

Hidden lives

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Ibn al-Sa‘ī

CONSORTS OF THE CALIPHS

Women and the Court of Baghdad

Edited by Shawkat M. Toorawa

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This volume is one of the growing series of publications produced by New York University Press for the Library of Arabic Literature, an exciting project which is bringing a range of Arabic classics to English and modern Arabic readers in fresh, high-quality editions which strive for accessibility as well as accuracy. This slim volume brings us a work by a relatively unknown thirteenth-century historian, Ibn al-Sa‘ī, a biographical dictionary of sorts dedicated to the consorts of the ‘Abbasid caliphs over several centuries, a period that ended during al-Sa‘ī’s lifetime and for which he harboured a certain nostalgia. The entries vary in length from a few lines to several pages and provide a rare summary of information and anecdotes about the women, slaves and free, who were the close companions of the caliphs from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries as wives, concubines, mothers of future rulers, and entertainers.

Ibn al-Sa‘ī’s work is not, perhaps, a great literary classic but his decision to write a volume on women provides us with a unique text. Most historical chronicles provide scant information about women and what material they include is widely scattered and buried among lengthy descriptions of political events and military campaigns. Although we can only lament that its companion volume is lost, this treatise gives a valuable aperçu into the lives of these elite women, their social roles, and their often impressive educational qualifications. It also introduces modern readers to the complexity of slavery (and freedom) in the medieval Islamic world and very

different understandings of gender relations from those we are used to.

The Abbasid court in Baghdad was a polygamous place: the caliphs and other elite men had access to up to four wives and as many concubines as they desired or could afford. However, their “consorts”, a deliberately vague word that blurs the line between slave and free and between concubine and wife, spring from Ibn al-Sa‘ī’s pages as women well

able to manage if not manipulate the situations they find themselves in. While there are some references to what we would call abuse, such as the whipping of Inan by her irascible owner al-Natifi, many women seem to have been able to adjust to changes in their master’s affections and to make the transition from lover, to mother, and to friend and adviser. Arib’s complicity when the caliph fell in love (or lust) with the young slave of another concubine, Farida, is a case in point.

The references to the origins of some consorts – Persian, Byzantine, Turkish and Andalusī – also remind us that female society was as ethnically diverse as its male counterpart and that the Islamic empire drew in people of very varied origins. This underlines the fact that the patrilineal genealogical bias in chronicles and biographical dictionaries dealing primarily with men, obscures the female contribution to supposedly “Arab” lineages such as the Abbasids.

Women are shown competing with men to prove their poetic skills, a talent expected of most consorts, and also accruing fortunes that they expended on charitable works, especially in the later Abbasid period. As the editor Shawkat M. Toorawa notes, Ibn al-Sa‘ī’s work shows an evolution from the hedonistic atmosphere of the high Abbasid caliphate, with its celebrated concubine singers and poetesses, to the more pietistic and proper environment reflected in the later biographies, while also trying to create a connection between the two phases of the Abbasid era.

The scholarly apparatus that supports the translation (made by the unnamed Editors of the Library of Arabic Literature) is, in general, helpful and well thought out. The presentation of the Arabic and English versions of the text on facing pages makes it a suitable volume for teaching. The translation choices are lively and mostly facilitate appreciation of the text in English, though on occasion this means that the correlation between the Arabic and English texts is quite loose. Although the lengthy prefatory material will not be to everyone's taste, it gives a fascinating insight into the unusual and experimental team process by which this particular edition was translated and prepared for publication. It also gives the reader a clear rationale for the mode of translation adopted. The result is a scholarly volume which offers the pleasure of reading about the highs and lows of women's often hidden lives at the Abbasid court.