Journal of Interdisciplinary History, XLVIII:3 (Winter, 2018), 385–392.

Ehud R. Toldedano

Expectations and Realities in the Study of Enslavement in Muslim-Majority Societies

Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria in the Arabian Peninsula. By Benjamin Reilly (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2015) 216 pp. $75.00 cloth $28.95 paper

For the past two decades, but more intensely during the last few years, the body of knowledge dedicated to understanding how and why modern-era Middle Eastern and North African societies enslaved humans has grown and deepened significantly. The study of the ways and means by which women and men from various geographical regions around the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean's western shores were enslaved has been enriched and diversified to a degree unknown in the earlier cycles of interest regarding enslavement. As the focus in the scholarship gradually shifts to a more global view of servile labor and non-Atlantic forms of bondage, top-level research is continuously being shown on screens and placed on library shelves across the world of learning. The fourth volume of the *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, just published, reflects the growing attention to, and coverage of, slavery in human history from the Pacific rim, via the Indian Ocean, to the Atlantic.[1]

The inclusion of other areas and the move toward a truly global understanding of enslavement owes a great deal to the efforts of scholars who research non-Atlantic societies, including Muslim-majority ones. In recent years, the study of the history of enslavement in those parts of the globe has achieved a volume, a dynamic, and a maturity that make it one of the leading, cutting-edge subfields in Middle Eastern and North African studies. Thanks to the respectable list of monographs and articles published within the

Ehud R. Toledano is the Director of the Program in Ottoman and Turkish Studies, Tel Aviv University. He is the author of *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven, 2007); *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle, 1998).

© 2017 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Inc., doi:10.1162/JINH_a_01163

1 David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and David Richardson (eds.), *Cambridge World History of Slavery* (New York, 2017), IV.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

past decade or so in this subfield, we also have the means to create a better understanding of neglected phenomena in Atlantic slavery, such as the nature of the relationships formed in household bondage, not just in gang servile labor on large estates and cash-crop plantations.[2] Non-Atlantic societies, especially in the Indian Ocean world and Muslim-ruled areas, have had specific, often variegated forms of slavery, developing diverse notions of abolition and generating diverse post-emancipation histories.

Reilly's book has to be seen as part of that trend. It offers an excellent account of agricultural enslavement in the region that hosts the modern states of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Bahrain, thereby filling a lacuna in the expanding study of comparative bondage. Reilly seeks to describe and explain the "system of slave and servile agricultural labor, employing mainly sub-Saharan Africans, that prevailed in the traditional Arabian Peninsula" (1). He adds that his study "will argue that, as a result of the interaction between economic, cultural, and environmental factors," a hybrid character emerged that combined well-known Middle Eastern elements of the practice—mainly domestic, military-administrative, and other nonagricultural iterations—with elements that were "strikingly similar to slave systems in the Atlantic world of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries" (2). His efforts center around the argument that, contrary to the prevailing view, agricultural enslavement in the Arab world deserves recognition for its pervasiveness and significance.

2 Some of the better known works on this list are Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven, 2007); Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise 1800–1909* (New York, 1996); Eve Troutt Powell, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2013); Madeline Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (New York, 2013); Chouki El-Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York, 2014); Muhammad Ennaji, *Slavery, the State, and Islam* (New York, 2013); Ismael M. Montana, *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia* (Gainesville, 2013); Behnaz Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800–1929* (Austin, 2017); Terrence Walz and Kenneth Cuno (eds.), *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: Histories of Trans-Saharan Africans in 19th-Century Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Mediterranean* (New York, 2010); Alaine Hutson, "'His Original Name Is . . .': Remapping the Slave Experience in Saudi Arabia," in Sabine Damir-Gielsdorf et al. (eds.), *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th–21st Century)* (Bielefeld, 2016), 133–162; Michael LaRue, "The Frontiers of Enslavement: Bagirimi and the Trans-Saharan Slave Routes," in Paul E. Lovejoy (ed.), *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam* (Princeton, 2004), 31–54; Amal N. Ghazal, "Debating Slavery and Abolition in the Arab Middle East," in Mirzai, Montana, and Lovejoy (eds.), *Islam, Slavery and Diaspora* (Trenton, 2009), 139–153; Matthew S. Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (New Haven, 2015).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

Another major feature of Reilly's contribution is the use of a truly interdisciplinary approach to historical explanation. He provides a convincing account that links the employment of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans to agricultural work in the mosquito-infested, malaria-infecting moist lowlands and *wadi* bottoms, where palm-shaded, date-growing oases provided the main cultivable areas in the largely arid deserts of Arabia. Unlike the Bedouin populations and the enslaved Ethiopians who largely performed domestic and nonagricultural tasks, Sudanese and other Africans possessed a resistance, either inherited genetically or acquired through immunization, to the various types of malaria prevalent in those oases. Reilly argues that this feature of agricultural bondage in Arabia also "explains the predominance of sub-Saharan African agricultural labor" in the U.S. South and the Caribbean (115–119). During much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the abundance of enslaved Africans from those regions, purchased at reduced prices, "combined to make sub-Saharan Africans the preferred type of slave for Arabian agricultural." To establish that point, he uses a variety of evidence from DNA and epidemiology involving malaria-causing mosquitoes.

Among other interesting and innovative methods, Reilly uses data about well depths in cultivated areas to assess the risk of malaria in agricultural settlements and the corollary presence of relatively immune Africans in communities where shallow wells were more common (119–121). The wealth of sources consulted in this book is impressive, ranging from journals about genetics and geography, Arabic chronicles, and travel accounts in both European and Middle Eastern languages. Although some of the methods are clearly circumstantial in nature, requiring some "backing and filling" and a fair measure of speculation, the weight of the accumulated evidence amply carries the burden of proof. Reilly has indeed demonstrated that "malaria has played an important role in the history of the Arabian Peninsula, most notably in mediating the relationship between traditional Arabian agriculture and African servile labor" (121–122). He maintains that the presence of agricultural enslavement in Arabia also owes much to two additional factors—"the technologically unsophisticated, labor-intensive methods utilized . . . , and the widespread availability of African slaves" (127).

Reilly's book occasions a discussion about certain general issues in this subfield of enslavement studies—that is, the field not

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

concerned exclusively with Atlantic slavery. Given the constantly growing volume of high-quality scholarship that has emerged in this area within the last two decades, the time has come to abandon the cliché that it is understudied. The relatively scant attention devoted to research about agricultural bondage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the complete lack of such coverage in Arabia are reason enough for the focus that Reilly offers; he need not have extended his complaint about the lack of scholarship to the entire region or even to the "Islamic world," as he frequently does in this work.

One question that arises is, What should be the appropriate unit of study for an examination of slavery in this part of the world? Should it be the Ottoman Empire, which had an articulated economic system and a coordinated bureaucracy that governed most of the MENA territories; or, as Reilly seems to believe, the Arabic-speaking world (other variants in the book being "the Arab world" and "the Arabic world"), which is a cultural notion; or the totality of Muslim-majority societies across Asia and Africa (Reilly's "Islamic world"), a religious-civilizational approach? To this reviewer, framing enslavement within the Ottoman imperial context seems to offer the most coherent sociocultural, historical basis for analysis and interpretation. In that light, Reilly's work is primarily a local-history study of enslavement in Arabia, particularly its agricultural component, rather than an attempt to address a broader "Arab world," a context that is fraught with ambiguity regardless of thematics.

Another problem is to determine how much research about enslavement in the MENA regions, especially within the Ottoman and Qajar empires and the Arab successor states, is sufficient to make a general case. Are we to expect an output similar to, say, the treatment of enslavement in Atlantic societies? Should we not think of the MENA regions as more akin to African or Asian societies, such as on the Indian subcontinent or Asia Pacific rim, than to Atlantic ones? What will convince scholars who venture into this subfield not to begin every study with a banal, and patently false, statement about the "lamentable paucity" of coverage? The amount of research in enslavement studies, as in other fields of social and cultural history, depends on the pervasiveness of enslavement within a given society, and the existence of a constituency that sees such history as its heritage and identity base.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

The sheer magnitude of enslavement in the Americas and the concomitant demand for knowledge about it among descendent communities—such as the African-American and the Brazilian ones—are the factors that determined the level of scholarship. Two leading historians of Brazilian enslavement state that "Brazilian historians and economists are doing more studies on their institution of slavery than is now occurring in the United States, despite the imbalance in the size of the historical profession in the two countries."[3] The sheer size of Brazil's enslaved population, the duration of the practice, and the quest of descendants for historical research into their heritage have created this large-scale flow of research. Hébrard writes that not until the 1970s did "the history of slavery [in Brazil become] a central focus of intellectual debate, including heated disputes over politics and memory. Once this had begun, nothing could stop the rush of research or the sheer intensity of argument that still characterizes this extremely rich area of Brazilian academia."[4] Unfortunately, much of this literature has remained in Portuguese.

All available research, including Reilly's current book (seemingly contrary to the thrust of his argument), reveals that enslavement in the MENA regions was, by and large, of a different nature and volume from that in the Atlantic world. Consequently, due to nation-building pressures in the successor states, descendent communities of enslaved Africans and Circassians remain more interested in negotiating issues of identity politics than in exploring their own history. The attempt to integrate as equal citizens in the Arab countries of the MENA regions, as in Turkey and Iran, takes precedence over any desire to emphasize cultural or political differences, let alone to press demands for multicultural inclusion or to seek reparations for past injustices. Given the nature of that research environment, the investigations of MENA bondage during the past decade and a half is hardly inadequate, despite the potential and desire for more to come. Hence, to borrow a phrase from Reilly's text, we "should put to rest once and for all the often-cited adage that" enslavement in the Middle East is sorely understudied. Realistic

3 Herbert S. Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna, *Slavery in Brazil* (New York, 2010), ix.

4 Jean M. Hébrard, "Slavery in Brazil: Brazilian Scholars in the Key Interpretive Debates," *Translating the Americas*, 1 (2013), 49.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

expectations proclaim that it is not; the pace and quality of what is in the pipeline are adequate testimony.

A related issue concerns the weight of agricultural enslavement within the larger bag of bondage forms practiced in the MENA regions and in other Muslim-majority societies. The "often-cited adage" to which Reilly objects is that "slavery in the Arab world was overwhelmingly consumptive rather than productive in character" (153–154). We have come a long way since the days when domestic labor was not given its proper economic value; the distinction between "consumptive" and "productive" forms of servile labor is now all but extinct. But even after eliminating any difference between these two forms, the research done thus far clearly shows that agricultural bondage was not the predominant mode of human exploitation in the MENA regions. Except for such known cases of slave labor in Egypt's cotton cultivation during the 1860s, the estates bordering the Sahara, Oman's date plantations in Zanzibar, and now, thanks to Reilly's work, the Arabian oases, agriculture in the modern Middle East was largely free and, to a significant extent, small-hold.

The large majority of enslaved persons in the Ottoman and Qajar empires and their successor states were Africans and women who toiled in urban households. Reilly's book does not change that picture despite the important light that it casts upon the few pockets of agricultural enslavement on the margins of those imperial domains. Numbers matter, but Reilly recognizes that the data about the volume of the traffic are unreliable, open to interpretation and speculation; in most periods and for most peripheral regions, they cannot really support far-reaching conclusions. Nonetheless, he constantly prefers higher estimates, sometimes even the totally imagined figures provided by travelers (75–79). The numerical evidence in my own work largely agrees with the estimates of such trusted scholars as Austen, Lovejoy, and, more recently, Wright that the annual number of Africans coerced into the Ottoman Empire during much of the nineteenth century fell between 16,000 to 18,000 women and men.[5]

5 Ralph A. Austin, "The 19th Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts): A Tentative Census," in "The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century," Special Issue of *Slavery and Abolition*, IX (1988), 21–44; *idem*, "The Mediterranean Islamic Slave Trade out of Africa: A Tentative Census," *ibid.*, XIII (1992), 214–248. See also Thomas M. Rick's thorough consideration of numbers in "Slaves

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

Only a small fraction of those persons arrived in Arabia, and a much smaller number of them reached the arable oases that Reilly describes for agricultural servile work—a figure in the low thousands for men. The history of these enslaved men is certainly worthy of Reilly's impressive investigation. However, the scale of their enslavement is not comparable to that of Atlantic, African, Indian, or Chinese agricultural enslavement; nor are the modes of exploitation and labor organization on cash-crop plantations. As already noted, certain similarities to Atlantic practices might be detectable on Egyptian cotton fields of the 1860s, Zanzibar's date plantations, and Reilly's Arabian oases but not enough to shift the balance dramatically.

Enslavement in non-Atlantic societies was, by and large, more female-dominated, more domestic and less agricultural, more integrative and less exclusionist, and more receptive to gradualist emancipation than to one-step abolition than was its Atlantic counterpart. The divergence in the pace of abolition—the transition from various stages of unfreedom to various stages of freedom—has garnered very little study thus far. In descending order, scholarship about MENA enslavement has tended to concentrate upon African and Circassian domestic servile labor in urban elite households, *kul/harem* and *gholam* military-administrative bondage, enslaved menial and agricultural labor, and, to a limited degree, galley slaves.

Finally, not surprising in a work that seeks to chart new territory within the current literature about MENA enslavement, Reilly's book contains several missteps. Notwithstanding the plethora of scholarly works that Reilly consults, he has overlooked a number of important contributions that also merit inclusion. Most conspicuous in its absence—despite clear-cut relevance—is Timothy Mitchell's chapter "Can the Mosquito Speak?" in his *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002), 19–53. Although Reilly cites an article by Hopper with a title similar to *Slaves of One Master*, he did not mention that book. Although this omission was probably

and Slave Traders in the Persian Gulf, 18th and 19th Centuries: An Assessment," *ibid.*, XIII (1992), 60–70. For higher numbers and a criticism of Austen's figures, see Lovejoy, "Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan: The Trans-Saharan Trade and the Desert-Side Salt Trade," *African Economic History*, XIII (1984), 87–95; *idem* (ed.), *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (New York, 2000), 135–159; for lower, more recent estimates, John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (New York, 2007), 125–126; for Iran, Mirzai, *Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800–1929* (Austin, 2016).

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

not his fault, since Reilly's and Hopper's books appeared in the same year, it is significant. Readers should be aware of it for future reference.

Three other books about enslavement in the Arabic-speaking world evaded Reilly's attention. Montana's *Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia* briefly refers to agricultural enslavement in the southern parts of Tunisia and, more importantly, contains a list of sources for future research. Troutt Powell's *Tell This in My Memory* and Chouki El-Hamel's *Black Morocco* also have something to say about servile labor in agriculture, although neither deals with it as a central theme. Finally, Walz and Cuno's *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* contains a few references to agricultural servility in the Arabic-speaking Middle East beyond Cuno's chapter about its presence in Egypt, which Reilly cites.

Understandably, Reilly, a newcomer to this subfield, makes addressing a lack of scholarly attention to MENA agricultural bondage his claim to fame. But he is slightly misleading to cite Lewis' statement from 1990 about the "remarkable dearth of scholarly work" on "slavery in a Middle Eastern context" given that a great many works (including ones that Reilly cites) have emerged since Lewis' observation (2).[6]

Despite minor points of criticism, the bottom line is that Reilly has written an excellent book that covers a lacuna of some significance in MENA enslavement studies, specifically in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arabia. Having deployed extensive and often innovative and creative research, Reilly offers important insights that can form the basis for future research into servile labor in agriculture in these and other regions of the Islamic and Indian Ocean worlds. Despite its recourse to technical and scientific data to support major arguments, this work is eminently readable, a valuable addition to the fields of Middle Eastern and enslavement studies.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/jinh/article-pdf/48/3/385/1702105/jinh_a_01163.pdf by guest on 24 January 2022

6 Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York, 1990), vii.