frequently taxed like other trades” (45). Moreover, it did not seem to have impacted the social status of the women, who had the possibility of getting out of the business and even rising to a position of power, the most famous of them being Empress Theodora (d. 548), later the wife of Justinian I (r. 527–565) (36–39). LEISER also shows how prostitutes were “both slaves and free women from various religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds,” suggesting that in late antiquity “there may have been more free women than slaves, but this is difficult to determine” (45).

In the second chapter, LEISER looks at medieval Arabia. Even though sources are fragmentary, they seem to agree on a continuity of practices related to prostitution after the rise of Islam, pointing to a triangular connection between pilgrimage sites, local fairs, and prostitution. However, this does not seem to imply any form of sacred prostitution (56–62). In a review of how marriage practices changed during the early Islamic times, LEISER argues, quoting what had already been established by Robertson SMITH’s *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, that forms of marriages evolved from polyandry to “limited polygamy at the time of Muhammad, with many different practices being concurrent” (63). This is in line with research by gender historians like Leila AHMED,<sup>2</sup> which, surprisingly, is not mentioned. In this chapter, LEISER also looks at the references to prostitution in the Quran (mostly verse 24:33, prohibiting slave owners from forcing their enslaved women into prostitution) (67–69), at *tafsīr* literature on the topic (70–71), and at Mālikī and Ḥanafī legal sources (the focus on these two schools is not clearly justified, even though the author states that he will “mention only the first two schools that emerged, namely the Mālikī and the Ḥanafī, which came to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean littoral” (71). This is not completely convincing, considering that in

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<sup>2</sup> Leila AHMED, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1992, in particular ch. 3.

the same chapter he mentions much later sources, like the Ottoman traveler Evliyâ Çelebi (d. 1683) (82–83). He concludes that “the practice of prostitution was not forbidden to the community of believers at the time of Muhammad,” and that the Quran does not explicitly forbid prostitution but, rather, pimping (73). Pointing out once again that “one factor that definitively affected the trade would have been the number of opportunities for independent women to earn a living” (73), LEISER mentions working as “singing girl” as one of the other few possibilities that women had, which in the end probably meant the same, similarly to what working “as an actress” meant for women in Byzantium (73).<sup>3</sup>

All in all, LEISER concludes that “it is noteworthy that the status of prostitution in Islamic Law was almost identical with that in Roman law. In both systems it was a legitimate occupation, and pandering was forbidden,” but also that “[D]espite these similarities, however, it would be difficult to prove the influence of Roman law on Islamic law in the matter of prostitution” (74).

The third chapter is devoted to Egypt: after a historical introduction from the Islamic conquest up to the end of the Mamluk period, LEISER looks at the regulation of sex work. Notwithstanding few exceptions, continuities seem to prevail: for example, even though there is no certainty, historical sources seem to suggest that probably prostitution was already taxed under the Fatimids (104). Starting from the Ayyubid period, there is more certainty, as we know that the Ayyubids taxed “this trade, with few interruptions, throughout their rule from 565/1169 to 648/1250” (105). Interestingly, as pointed out by AL-MAQRĪZĪ (d. 1442), “when Saladin became the Fāṭimid vizier, he renounced drink and amusement (*lahw*), certainly as a symbolic act of following the dictum of ‘commanding right and forbidding wrong’” (105), what then, after the overthrow of the Fatimid dynasty, brought him to issue a decree abolishing “numerous non-canonical taxes” (which probably also included the tax on prostitution) (105). Similarly, when closing taverns, he probably also closed brothels. It seems that this was a common practice: indeed, “[T]he religious authority, the Muslim jurists, were never happy with this state of affairs, and there was continuous tension between them and the rulers over the permissibility of vice taxes. The sultans’ chronic need for money, however, always trumped Islamic law and the sense of religious propriety” (108).

Also, during the Mamluk period sex work was taxed and was strongly linked to singing girls, who had to register their names and pay a sum of money to a *ḍāmīna*. This term refers to a woman who committed herself to paying a sum of money to the state every year, by means of collecting taxes from the singing

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<sup>3</sup> Even though this point appears really convincing, up to now it has not been proved conclusively.

girls.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, AL-MAQRĪZĪ also seems to suggest that prostitutes wore distinctive clothing (134). After an excursus on prostitutes in the Arabian Nights, LEISER comes to the Ottoman period, looking at travel literature, in particular from Leo Africanus (exact date of death unknown, around 1554), Pietro Della Valle (d. 1652),<sup>5</sup> and Evliyâ Çelebi, from whom we learn that prostitutes were organized in guilds (157–158) and worked in particular in the quarter of Bâb al-Lûq in Cairo.

In the fourth chapter, the situation in medieval Syria is investigated. After the usual summary on the history of the region from the Byzantine period up to the Crusades, LEISER stresses that much of the population remained Christian for a long period even after the annexation to the Islamic Empire. Similarly to Egypt, a connection between entertainers, in particular singers and musicians, and prostitutes seems to have existed (170). Taking into consideration that Syria was ruled for most of the time between the ninth and sixteenth centuries by Egyptian rulers, it comes as no surprise that for most of this period the measures taken in Egypt were also valid in Syria (205–206). Sources like al-Muqaddasī (d. 990) and Ibn Buṭlān (d. 1066) seem to point out that prostitution particularly flourished at places close to ports (171) and trade routes (172). It also seems that there were attempts to ban prostitution to the outskirts of Damascus, especially during the Mamluk period (206). Prostitutes were mostly either free or enslaved women and subjected to the control of a pimp, even though the existence of guilds during later times cannot be excluded (206). When looking at the periods of the Crusades in Egypt, LEISER also considers Christian sources and comes to the conclusion that prostitutes accompanied crusading armies and most probably also followed their fate, meaning that they might have ended up being enslaved when the army they travelled with was defeated (115–116). Similar developments can also be observed in Syria, where the number of prostitutes increased during the late eleventh century due to the arrival of many European women in the region traveling (?) with the Crusader armies (206). Besides working in the sex trade, they also performed other tasks, including “cooking, doing laundry, keeping the camp tidy and tending the wounded (?). Some may even have taken up arms” (177). Following the Crusades was certainly a way to make a living for the women, who were probably also attracted by the possibility of remission of penance or even plenary indulgence granted by the Pope (178). LEISER points out that “[W]hile prostitution was flourishing in the cities held by the Crusaders along the coast of Syria, the sit-

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Abd AR-RĀZIQ, *La femme au Temps des Mamlouks en Égypte*, Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire, 1973, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Erroneously spelled as Pietro Della Vale (155).

uation in the rest of the country beyond the coastal ranges is less clear. Evidence for this trade there is extremely spotty” (187). It seems, however, that in this region also sex work was taxed, in 1163 Nūr al-Dīn decided to abolish the “non-canonical” taxes after a series of defeats by the Crusaders, which led to a massive decrease of state income (189). This seems to resonate with what happened in the Christian-controlled cities, where prostitution was banned after clergy blamed sexual excesses for the Crusaders’ difficulties during their campaign (207).

The fifth chapter is devoted to public women in medieval Anatolia and, as usual, starts with a historical summary from the arrival of the Seljuks and to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. LEISER also stresses that Anatolia, being part of the Byzantine Empire for centuries, had a predominantly Christian population (209–213) that probably also administered the sex trade (213). It seems that prostitution was tolerated by the Seljuks (218), was somehow connected to public baths (224), and was taxed (226). For example, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī seemed to have considered prostitutes an important factor in society, a position similar to that articulated by St Augustine, who considered them important to keep male desire under control (222). It also seems that some brothels were owned by women (222). LEISER also looks at prostitution in the early Ottoman period, focusing in particular on Istanbul, as he was not able to identify sources for Anatolia (227). Showing a clear continuity with previous periods, prostitution was tolerated and taxed, while procuring was punishable (228). It seems that most prostitutes worked close to Galata, which was not only the quartier of entertainment but also the location of the harbor (230). And, once again, there was a connection with festivals and fairs. However, there are also cases of prostitutes who had been banned or even executed (233), although this was usually done by “officials acting on their own authority” (236), as happened for example in Sofia under governor Melek Ahmed Pasha (233).

In the last part of the book, LEISER does an excursus on “[P]rostitution as an incentive to long-distance trade,” in which he shows how prostitution was a common feature alongside trade routes on sea and land. Given the dangers of travelling, prostitutes waited for merchants and travelers in inns, taverns, caravanserais, and ports (237–238), contributing to local economies. LEISER even suggests that the idea of finding prostitutes along the route may have functioned as an incentive to long distance travel (252).

Finally, LEISER summarizes his main findings under 19 points. What is probably most striking is to observe the continuities over centuries, including the fact that for most of the time prostitution was taxed and the fact that prostitution generated revenues for the *awqāf*. Moreover, such revenues were in some cases granted as an *iqṭāʿ* to military officers like land, something that speaks about the degree of institutionalization of sex work (119–120). It is also noteworthy to see the

uncertainty in which sex workers must have lived, considering the rather unpredictable regulations and restrictions, partly initiated for political reasons or when natural disasters occurred (255). It also seems that every societal background was possible for the women as much as for the clients, and that sex workers were well integrated into the local economy.

LEISER mentions at the very beginning of his book that he aims “to establish a rough framework for further research, answer some basic questions, and provoke others” (xi). This may explain why the authors of this review sometimes missed critical reflections on the material examined or the contextualization of the book within current theoretical debates. True, “[N]o book has been written on the history of prostitution in Southwest Asia, the Modern Middle East, in the Middle Ages” (xi). However, there is a wide theoretical debate within the field of scholars working on sex work in different areas of the world, for example on terminology. Connecting the research to this debate would have added an interesting layer to the book.

Still, LEISER’s book represents a very important addition to the literature on sex work in the Middle East and is certainly a milestone: indeed, even though there is a growing body of research on sex work in the modern period, research on the pre-modern period is scarce.<sup>6</sup> There is a consensus between scholars that modernity led to a main rupture in the discourse on sex work, in particular because the modern state, with the introduction of obligatory health controls on women, practically created the specific category of prostitute. Without denying this main rupture, as one of the authors of this review argued elsewhere, certainly there are also some continuities with the pre-modern world. In order to assess them, but also to better situate ruptures, it is crucial to have more research on sex work in the Middle East in the pre-modern period.<sup>7</sup> As LEISER mentioned in his preface, one of the problems in researching this topic is that “the women

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<sup>6</sup> With the exception of the Ottoman period. See, for example, James E. BALDWIN and his literature review on prostitution in the Ottoman Empire, “Prostitution, Islamic Law and Ottoman Societies”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, 1, (2012): 117–152, at 118, footnote 3. As regards the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, see Abul-Karim RAFAQ, “Public Morality in 18th Century Ottoman Damascus”, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 55–56 (1990): 180–196; Marco SALATI, “Proscrizione, pentimento e perdono: Alcuni documenti riguardanti la prostituzione nella Aleppo ottomana del XVIII secolo”, *Oriente Moderno* n. s. 24 (2005): 537–562; Elyse SEMERDIJAN, *Off the Straight Path: Illicit Sex, Law and Community in Ottoman Aleppo*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008, ch. 4. For pre-modern Egypt, see Serena TOLINO, “Sex-Work in Pre-Modern Cairo: Between Prohibition and Regulation”, in Carlo De Angelo (ed), *Fede, speranza e dialogo. Atti in memoria di Agostino Cilardo*, Lugano: Agorà & Co, 2021, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> TOLINO 2021, forthcoming.

who are the subject of this book do not speak for themselves,” and that “[A]ll our sources were written by men, who, for the most part, took little interest in their profession or condition,” something that does not allow us to reconstruct “the personal experiences of these women or what they thought of their trade or about men” (xiii). Nevertheless, LEISER identified a surprising and promising number of references to sex work in pre-modern sources, something that will certainly inspire more researchers to embark on studying this topic.