Most of the 22 papers in this book were delivered at a conference held in Zürich in September 2012. In German, English, French, and Italian, they are preceded by summaries either in English or in German. Covering a vast geographical area stretching from Siam to the Atlantic coasts of Europe and North Africa, and an immense chronological period from late Antiquity to the nineteenth century, they deal with some of the many ramifications which the phenomenon of slavery has produced.

Such an ambitious project, which contains so much new information on more or less unexpected aspects of slavery, inevitably encounters certain problems. One of the principal difficulties is the definition of slavery. Were slaves captives and vice versa? Frequently used as domestic servants, in what way did they differ from other domestic servants? And what happened in areas such as the Ottoman Empire where so many citizens were considered the slave of the sultan? The standard distinction between slaves and captives is that slaves were the permanent property of their owners (and consequently economically productive, whether in domestic or any other service) and could, as Steven Epstein writes in his study of Genoese slavery, “only hope for mercy through emancipation.” Captives, on the other hand, were held to ransom and only remained in captivity until the ransom was paid (thus acting as temporary investments). In her study of Maghrebi slaves in Spain Aurelia Martín Casares quotes Claude Meillassoux’s definition: “The captive is a commodity: the slave is a means of production; the captive consumes, while the slave produces.”

But in fact the definitions, as one might expect, vary greatly from place to place and according to the moment, and the terminology tends to be highly ambiguous. If we take as an example the prisoners captured at the Battle of Lepanto, discussed in an excellent article by one of the editors of this volume, Stefan Hanß, we see that prisoners of war captured before 1571 were still described in Rome as prisoners, but after the Christian victory at Lepanto the elated Italian authorities referred to them all as slaves. The situation in the Ottoman Empire is still more confusing. One of the best pieces in this collection is I. Metin Kunt’s ‘Ottoman white eunuchs as palace officials and statesmen (1450–1600).’ Kunt deals with what he calls the “slavery of privilege,” and reminds us that the Mamluks, once the flower of the Ottoman army and the rulers of Egypt and Syria, were, as their name shows, slaves, but that this sort
of slave—and the category includes the ‘white eunuchs’—could embark on the most glorious political or military career, quite unimpeded by his originally servile status, and end up by becoming grand vizier or a military commander. In other pieces on the Ottoman Empire, however, such as Suraiya Faroqhi’s ‘Manumission in seventeenth-century suburban Istanbul’ and Hayri Gökşin Özkoray’s ‘Une culture de la résistance? Stratégies et moyens d’émancipation des esclaves de l’Empire ottoman au xviè siècle,’ we encounter slaves whose chances of emancipation were far higher than in the Christian countries of Europe, who did indeed have recognised rights, but who nevertheless might rebel against their owners.

A similar problem exists where Russia is concerned. It is illustrated in an elegant survey by William Clarence-Smith. Could slaves be differentiated from serfs? To all effects and purposes their condition was very similar, but it is here that another element plays a part—the actual religion of the slave. By and large the slaves in question were Muslims, but to these could be added not only Buddhists and animists but also those Christians who were not members of the Orthodox Church—Roman Catholics and Protestants captured, even well after the official abolition of slavery in 1723, by those inveterate slave hunters, the Cossacks. One possibility of emancipation was conversion to Russian Orthodoxy, but that entailed the adoption of serf status which could hardly be regarded as an improvement.

That femaleslaves (as well as young male ones) were the frequent victims of sexual abuse may not be surprising and is referred to in a number of essays in this volume. What also emerges, especially from Debra Blumenthal’s article, however, is the important role played by female slaves in producing children who might then be legitimised, thereby “securing the continuation of their own (the masters’ and mistresses’) line.”

Another aspect of slavery dealt with in this fascinating collection of papers is the role of those religious orders founded with the express purpose of ransoming captives (or slaves). The best known of these is the order of the Trinitarians, but it sometimes found itself in conflict with local organisations. This is discussed by Andrea Pelizza in an article on Venice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Venetians had their own confraternity, the Scuola della Santissima Trinità, which succeeded in ousting the Trinitarians and maintaining a monopoly in the ransom of captives. By 1762, however, the confraternity had to admit defeat and give way to the Trinitarians who had proved more efficient and, above all, with funds of their own, cheaper for the State.

Even if the papers in this collection are a little uneven one must be deeply grateful for the variety of perspectives which they offer, the new points of view which emerge—Michael Toch, for example, argues against the traditional view