
In spite of the advances in Disability Studies and history, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge of disability in pre-industrial societies and outside Europe and North America. The latter, argues Sara Scalenghe in this important book, amounts to a form of ‘disability imperialism’ (8) in which modern, western models of disability are privileged in academic studies despite some 80% of the world’s disabled population living in the Global South. In Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800, Scalenghe challenges scholars to engage with alternative models of disability in a book that adds significantly to our understanding of disability in early modern Islamic culture and society.

Until fairly recently, there has been no word for ‘disability’ in Arabic. In earlier centuries, much was written about ‘people with blights’, but these accounts do not map easily onto modern concepts of disability, since ‘blights’ did not necessarily relate to a person’s capabilities or productivity. Thus, descriptions of ‘blights’ incorporated characteristics such as long beards and short necks as well as more recognisable impairments such as paralysis, blindness and hearing loss. Nevertheless, impairment was an important issue in the early modern Ottoman Arab world (encompassing geographically the region of the Middle East corresponding to modern Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria), not least because high rates of consanguinity led to congenital and hereditary impairments. Drawing on a rich variety of source materials, most notably legal texts and biographical dictionaries, Scalenghe discusses social, cultural, political and medical responses to these impairments in her book, through studies of deafness and muteness, blindness, impairments of the mind and, in a chapter that extends the boundaries of what disability history might encompass, intersex.

The book begins by exploring experiences of deafness and muteness, focussing in particular on mutes at the seraglio of the Ottoman court who communicated using sign language. Biographies of deaf men showed that although hearing loss might be viewed as a misfortune, it did not necessarily prevent someone from participating in social and economic life. However, with the exception of mutes at the court, evidence is lacking for the lives of the prelingually deaf. Inability to speak might be disabling in particular situations, particularly given the need to vocalise prayer and indicate verbal consent in marriage. However, Scalenghe shows how Islamic scholars often took a pragmatic approach, with some arguing that prayer in the heart was sufficient, provided that proper intent was present, and that marriage might be consented to using writing or making a clear sign. In her study of blindness, Scalenghe finds little of the contempt with which the blind might be treated in mediaeval or early modern Europe. Instead, blindness enjoyed a privileged place in hierarchies of impairment in the Arab-Islamic world, showing how there were many attempts to integrate blind men into society. Significantly, there was little evidence of the notion of impairment as divine punishment due to the absence in Islam of the Christian doctrine of original sin.

The chapter on impairments of the mind compares attitudes towards four groups of mental deficiency: idiocy, melancholia, madness and holy folly. Those suffering from mental affliction were often confined within the home, but there was no Foucauldian ‘great confinement’ of the mentally disturbed in institutions. Whereas
melancholia might stem from sadness, despair and environmental factors, ‘holy folly’ was understood as a divinely favoured state that gave the majdhūb – holy fool – considerable liberty for licensed eccentricity. Holy fools convinced others that they had special abilities which could only come from God and, despite the disruptive nature of their appearance and behaviour, they were accepted largely because people feared divine reprisals. Nevertheless, it was easier for men to adopt the role of holy fool than women – one of many gender differences in attitudes towards impairment in the Arab-Islamic world.

The book’s most interesting chapter is the final one, which makes the case for examining intersex as a type of impairment. High rates of consanguineous marriage were responsible for the frequency of disorders of sexual development in the Middle East. Although it is not conventional for gender ambiguity to be classed as a ‘disability’ today, in a society in which almost everyone was expected to marry and have children, physical characteristics that affected a person’s marital and reproductive prospects might be disabling. In the Ottoman Arab world, the intersexed were recognised as a distinctive human variety. There was little religious or moral displeasure directed against them and they were not regarded as monsters or signs of divine punishment. However, the judicial authorities did make serious attempts to assign them to one sex or the other. Much like other forms of impairment, argues Scalenghe, the physical difference of the intersexed was handled ‘in a frank, straightforward manner, reflecting an attitude generally devoid of embarrassment, shame or moral opprobrium’ (161).

Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800 is a tremendous book that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of disability outside the modern western, industrialised context. The text makes a powerful case for the broadly tolerant and pragmatic attitudes towards physical difference in the pre-modern Middle East, at least before the spread of western-influenced institutionalisation and social Darwinism in the nineteenth century. Surprisingly, perhaps, there is relatively little in the book on the treatment of bodily deformity or mobility impairments and it is unclear how those injured in work or conflict fared in this society. Nevertheless, the book asks many important questions and, in highlighting the importance of ‘defects’ that might hinder marriage or reproduction as ‘disabilities’, demonstrates the need to broaden the scope of disability history in the early modern past – a point that historians of Europe and North America as well as those of the non-western world should note.

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thought it would, including Ottoman state officials and urban religious elites, is the starting point for James Grehan’s richly detailed historical ethnography of everyday religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Grehan argues that histories of religion, especially in the Middle East, have focused excessively on textual traditions. They have overemphasized the salience of religious difference in everyday life, and the ability of religious institutions (the main generators and guardians of textual sources) to determine everyday religious practice. Attempts to go beyond this by studying “popular religion” have only helped up to a point: the dichotomy between “popular” and official religion still grants normative status to text-based orthodoxies, and cannot account for the prevalence of “popular” practices among educated urban elites.

Grehan sets out to offer a more nuanced account of what he terms “agrarian religion”: everyday religious practice in a predominantly rural and illiterate society, where “even the towns”—and their literate elites—“were sunk in an essentially agrarian milieu” (15). His local and western sources include topographies, travel narratives, memoirs, and (for the later part of the period) Ottoman statistical surveys. The scholar and Sufi ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (1641–1731), whose writings figure often, is a particularly genial guide.

Common to all religious traditions in Ottoman Syria and Palestine was a weak infrastructure of sacred buildings and educated personnel outside the towns. Ottoman state surveys from the late nineteenth century show that mosques, churches, and synagogues, ‘ulama’, priests, and rabbis were all concentrated in towns; where villages had them, they were large ones like Jenin or were close to larger towns. Having established the weakness of institutional religion, Grehan explores the everyday religious life of the population through five thematic chapters looking at saints, tombs, sacred landscapes, the spirits that haunted the land, and the magic of blood and prayer. The chapters focus on the countryside, but return often to the towns and cities whose own religious cultures were familiar to all: talismans, charms, or icons could mediate human interactions with them, and dreams and visions grant more direct access to a spirit realm. Blood sacrifice and prayer offered ways of gaining saintly intercession and not just for peasants at the limits of the state’s reach: when the Beirut–Damascus railroad was opened in 1895, “religious officials presided . . . with the usual sacrifices” (174).

Agrarian religion “pervaded everyday piety, paid only lip service to orthodoxy, and casually embraced customs and beliefs that had no warrant in scripture or law” (165). Grehan’s argument for dispensing with notions of “popular” religion is persuasive; his argument against the salience of sectarian divisions deserves to be taken seriously, too, particularly in public rather than historiographical debate, though in regard to the latter, more explicit engagement with recent scholarship on sectarianism (189 n. 126) would have been welcome. There are other points of criticism: Grehan argues that agrarian religion’s “immense stability” also permitted “discreet adaptation and invention” (16), but—because he explicitly decides not to reconstruct these patterns of change—the picture presented here is one of timeless-ness, though it covers two and a half centuries. Gender is not considered in any depth, nor is the survival into the present (as I have witnessed myself) of many of the beliefs and practices Grehan describes. On the editorial side, a list of images would have made the fine illustrations more accessible.

Nonetheless, this is an evocative, thought-provoking, and richly textured work. Grounded in the comparative history of religion as well as the history of the Middle East, it deserves a place on a wide range of postgraduate and advanced undergraduate reading lists.

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My immediate reaction on seeing the title of this book was that the author had set herself an impossible task. Not that the subject seemed in itself impossible, but
rather that the materials were so scattered and fragmentary, and covered such a variety of literary genres, that there seemed little hope of combining them into a single, coherent study. It turned out that I was wrong. The author has indeed scoured a vast range of primary and secondary materials, including unpublished manuscripts from libraries in Berlin, Dublin, Princeton, Cairo, Istanbul, and Paris, and the result is anything but incoherent. The book discusses disability under four main headings—deafness and muteness, blindness, impairments of the mind, and intersex—which form the subjects of the four central chapters. The author has found much of the material which forms the foundation of her study in Arabic biographical works, notably the Kawakib al-Sū'ira, a biographical dictionary by the Syrian Najm al-Din al-Ghazzi (d. 1651), supplemented by other sources, including the reports of Western and non-Arab Ottoman travellers to Syria and Egypt. Sara Scalenghe has organized these diffuse and voluminous materials according to the categories defined by her chapter headings, and used their anecdotes about disabled individuals, such as the Damascene mufti Ibn al-Fufur (d. 1627), struck by deafness in mid-career, and groups, such as the blind men of al-Azhar University in Cairo, to discuss their cases both with reference to the classical Islamic medical, legal, and moral understanding of their condition, and with reference to a modern understanding of disability and epidemiology. Additionally, she has used comparative materials from Western European disability history. Her classification of the material under these general topics proves to be remarkably enlightening, often in unexpected ways. As an example of how modern epidemiology can throw light on historical phenomena, I had previously imagined that the surprisingly generous space that Muslim jurists devote to the khun-tha (hermaphrodite) to be very largely the result of juristic speculation—the enjoyment of a legal problem for its own sake. However, the author’s chapter on intersex uses modern studies to show that hermaphroditism is in fact relatively common in the area under discussion, indicating that the percentage of juristic texts devoted to hermaphroditism are more proportional to its presence in the larger public than I had thought. As another example, the chapter on blindness similarly reminds us of the prevalence of trachoma in Egypt.

To understand how contemporaries in Syria and Egypt, or at least those who belonged to the intellectual elite, understood disablement, Scalenghe compares the biographical accounts with historical medical texts, reaching the conclusion that disabilities were usually explained in terms of the humoral theory of medicine. Unexpectedly, this also includes the explanation for impairments of the mind. The standard Arabic word for “mad” is majnān, a term which implies that the person is possessed by the jinn, the unseen spirit-beings in which there was an almost universal belief. In medical theory, however, whatever the beliefs of the general populace, mental problems were usually seen as arising not from possession by spirits, but from imbalances in the humors, the exception being the majdhiḥ, the “holy fool” who gained popular acceptance, sometimes alongside the skepticism of the learned elite, through his or her apparently miraculous powers. In addition to discussing the medical understanding of disability, the author devotes much space to legal questions, an essential undertaking given that disabilities raise crucial legal issues. For example, since marriage requires a verbal consent, can a mute conclude a marriage? Or, does insanity lead to permanent legal incapacity? In answering such questions, the author shows, the jurists demonstrated a remarkable pragmatism: in the first case, a written statement or a “clear sign” would imply consent; in the second, an insane person would regain legal capacity in moments of lucidity. The tenor of the law, therefore, and indeed also of medical theory, was to integrate the disabled into society as far as possible. At this point the author’s comparative material suggests a remarkable contrast with some Western European societies, which often saw disablement as a punishment for sin and sometimes subjected the disabled to torments. Furthermore, since charitable giving formed an essential element in Muslim piety and was enshrined within Islamic legal literature, despite suspicion of impostors and the presence of overly aggressive beggars, the disabled in the Ottoman world were clearly more humanely treated than their counterparts in Christian Europe.

To sum up, this is a multi-layered book that handles difficult material and complex issues with apparent ease, to reach important conclusions. And, unlike many academic books, it is a pleasure to read.

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For decades, a critical reading of bio-power has inspired historians to think in new ways about the transformation of non-Western states. Frustratingly, little has been done to explore how the late Ottoman Empire fits into this scholarship. Kent F. Schull seeks to address this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by integrating the Ottoman experience into the larger scholarship. Crucially, Schull not only wishes to fill this lacuna by. Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire: Microcosms of Modernity. Schull here adopts a valuable contrarian angle to read his sources (mostly dated after 1909), arguing that Ottoman prisons functioned both as microcosms of the larger transformations associated with this period and as crucial indicators of the empire’s unique relationship with modernity (42–66). In

Reviewed by John Little (American University)

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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, followed 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 nonverbal.

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 (baṣīr) 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, highlighting 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 considered 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 multiethnic, 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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DISABILITY IN THE OTTOMAN ARAB WORLD, 1500–1800

Sara Scalenghe
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014
(xiv + 203 pages, bibliography, index) $90.00 (cloth)

Reviewed by Beverly Tsacoyianis

Sara Scalenghe’s fascinating new book is a groundbreaking addition to a field still in its infancy: disability history in the Arab world. Based in part on her 2006 dissertation, “Being Different: Intersexuality, Blindness, Deafness, and Madness in Ottoman Syria,” Scalenghe’s book also incorporates a variety of sources from sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Egypt, including dream manuals and a colorful collection of jokes and anecdotes. This work is proof that though few historians of the Arab world have devoted book-length monographs to disability, sources abound. As Kristina Richardson has shown in her recent publication on “blighted bodies” in the medieval Islamic world, questions about disability are central to understanding change and continuity in societies. Scalenghe’s work builds on previous studies of difference and health like Richardson’s and Khaled Fahmy’s while forging a new path in the field. Drawing upon nearly a hundred primary sources entailing a variety of Arabic-language works by Sunni Muslim men (such as fatwa collections, books on Islamic

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law and jurisprudence, texts on humoral medicine, travelogues and chronicles, and biographical dictionaries) and roughly three hundred secondary sources, she argues that compared to European societies of the time, the theory and practice of Islamic law "supported, enabled, and validated" a "relatively benign conceptualization of physical and mental impairments" in the Ottoman Arab world (164). Her research shows that the regions that today are parts of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine/Israel have a shared history not only as former Ottoman lands but also as areas where categories of impairment such as blindness, deafness and muteness, mental ability, and intersexuality influenced one's status in society in ways as concrete as categories of gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, race, ethnicity, or age. But categories of impairment were different from these other categories in a significant way: they could be "situational... inasmuch as they were disabling only in particular contexts," and jurists usually did everything they could "to integrate physical minorities into the social body by seeking a balance between the rights and duties of the individual and the interest of the community" (164).

Readers might wonder why impaired individuals in the Ottoman Empire seem to have fared better (at least in terms of stigma) than individuals in Christian Europe. Scalenghe offers a compelling, well-evidenced explanation: "The foundational texts of Islam largely refuse a causal relationship between guilt and disease, illness, and infirmity, and the rejection of the Christian notion of original sin precluded the attribution of congenital defects and impairments to the 'sins of the father'" (165). Over the past 150 or so years, however, the treatment of people living with disabilities in the Middle East has changed considerably, and impairment has become more stigmatized than in previous centuries. Scalenghe notes that there are a variety of possible causes for the shift over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries toward a "devaluation of people with congenital impairments... [who became] viewed as an impediment to... a strong and 'healthy' nation" (170). Among those causes one might look to the presence of psychiatric and biomedical notions of bodies that Europeans brought to the region with their imperialist and Christian missionizing projects, a study this reviewer has undertaken in research on mental hospitals in Lebanon and Syria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, for example, individuals who early modern Ottomans had considered "holy
fools" or majadhib may have been "recast as clinically ill" (168). There may also be roots of change in the Ottoman and Egyptian reforms of the mid-nineteenth century, which Scalenghe notes Khaled Fahmy has documented in his research on men who physically impaired themselves to try to avoid conscription into Mehmed Ali’s army.

Scalenghe’s scope in the Ottoman Arab world is limited to permanent or “potentially permanent” impairments that might “hinder substantially a person’s ability to participate fully in some of the major spheres of life,” such as participation in religious rituals, work, marriage, sexuality, and reproduction (12). With chapters devoted to deafness and muteness, blindness, mental impairments, and intersex and urogenital anomalies, Scalenghe takes readers on a tour of what the lives of many of these individuals could have been like. Her rich source base reveals glimpses into the legal and medical questions (and answers) the condition of these individuals occasioned.

For example, a number of her sources complicate the idea that khuntha (the Arabic word in Islamic legal and medical texts for an intersex person) and mukhannath or “effeminate man” were unified categories. There were kh_thas, for instance, whose sex was determined at birth (by assigning the sex depending on which urinary orifice produced urine first) and who were socialized and raised as either male or female (and who might later be identified as the other sex upon spontaneous and noticeable physical changes at puberty). At the same time, there were khunthas who were mushkil (ambiguous or problematic) in that their divergent sex development (specifically their contradictory markers of sex) raised persistent questions that affected their daily lives, such as what they could inherit, where they could pray, and whom they could marry (138–41). Though intersex persons were much less common than blind, deaf, or mentally impaired persons, being intersex meant a person was “disabled in most contexts,” rather than in only certain situations as blind, deaf, and deaf-mute persons were (138). Intersex bodies raised serious legal concerns that, among other things, threatened to impair a person’s marriageability, since “the physical inability to consummate a marriage on the part of either a husband or a wife could lead to its dissolution” (136). Another example of the complexity of these categories is illustrated by the fact that legal testimony of a mukhannath who “commits bad acts and is penetrated” was not acceptable on the grounds that the witness had “corrupt morals,” but legal testimony of a mukhannath (an individual effeminate “in limbs and speech” “by natural disposition”) was acceptable

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because, as Scalenghe suggests, "being innately effeminate was not deemed sufficient indication of illicit sexual activity" (159). She proposes that the complexity of "sex and gender categories" in Ottoman Egypt and Syria may have been "due, if only in part, to the reality on the ground of ambiguously sexed bodies . . . in the region" (160). There were large numbers of people with impairments in Ottoman Arab lands (for reasons mentioned below) and perhaps the greater incidence of and exposure to such individuals "led to . . . less distrust, suspicion, and marginalization" than in communities where such genetic anomalies were more rare (165).

There are, as Scalenghe points out, both cultural and geographical factors in the development of these impairments. For example, the cultural preference for consanguineous marriages resulted in births of individuals whose autosomal recessive genes produced a number of congenital malformations, such as hereditary deafness and various forms of divergent sex development (DSD). Even today, parts of the eastern Mediterranean have a very high incidence of certain rare forms of DSD that result in spontaneous virilization at puberty for genetically male individuals whom doctors and families had previously identified as female based upon their external appearance (128–29). Other causes of impairments were a result of the geography itself; soil in parts of Lebanon and Syria does not retain iodine, and iodine-deficient pregnant women bore deaf, growth-stunted, or brain-damaged children (4).

As the best studies do, Scalenghe’s work points readers to numerous avenues for future research. Although there are some obstacles—extant works on Arab folk medicine and texts by female writers, for example, are few and far between—the various legal and medical texts Scalenghe analyzes are a source base known to scholars in this field, and she asks new and important questions of the texts that are pioneering in the field. Moreover, there are a number of further as-yet untapped sources that may speak to issues of disability: poetry, Islamic court records, Ottoman imperial edicts, censuses, tax registers, and texts produced by Christian, Jewish, Druze, Shi‘i, and other minority groups. Notably, Scalenghe also effectively challenges those who might decry her sources as elite and "removed from . . . a broader social reality" by pointing out that some of the Arab chroniclers were only barbers or court clerks, "actively engaged in the lives of the communities in which they lived" (19).
The only fault this reviewer finds with the work is the prohibitive cost (ninety dollars) that may make it difficult for university course purchases, and the lack of visual evidence (except for the hardback cover, which includes a reproduction of a sixteenth-century miniature of mentally and physically impaired male beggars in Constantinople) that may have made the material more accessible. The book is a welcome contribution to the fields of Middle Eastern history, disability history, and the social history of premodern societies, and it will force students and scholars to think carefully about the complex relationships between impairment, rights and duties, and state and local intervention in the lives of those affected. Scalenghe demonstrates that there are a great many sources out there for students and scholars to analyze, and fields as varied as social history, medical history, legal history, and Middle East area studies are very clearly the richer for her contribution.