

## BOOK REVIEW

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### *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*

By IBN AL-SĀĪ, edited by SHAWKAT M. TOORAWA, translated by the Editors of the Library of Arabic Literature; introduced by JULIA BRAY, foreword by MARINA WARNER (London and New York: Princeton University Press, 2015), xlv + 226 pp. Price HB \$30.00. EAN 978-1479850983.

This is a meticulously edited translation of a thirteenth-century work by Ibn al-Sāī, librarian and chronicler of 'Abbasid society. It is a collaborative effort, involving many layers of consultation, following the principles outlined by Shawkat M. Toorawa in his preface and in his 'Note on the Translation'. It is an excellent example of what can be achieved by collaboration rather than by one individual scholar working on his or her own.

The book contains an Arabic text with the English translation on the facing page. With this layout non-Arabic speakers can enjoy the stories, while Arabic speakers can easily judge the translation. Each entry consists of an anecdote about or a description of a woman who was important at the court in Baghdad, from the golden age of Hārūn al-Rashīd to Ibn al-Sāī's own time and the rule of the last 'Abbasid Caliph, al-Musta'ṣim. Women of the earlier period are usually cultured and refined poets, who are also slaves, and the anecdotes often relate how the women bested various male poets in capping lines of poetry, thereby winning favour. The later women are more often praised for their pious deeds, for building bridges and libraries, and for their charitable gifts. Dipping into these disconnected, short anecdotes—some are just a brief paragraph, others last several pages and contain many examples of poetry—the reader is immersed in an unfamiliar world in which beautiful, witty and talented slaves are bought and sold and yet are highly esteemed, often with slaves and a retinue of their own.

The introduction by Julia Bray succinctly puts the work in context. Ibn al-Sāī was writing after the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols. The work celebrates the glory and culture of the high period of 'Abbasid culture: 'This is legendary history, cultural memory' (p. xix). It is, however, in spite of its anecdotal format not a fabulous Arabian Nights but serious history in that it is framed by *isnāds* or chains of transmission and the transmitters are often important men in society. In fact Professor Bray identifies two formats, the anecdotal format for the earlier period and the obituary format for the author's own time. She points out the relative lack of sophistication in modern scholarship with regard to the role of female slaves in society and highlights Ibn al-Sāī's special contribution: 'his seriousness and sympathy, the multiplicity of roles within the dynasty that he

identifies for consorts, and his systematic, and challenging, idealization of the woman over the slave' (p.xxv).

Marina Warner's foreword gives a slightly different perspective, placing this work in the line of scholarship that is giving a voice to the 'muted' female subjects so neglected in the past, especially in studies of the East where women have been trivialized and eroticized. She sums up the value of this work beautifully: 'Ibn al- Sā'ī's gallery of women poets, wits, singers, chess players, teachers, benefactors, and builders (of waterways, libraries, and law schools) transcends the collective, stereotypical character of great ladies as femmes fatales, wives, mothers, or concubines; his report lifts a veil of silence and allows us to overhear the hum of lyric, argument, wit, and elegy from women's voices in the past.' (p. xiv)

The greatest puzzle for the modern reader is of course the role of the slave and especially the female slave in 'Abbasid culture and society. All three scholars, Shawkat M. Toorawa, Julia Bray and Marina Warner, raise the issue. How, for example, should the word *jāriya* be translated?: 'Slave girl', 'singing girl', 'female slave', or just 'slave'? In the end the editors settled on the simple 'slave', despite the possibility of misunderstandings caused by the position of African slaves in American history. How can one understand the role of the female slave performer as a commodity to be bought and sold (the author often gives details of the fabulous sums exchanged for these slaves), but also as a valued member of the court, whose funeral prayers in one case were led by the son of the caliph? The rich variety of experiences related here shakes our preconceived notions and can help towards a better understanding, not just of female slaves but also of women generally in this period and environment.

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doi:10.1093/jis/etw032