

## Brief Reviews of Books

Ibn al-Sāʿī, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*. Edited by SHAWKAT M. TOORAWA, translated by Editors of LAL. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015. Pp. xlv + 226. \$30.

Sources describing the vicissitudes of the Abbasid court are generally not very admiring of powerful women or rulers who listen to these women. Mothers, sisters, concubines, and harem managers (sg. *qahramāna*) who wielded power and let their voices be heard at meetings were often presented as founts of despair and destruction. Several contemporaries and near-contemporaries chronicling the reign of the eighth-century Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32), for example, consider the caliph's soft-heartedness and his dependence on the women at his court to be one of the reasons for the demise of the caliphate during his reign. The tenth-century Iraqi litterateur and judge al-Tanūkhī included in his *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara* (ed. ʿA. al-Shālījī, 8 vols. [Beirut: Dār al-Sāḍir, 1971–73], 1: 287–88) an anecdote about the young prince Jaʿfar (the later caliph al-Muqtadir) that foretold the problems he would face: Seeing his son share grapes fairly with his playfellows, his father, the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 279–89/892–902), is said to have exclaimed, “I should kill that child today. [. . .] He will become caliph [. . .] so the women will wield power over him.” And according to the tenth-century chronicler al-Miskawayh in *Tajārib al-umam*, the highest military leader under al-Muqtadir wrote to the latter that “the army had complained bitterly of the amount of money and land wasted upon the eunuchs and women of the court, and of their participation in the administration, and demanded their dismissal and removal from the palace, with seizure of their possessions” (see H. F. Amedroz and D. S. Margoliouth, eds. and trs., *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, 6 vols. [Oxford and London: Basil Blackwell, 1920–21] 1: 189).

In his *K. Jihāt al-aʿimma al-khulafāʾ min al-ḥarāʾir wa-l-imāʾ*, Ibn al-Sāʿī (d. 674/1276) approaches the women at the Abbasid court from a completely different angle. His consorts are witty, entertaining, and pious. Ibn al-Sāʿī praises their good works, their maternal virtues, their generosity, and their poetic and musical talents. ʿInān, slave of al-Nāʿifī (fl. second/eighth century), “was a poet and woman of wit,” he narrates. “She was the most gifted poet of her generation” (p. 11). Faḍl al-Shāʿira al-Yamāmiyya, slave of caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61), was “one of the greatest wits of her time. [. . .] She was dark-skinned, cultured, eloquent, and could think on her feet” (p. 65).

Yet these women were not only refined cultural trophies, who sang and composed poetry; they were influential advisors and performed official tasks, especially in the sphere of charity. Khamra, al-Muqtadir's slave, was “always mindful of her obligations and performed many pious deeds. She was generous to the poor, to the needy, to those who petitioned her, and to noble families who had fallen on hard times” (p. 103). Shāhān, a Byzantine slave from the household of the caliph al-Mustanʿir (r. 623–40/1226–42), had her own fiscal office to administer her funds. “She performed many pious acts of charity and was known for her attention to widows, orphans, and the poor, to whom she always gave alms” (p. 121).

Moreover, some of the consorts dealt with state affairs. Khātūn, the wife of Sultan Malik-Shāh (r. 465–85/1072–92), acted as regent for her son Sultan Maḥmūd (r. 485–87/1092–94). His mother “had in her service ten thousand Turkic slave soldiers. She directed the affairs of the state and commanded the military” (p. 143). And in the face of warnings offered by such as al-Tanūkhī and Miskawayh, the caliphs portrayed by Ibn al-Sāʿī did not keep their beloved and powerful consorts at a distance; rather they kept them close. The caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170–93/786–809) loved his wife Ghādir so much that “he would place her head in his lap as she slept and would not move or shift position until she woke” (p. 9). When the consorts died, their husbands expressed deep grief.

Julia Bray's welcome introduction to the collective edition and translation of the text explains Ibn al-Sāʿī's intentions. His interest in the wives and concubines of the Abbasid caliphs seems to have been twofold. First, he was an Abbasid loyalist, who used the descriptions of the good deeds and virtues of these court women to glorify the dynasty. Second, and this is particularly true for the women of the early Abbasid rulers, Ibn al-Sāʿī's consorts were some of the best poets and musicians of their time and this makes them “culture heroines, whose hold on the Arabic imagination persists through the ages” (p. xxiv).

Ibn al-Sāʿī, a Baghdadi librarian with connections among highly placed members of the ruling elite, collected his information on the consorts of his time by using his own network and insider knowledge. Some of his informants are mentioned in the chain of transmitters at the beginning of his narratives. For the early Abbasid period he consulted literary sources, of which the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. ca. 363/972) is the most frequently cited. In this way, his descriptions of the early consorts follow al-Iṣfahānī's classical anecdote format of prose narratives interspersed with poetry, while

the more contemporary biographies are in the style of the obituaries of the histories of Ibn al-Sāʿī's own days.

There is one manuscript of this text available—at the Veliyyudin Library in Istanbul—and one previous edition, by Muṣṭafā Jawād. Shawkat Toorawa used both for his edition of the text, along the way correcting some of Jawād's readings. The translation of the text is yet another wonderful collaborative project of the Library of Arabic Literature (LAL). It was done with utmost precision by a team of LAL editors, each of whom is an outstanding Arabist and specialist in Abbasid literature. Clear from this volume's pages is that there was great appreciation of the original text and the entire process of editing and translating was a labor of love; the reader—specialist or non-specialist—reaps these fruits by getting to know another great text of Arabic classical literature.

MAAIKE VAN BERKEL  
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN

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*The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Sultan.* By GEORGE H. JUNNE. London: I. B. TAURIS, 2016. Pp. x + 336. £64.

George Junne is a professor of Africana Studies at the University of Northern Colorado and has undertaken this book on the African eunuchs of the Ottoman imperial harem as a labor of love. In the book's acknowledgments, he cites my short biography of the Chief Eunuch el-Hajj Beshir Agha (term 1717–1746) as an inspiration for his research. This is, obviously, extremely flattering and even touching. I therefore sincerely wish I could say that this book is better than it is. Unfortunately, the author's lack of formal training in Ottoman and Islamic history combined with a lack of thorough-going peer review on the part of the press to yield a work that is hampered by inaccuracies and poor execution. This is particularly disappointing because the author has perused a truly exhaustive corpus of secondary literature. Moreover, a lucid synthesis of the material on African harem eunuchs found in widely scattered secondary sources would have been quite useful.

The book consists of nine chapters, preceded by a brief introduction. The introduction and chapter one seem to assume that African eunuchs fall into the modern analytical category of Black. Since most harem eunuchs were from the Horn of Africa and were therefore not only identified but also self-identified as *ḥabashī* ("Abyssinian"), this assumption is, to say the least, highly problematic. Paradoxically, Junne himself discusses the *ḥabashī* label and other regional identitarian categories later in the book.

Chapter two abruptly turns to the tradition of eunuchs in the Byzantine empire, inaccurately positing that the Ottomans simply adopted the principal Byzantine ruling institutions, up to and including the employment of harem eunuchs. The well-documented

influence of earlier Islamic empires on the Ottomans' palace culture and bureaucratic institutions is hinted at in chapter three, which otherwise addresses sources of African eunuchs (with, however, too great an emphasis on West Africa, where few Ottoman eunuchs originated) and castration practices. Chapter four attempts to give an overview of different forms of slavery in the Ottoman empire, including Ottoman responses to British abolition efforts, while chapter five focuses on the functions fulfilled and influence exercised by African harem eunuchs specifically.

After this more or less introductory material, chapter six catalogues the Chief Eunuchs of the Ottoman harem, from (Ḥabeshī) Mehmed Agha (term 1574–1590) to Fahreddin Agha (term April to May 1909). They are listed in rather bare-bones fashion, and many anecdotes of dubious authenticity are incorporated into the narrative. A succeeding chapter deals with the harem eunuchs' religious influence, focusing mainly on mosques and larger religious complexes founded by Chief Eunuchs. The two final chapters cover physical descriptions of harem eunuchs and various accounts of their personal lives.

There is no discernible overarching argument to this book. Even the individual chapters lack an organizational principle. Instead, various assertions and quotations from a disparate array of English-language and translated primary sources and secondary sources—everything from memoirs to atlases—are strung together. Conclusions are difficult to identify. The author's lack of familiarity with Ottoman and Islamic history leads to some bewildering statements, such as the assertion that the Ottomans did not employ either eunuchs or harems before the conquest of Constantinople from the Byzantines (p. 112), that only mosques commissioned by the imperial family were domed (p. 154), and that "the Ottomans . . . were the official ruling and military class and could be Turks, Arabs, Jews, Slavs, or others" (p. 46).

The book contains no illustrations or maps. On the other hand, the back matter includes a useful table of all Chief Harem Eunuchs, organized by sultan's reign, with their dates of service and, to the extent this is known, the dates of their deaths. The book's copious bibliography will be of great use to readers hoping to research this subject for themselves.

JANE HATHAWAY  
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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*Written Culture in Daghestan.* Edited by MOSHE GAMMER. Series *Humaniora*, vol. 369. Helsinki: FINNISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, 2015. Pp. 226, figs. €35.

This volume provides an overview of religious literature in Daghestan, today one of Russia's "Muslim" republics in the North Caucasus. The papers stem from a 2008 conference in Jerusalem, convened by the emi-