

BOOK REVIEW: OTTOMAN MEDICINE: HEALING AND MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS, 1500-1700

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ABSTRACT

“Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Medical Institutions, 1500-1700”¹ outlines the history of health and sickness in the vast Ottoman Empire, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The book, based on research of primary sources such as archives, manuscripts, travel accounts amongst others, addressed the question of how Ottomans, whether patients or healers coped with disease and/or attempted to stay healthy in the early modern period.

INTRODUCTION

“Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Medical Institutions, 1500-1700”¹ outlines the history of health and sickness in the vast Ottoman Empire, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The book, based on research of primary sources such as archives, manuscripts, travel accounts amongst others, addressed the question of how Ottomans, whether patients or healers coped with disease and/or attempted to stay healthy in the early modern period.

The author’s central argument is that medicine, as a human experience, is socially and culturally constructed. The history of Ottoman medicine is presented as the history of the impact of the society and culture on individual and communities’ responses to health and diseases, and their understanding of medical knowledge. Thus, the author does not limit herself to text-based medical knowledge, but constantly tries to uncover the complexity of relationship between medical knowledge and medical practice.

Since the topic covers the Ottoman Empire, a vast territorial region, the author makes it clear for her readers that she chose to concentrate on urban medical practice. She chooses to concentrate on three of the Empire’s most significant cities, each of which was a capital of the Ottoman Empire: Bursa, Edirne and Istanbul. The state power was more visible in these centres than in other provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Sultans and other members of the ruling elites were also keen on patronizing cultural and intellectual activities in these main cities.

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Chapter I

The main argument of this book unfolds in four main chapters. Each of the four chapters deal with different aspects of Ottoman state, individuals and communities attempted to prevent and cure sickness or maintain health. The first chapter explores the pluralistic nature of medicine in the Ottoman Empire. Avoiding a traditional text-bound approach to the history of Islamic medicine, the author uncovers different sources of medical knowledge, including orally transmitted popular medicine. Humoralism, based on Greco-Islamic medicine, religious prophetic medicine and folkloric medicine were diverse sources of medical knowledge and medical practice which co-existed in the Ottoman medical scene.

In this chapter, the author emphasises the complex interplay between theoretical medicine as outlined in learned medical literature and actual medical practice. Through analysing sources such as detailed lists of foodstuffs purchased for the palace and hospitals, as well as travellers' accounts, the author asserts that dietics was an important therapeutic tool not only in theory but also in practice amongst Ottomans. Although Ottomans generally preferred preventive medicine, they were however not averse to taking medicine. Medical therapeutics were however influenced by social and economic differences. The options of medical cures available for poor people were limited by financial considerations. Theoretical medicine considered surgery as the last option but it seems, as the author argues, that surgery was commonplace in Ottoman society.

Chapter II

Despite the diversity of Ottoman medical subsystems, they all shared an integrative and holistic view of humans and their environment. The second chapter addresses the holistic nature of Ottoman medicine. The Ottomans placed the human body in two cosmos: interaction between the body and the environment, and the body as encompassing a complex cosmos in itself. Man was expected to maintain the balance of the humors within his own body and the balance with the world surrounding him. These etiological concepts were clearly reflected in medical theory and medical practice. Learned Ottoman medical treatises promoted the view that music was capable of restoring the balance of the human body. Indeed, some Ottoman hospitals did employ musicians as part of their staff. Similarly, in both Ottoman medical theoretical literature and practice, hygiene was observed amongst Ottomans. European travellers admired Ottomans' cleanliness. The *hammam* was an important ritualistic and social centre, which the Ottomans also associated with health benefits.

The same chapter also offers an interesting discussion of the relation between medicine and religion. However, the author does not make it clear how this discussion is relevant to the chapter's overall argument on Ottoman medical holistic views. She goes beyond theoretical medical literature to examine actual medical and social practice. As was the case in other pre-modern societies, Ottomans believed in the healing powers of magic. Ottomans commonly used amulets, talismans, and magical bowls, in which verses of the Quran were written, to ward off the evil and hold back disease. The relation between religion and medicine could also be complex. Although alcohol was condemned by religious scholars, Ottoman physicians pointed out its medicinal benefits, and it was commonly used as a therapeutic in some Ottoman hospitals.

Chapter III

Chapter 3 discusses the venues and reasons for medical charity. The chapter starts by an overview of Muslim religious views of medical charity. Prophetic literature encourages Muslims to visit and care for the sick. Ottoman Sultans manifested their medical charitable acts by founding hospitals as *vaqfs*. Sultans' hospitals offered free medical services to the poor, strangers and those who had nobody to care for. The author nonetheless discusses the other face of the coin: medical charity allowed the ruling elites to maintain control over those who can (or were perceived to) threaten the social order.

Chapter IV

Chapter 4 offers an important and innovative discussion of the relationship between medical knowledge, social practice and physical design, by drawing on the social science literature by Durkheim and Mauss. The author focused precisely on the location and architectural design of hospitals. She argues that hospitals were built in urban cities could be partly explained by medical views of cities as less healthy than the countryside. Learned Ottoman medical treatises attributed the spread of disease because of the air miasma and thus hospitals were not located remotely from populated areas. The interior architectural design of Ottoman hospitals was informed by Ottoman medical etiological theories. Patients who were suffering from different diseases were not kept apart from each other and there were no efforts made to separate the healthy from the ill.

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion of her book, the author highlights the unique aspects of Ottoman medicine. Although Ottoman medicine was strongly embedded in Arabic-Islamic medical traditions, the author rightly argues that there were unique features in Ottoman medicine, mostly related to the changes in the cultural identity of Ottoman elites. One of these main changes had to do with the language of writing medical literature. Ottoman Turkish joined Arabic as a language of writing medicine particularly amongst the elites. The second noticeable change in Ottoman medicine was the evolution of hospitals into bureaucratic and hierarchical institutions, similar to other Ottoman institutions.

This book provides an interesting and thorough account of the history of Ottoman medicine. Just as its author intends, the book did not focus merely on Ottoman medical theoretical literature, but draws a realistic picture of Ottoman medical practice in which Galenic naturalistic medicine was used alongside magic and religion. The book is definitely an important addition to the historiography of Islamic medicine, in general, and Ottoman medicine in particular.

REFERENCES

1. Shefer-Mossensohn M, *Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Medical Institutions, 1500-1700*. New York: State University of New York Press; 2009 (277 pages).