

**FLORENTINE and OTTOMAN WOMEN OF THE 14<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES --  
A COMPARATIVE CURRICULUM UNIT**

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Teach Ottoman Empire Travel Seminar 2009

**Length:** One to two periods (forty-five to ninety minutes)

**Level:** high school (9-12)

**When best to use it:** at the end of the Italian Renaissance unit in European or world history classes or while studying the early Ottoman Empire

**Aims:**

- to evaluate what the Renaissance meant for Italian women, particularly in Florence
- to provide a comparison to the conditions of European women with non-European women
- to have students examine stereotypical images of Eastern and Western women
- to expose students to the social history of the early Ottoman Empire
- to introduce students to a variety of issues that are barely touched upon in most textbooks (sumptuary laws, European slavery, prostitution, etc.)
- to have students use primary and secondary sources as the basis for learning

**Lessons:** The following materials may be used in one of two ways.

- A. The teacher can make a handout of the documents and give students a homework assignment, along the lines of the sample assignment at the end of this packet. The next day student responses can be the basis for class discussion.
- B. Use the documents for in-class activities on Italian and Ottoman women. See below.

USING THE DOCUMENTS IN CLASS [minimum: 45 minutes]

**Introduction:** (5 minutes)

- Introduce the topic by eliciting student images of the general differences between the lives of Western Christian women and (Ottoman or Turkish) Muslim women. This can be done as a DO NOW: [e.g. list 3 differences between Ottoman [Muslim] and Italian [Christian] women in the early modern period. Typically, students will say that Western women are relatively equal and free, even if they face discrimination at the workplace, while Muslim women are less free. For Ottoman women, they'll probably mention the harem, stoning to death for adultery, polygamy, and the veil. Ask them to consider whether their ideas about the two groups of women would have been the same in 1500, and if not, what might have been different at that time.
- If you are doing this exercise as part of an Italian Renaissance unit, you'll need to introduce some key points about the Ottoman Empires. Herewith, an extremely brief summary:

The Ottoman Empire became the successor state to the Byzantine Empire when the Ottoman Turks, who were Muslims, conquered first Anatolia and then the city of Constantinople in 1453, renaming it Istanbul, an event of huge impact in world history. The Ottomans had a splendid court that rivaled the Medici court or any similar European court in culture, artistic patronage and opulence. Sinan, the great architect of 16th century Istanbul, can be compared to Michelangelo in the beauty and majesty of his work; he outdid any Western architect in terms of the number of works designed. Ottoman

rulers like Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) were highly esteemed in the West and played important roles in European politics and diplomacy. There was a significant exchange of ambassadors and other visitors. The Ottoman Empire included the Middle East, North Africa, and most of the Balkans, and lasted until 1918, and generally speaking, was a multi-national empire in which peoples of various religions and cultures had some rights and got along.

**Group work with documents:** [10-15 minutes]

Students organized in informal groups work through the documents and try to determine whether the women described in these documents are Ottoman women or Florentine women, and in each case to give the reasons for their choice. You might photocopy all the documents and have each group do all of them, or pairs could do one or two documents and report back to the whole class.

**Discussion of Documents:** (25-30 minutes)

After students report their choices, inform them about the sources of the documents: Documents I, II, III, V, VII, IX, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, and XVI were Florentine or Italian. Documents IV, VI, VIII, X, XI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI, XXII were Ottoman. Discuss which ones they had mistaken and were a surprise and which they guessed right. Work through each of the documents with the class, asking students to draw general conclusions from them about the situation of Florentine women in the Renaissance and of Ottoman women at around the same time. The discussion should lead students to raise questions about their own assumptions about European Christian and Muslim gender roles, and to understand some of the subtler aspects of the lives of women in patriarchal societies. Also discuss whether they learned more from the primary or the secondary sources and help them evaluate the different types of sources.

*Possible discussion issues:*

• **Dress codes for women:**

Why are they put in force? What attitudes and religious beliefs underlie such codes? Do such dress codes significantly limit women's freedom? How were the codes for Ottoman women different from those for Florentines? What might explain those differences?

• **Images of women and women's roles**

What common views about women are found in both cultures? What differences are there?

• **Slavery:**

Why is it that students often hear about female slavery in the East but not in the Western Europe? How did European slavery differ from U.S. slavery?

• **Women's access to the marketplace.**

How much access did women have to the worlds of work and earning money? What attitudes underlie restricting women's access to the marketplace? What are the cultural contexts for these attitudes? How does social class play a role? What social functions does prostitution serve?

**Homework writing assignment:** "

Write a dialogue between a Florentine women of the Renaissance period and her contemporary in Ottoman Empire in which each women discusses her life as a woman and commenting on what she thinks of the life of women in the other culture. Students should use at least eight of the documents (I-XXII), implicitly or explicitly.

*Additional topics for further research or discussion.*

The great historian Joan Kelly-Gadol raised the issue of whether or not there was a Renaissance for women in a groundbreaking article in the 1960s. Students could use these documents to consider this important question. Similarly, they could discuss why these sources had no representation of the voices of Italian Renaissance women or Ottoman women. Students might question the fascination, at the exclusion of other aspects of women's lives in the Ottoman Empire, with the harem held by Europeans. Lastly, what issues come up if you compare the portrait of Italian Renaissance women with those [made by a European] of Ottoman women?

# Florentine or Ottoman?

## documents about women of the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries

### PRIMARY SOURCES:

#### DOCUMENT I:

All women and girls, whether married or not, whether betrothed or not, of whatever age, rank, and condition...who wear - or wear in future - any gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, bells, ribbons of gold or silver, or cloth of silk brocade on their bodies or head for the ornamentation of the bodies...will be required to pay each year...the sum of 50 [coins] ...exceptions to this prohibition are that every married woman may wear on her hand or hands as many as two rings and every married woman or girl who is betrothed may wear a silver belt which does not exceed fourteen ounces in weight.

#### DOCUMENT II:

After diligent examination and mature deliberation, the responsible officials [have] the great desire to restrain the barbarous and irrepressible bestiality of women who...with that reprobate [morally damned] and diabolical nature, force their men, with their honeyed poison, to submit to them. But it is not in accordance with nature for women to be burdened with so many expensive ornaments, and on account of these unbearable expenses, men are avoiding matrimony

#### DOCUMENT III:

The trumpet of the lord and the voice of the highest shall call out on the day of judgment: "You who are worthy; come; and you who are unworthy, o' accursed ones, go into the eternal fire."...Natural law has ordained that the human species should multiply and that man and woman be joined together by matrimony...nothing is more displeasing to God than its violation. There are many who have failed. As a result, divine providence is disturbed and has afflicted the world with evils of wars, disorders, epidemics and other calamities and troubles. A heavy penalty must be meted out to delinquents, especially those women who continue to sin.

#### DOCUMENT IV:

...the women dress themselves very richly in silk. They wear cloaks down to the ground, lined just like those of the men. They wear closed-up boots but fitting tighter on the ankle and more arched than those of the men...They are fond of black hair, and if any woman by nature does not possess it, she accuses it by artificial means...They decorate their hair with small bands of ribbon and leave them spread over their shoulders and falling over their dress. Covering their hair they have a colored strip of thin silk...On the head they also have a small round cap, neat and close fitting, embroidered with satin, damask, or silk and colored.

#### DOCUMENT V:

[To her husband] she replied, "I have said and will repeat: I can not want anything except what you want, and in these children is nothing of mine but the birth pangs. You are my lord and theirs, use your right over your property, and do not seek my consent. From the moment I entered your house, as I laid aside my clothes, I laid aside my wishes and feelings, and put on yours; therefore, in anything, whatever you want, I too want."

**DOCUMENT VI:**

Night and day immoral individuals openly consume intoxicating beverages to an excessive degree and commit all kinds of transgressions against women.

**DOCUMENT VII:**

A husband who is promised a dowry by his brother-in-law that is not paid can send his wife back to her brother's house and even deny her basic necessities.

**DOCUMENT VIII:**

Rights must not be allowed to languish. If she [a wife] does not come [to the court] in person, the legal authority must obtain a proxy for her by ordering that one be appointed.

**DOCUMENT IX:**

Now as a bride receiving the rich casket from that husband whom she never saw, she feels much beloved when she is so richly rewarded and she creates a noble image of him who so nobly sent, and not seeing, his love.

**DOCUMENT X:**

To achieve her desire of acquiring merit in God's sight...and in genuine and sincere dedication devoid of all hypocrisy and deceit, only with the purest of intentions, she ordered [the construction of] a great many magnificent edifices of charity.

**DOCUMENT XI:**

She built a school...for which let God grant her fame and benevolence. Oh God, take her into the eternal Paradise.

**DOCUMENT XII:**

In those matters no one can rule the wills of wives except their husbands to whom God wished females to be subordinate.

**DOCUMENT XIII:**

Women are imperfect creatures, and consequently have less dignity than men, and that they are not capable of the virtues that men are capable of... Very learned men have written that, since nature always intends and plans to make things most perfect, she would constantly bring forth men if she could; and that when a woman is born, it is a defect or mistake of nature, and contrary to what she would wish to do...Thus, a woman can be said to be a creature produced by chance and accident. Nevertheless, since these defects in women are the fault of nature that made them so, we ought not on that account to despise them, or fail to show them the respect which is their due. But to esteem them to be more than what they are seems a manifest error.

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SECONDARY SOURCES

**DOCUMENT XIV:**

The government beefed up the authority of the ... Office of Decorum to protect and recruit foreign prostitutes, in part to turn young men away from homosexuality.

**DOCUMENT XV:**

Of 7,534 children registered in the ninety years [1395 to 1485] covered by the books of the [orphanages], 1,096 (fourteen per cent) are specifically mentioned as having slave mothers, while this may also be true for others whose parentage is not specified...

**DOCUMENT XVI:**

Of the 357 slaves [on an official list of slaves sold between 1366 and 1397] 274 were Tartars, thirty Greeks, thirteen Russians, four Circassians, five Bosnians or Slaves, one Cretan and the rest "Arabs" or "Saracens." And of these, at least the Greeks, Russians, Circassians, and Bosnians were almost all Christians." The other interesting point is the very large preponderance of female slaves; 329 of them are women or little girls, and of the twenty-eight males only four are over sixteen. In these great [households], there was a place not only for wives but concubines, not only for sons but bastards. Many a young bride, arriving in her new home, might find among the maidservants of the house some who were her husband's concubines ...On 20 August 1379, a female slave, who had put some nitrate of silver into an enema which she administered to her master who then died in agony, was sentenced by the judge to be placed in an open cart and drawn through the streets, while the population watched her flesh being torn to pieces with red-hot pincers until she reached the place of execution, where she was burned alive.

**DOCUMENT XVII:**

Where possible, the state attempted to confine the activities of prostitutes to certain parts of the cities, if not to suppress them altogether...The most common way of dealing with prostitutes was to tolerate their existence but to deny them status and recognition as women workers. The law code set out fines for prostitution under the section on adultery.

**DOCUMENT XVIII:**

Women were virtually excluded from the government apparatus...[and] had little more place in commerce and industry. Certain kinds of work roles, most notably those linked to health care, such as nursing and midwifery were of necessity open to them, as well as a few others connected with textile manufacture, such as winding and weaving, cap-making, embroidery, stitching, and handkerchief making...Occasionally, women of the urban well-to-do extended their interest in management beyond the household into the active world of commerce and trade, in partnership with their husbands, or as backers of commercial entrepreneurs...Well-to-do women appear...to have used their wealth and position to become major consumers of luxury goods and leisure-time activities.

**DOCUMENT XIX:**

Laws [were] directed at preventing women from entering the shops of sellers of fresh cream, who were apparently well known for their association with prostitutes.

**DOCUMENT XX:**

Information on women literati is itself scarce enough, much less description of their personal lives and training. [A profile of a fifteenth century poet] mentions that her father chose to have her instructed after "he saw spark the rare jewels of her talent."

**DOCUMENT XXI:**

Time has proved that the very regulations of feminine costume greatly assisted the clandestine meetings of wives with their lovers.

**DOCUMENT XXII:**

Success was possible for freed slaves. On gaining her freedom in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a trained silk weaver procured a loom and became prosperous by selling brocade.

## SOURCES OF DOCUMENTS :

- I: Communal regulations, Florence, ...[1373] [source: AP DBQ]
- II: "Regulation to restrain female ornaments and dress, [1413]." *Ibid.*
- III: "from the deliberations of the officials of the curfew and the convents." *Ibid.*
- IV Bassano da Zara, [1540], quoted in N. M. Penzer. *The Harem: an account of the institution as it existed in the Palace of the Turkish sultans with a history of the grand Seraglio from its foundation to modern times*. London: Spring Books, 1936, pp. 163-165
- V: Francis Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age [Rerum senilium Libri, I-VIII]*, Vol. II, translated by Aldo S. Bernardo, et al. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 663
- :
- VI: Imperial order 1585, Ankara, cited in Madeline c. Zilfi, editor, *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*. Leiden: Brill, 1997, p. 185
- VII: Alessandro Strozzi, Florentine jurist, quoted in William J. Connell, editor, *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 99-100
- VIII: Ebu Suud, Ottoman judge, 16<sup>th</sup> century, quoted in: Lesley Pierre, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003, p. 153
- IX: Giovanni Domenici, Florentine friar, quoted in Connell, *op cit.*, p. 95
- X: quotation from the foundation deed and referring to Hürrem Sultan cited in Lucienne Thys-Senocak, *Ottoman Women Builders: The Architectural Patronage of Hadice Turban Sultan*, Ashgate 2006, p. 85
- XI: inscription, referring to Kosem Sultan. *Ibid.*, p. 89
- XII: Antonio Roselli of Arezzo, law professor, University of Florence, quoted in Connell, *op cit.*, pp. 93.
- XIII: Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, George Bull, translator. Baltimore: Penguin, 1967. Medieval History Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook1x.html>
- XIV: Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. 1980, p. 380
- XV: Iris Origo, "The Domestic Enemy" *Speculum XXX*, 1955, quoted in Harold Acton & Edward Chaney, editors, *Florence: A Traveler's Companion*, New York: Atheneum, 1986, p. 127
- XVI: *Ibid.*, p. 293-4
- XVII Ian C. Dengler, "Turkish Women in the Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age," in Beck and Keddie, editors, *Women in the Muslim World*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978, p. 239, n.7
- XVIII: *Ibid.*, p. 240-241, n. 13 & 14
- XIX: Penzer, p. 163
- XXI: Dengler, p. 233
- XXII: Dengler, pp. 230, 235, 236
- XXII: Geoffrey Goodwin, *The Private World of Ottoman Woman*. London: Saqi Books, 2006, p. 106

## Homework Assignment on Ottoman and Florentine Women

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

1) Read documents 1-XXII. Take a guess which are Florentine and which are Muslim from the Ottoman Empire. You may list them by number.

Florentine \_\_\_\_\_

Ottoman \_\_\_\_\_

2) Check your guesses with the list of the sources of the documents.  
Which were a surprise? Why? Which documents did you guess correctly?  
What led you to those choices?

3) On the basis of these documents, discuss which group of women seemed to have greater freedom? Justify your conclusion with specific references to the documents.

**VISUAL EVIDENCE: [both found at GoogleImages**

Domenico Ghirlandaio  
Istanbul, made by  
1488  
with the Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni  
to Istanbul 1555

Sketches of women in  
Nicholas de Nicolai, who traveled  
French Embassy