# Unfree Lives

Slaves at the Najahid and Rasulid Courts of Yemen

Magdalena Moorthy Kloss

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Cover illustration: Slave market in the town of Zabid, Yemen. From al-Hariri's *Maqamat*, manuscript of the Baghdad school calligraphed and illustrated by al-Wasiti (1237). Public domain.

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Acknowledgements

Preliminary Remarks

Transliteration follows the guidelines of the *International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies*; therefore, only Arabic place names and terms not found in Merriam–Webster's dictionary have been transliterated. In order to provide readers with a sense of the diversity of vocabulary used for different categories of slaves, the transliteration of Arabic terms for slaves was included in all my translations. Given the attention paid in this book to names and naming, all personal names were also transliterated.

Daniel Varisco has convincingly challenged the usefulness of the term "medieval" in reference to Islamic history.[1] To accommodate readers not specialized in the Islamic context, the term will nevertheless be used in this book to denote the broad timeframe between 500 and 1500 CE. During this period, "Yemen" did not exist as a constant, unified political entity; the name is here used as shorthand for South Arabia, roughly corresponding to today's Republic of Yemen, but not excluding neighbouring areas (e.g. parts of Oman and of south-western Saudi Arabia).

Throughout this book, dates referring to Islamic history are given according to both the Islamic (*hijrī*) and common-era (CE) convention, while dates of contemporary publications, scholarly debates and so on are only quoted in the latter.

For the purposes of this book, I translate *al-Ḥabasha* as "Ethiopia", by which I mean the territories roughly corresponding to today's Ethiopia and Eritrea. The term "Abyssinia" with which some scholars translate the term appears too narrowly identified with the Christian Abyssinian empire.

As per established convention, slave soldiers will be referred to as *mamluks*, while the eponymous Sultanate (648–922/1250–1517) will be capitalized (Mamluks).

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1 "Making 'Medieval' Islam Meaningful," *Medieval Encounters* 13, no. 3 (1 September 2007): 385–412. See also Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018).

Maps
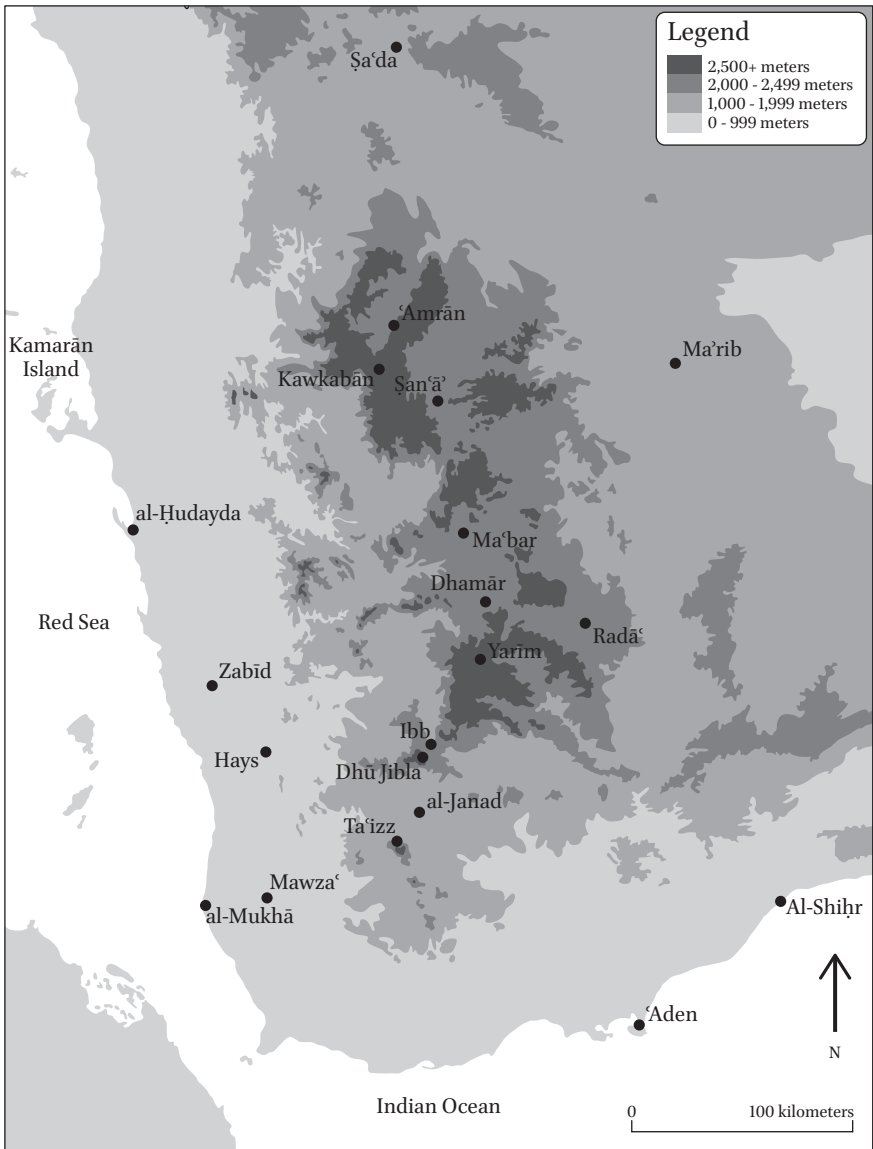
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            contemporary political borders
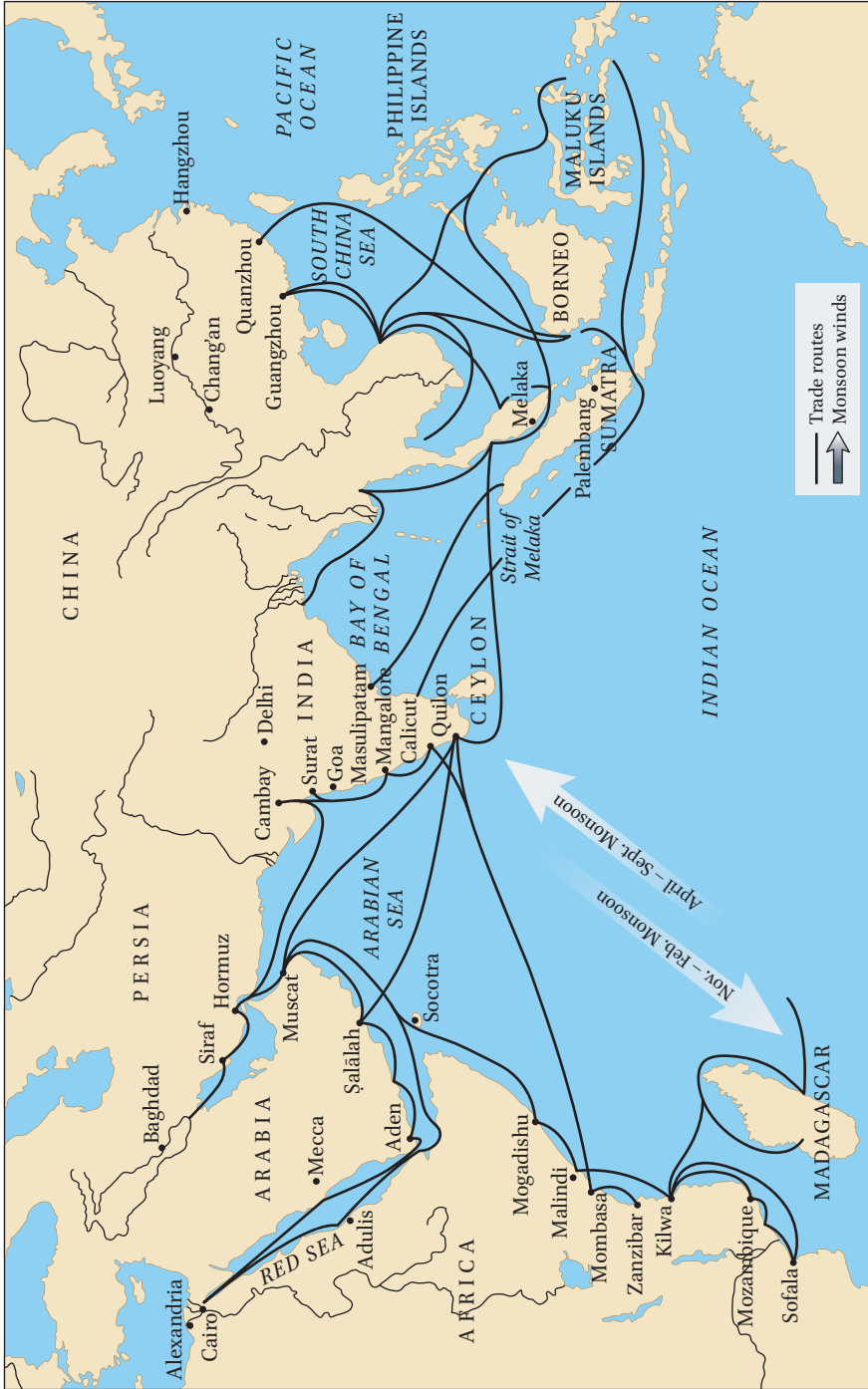
MAP 3   Major trade routes in the medieval Indian Ocean

Introduction

When I first began reading medieval sources from Yemen, the frequent mention of enslaved persons in these texts immediately caught my eye. Why had I never heard about Yemen's history of slavery before? The remarkable breadth of occupations and tasks performed by slaves in medieval Yemen fascinated me even more. Chronicles from this period might feature a sultan's slave soldiers deployed against unruly tribesmen or his enslaved concubine bearing him children, while administrative documents record the occasional slave as merchandise to be bought and sold or as the recipient of salaries and gifts. Such references, although widely scattered and unsystematic, offer striking insights into the phenomenon of slavery at the time and led me to the central question of my research: What did it mean to be enslaved in medieval Yemen? How could a sultan's kitchen slave and his concubine belong to the same legal category of "slave", given their radically different life trajectories? Does the label "slave" have any explanatory power if it includes men who toiled in stone quarries as well as eunuchs who governed cities and commanded armies?

As I soon discovered, scholars of slavery had been grappling with similar questions in other medieval Islamic settings. Regarding Yemen, Ḥusayn al-ʿAmrī's pioneering work of 1989 remains the only scholarly discussion of slavery in the medieval period.[1] This academic void is partly due to the fact that foundational research on the country's history is still ongoing. Yemen continues to receive little attention from historians of the Middle East even though a number of unique sources from the medieval period have been published since the early 2000s CE.[2] Furthermore, existing works, both historical and anthropological, have tended to focus on high-status groups. As a marginalized group in an area of peripheral interest to Middle Eastern studies, the slaves of

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1 Al-Umarāʾ wa al-ʿabīd wa al-mamālīk fī al-Yaman: Baḥth taʾrīkhī muqārin bayn al-sharq wa al-gharb ḥatta al-qarn al-ʿashrīn (Beirut: Dār al-fikr al-maʿāṣir, 1989).

2 These include anonymous, Nūr al-maʿārif fī nuẓum wa-qawānīn wa-aʿrāf al-Yaman fī al-ʿahd al-muẓaffarī al-wārif/Lumière de la connaissance. Règles, lois et coutumes du Yémen sous le règne du sultan rasoulide al-Muẓaffar, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Jāzim, 2 vols. (Sanaʿa: Centre français d'archéologie et de sciences sociales, 2003); G. Rex Smith, A Medieval Administrative and Fiscal Treatise from the Yemen: The Rasulid Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī al-Ḥusaynī (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Yūsuf b. Yaʿqūb Ibn al-Mujāwir, A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujāwir's Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir, ed. G. Rex Smith (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

medieval Yemen have thus far largely been overlooked. This study therefore addresses a critical research gap and has three key aims.

First, this study contributes the first substantial Yemeni case study to a growing body of scholarship on slavery in medieval Islamic societies.[3] Given the pre-eminence of the transatlantic slave trade and American plantation slavery in the field of slavery research, students of other forms of slavery had to first emancipate themselves from the theoretical frameworks developed for this particular setting.[4] The examination of slavery's history and legacy in the Islamic context has recently gained momentum, and the Yemeni case can offer important reference points for comparison and the advancement of theoretical debates. For instance, the social mobility of slaves in Islamic societies has recently been at the centre of scholarly attention.[5] Yemeni source material highlights a broad spectrum of roles and circumstances inhabited by slaves, allowing for a fruitful reappraisal of Claude Meillassoux's distinction between slaves' *state* as unfree persons and their *condition*, which depended on the roles assigned to them.[6] Another current theme in the study of medieval slavery more broadly concerns the gender identity of eunuchs, who have

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3 E.g. Hannah Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade, 1260–1500" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014); Julia Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of al-Muqtadir," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 2 (2005): 234–52; Cristina de la Puente, "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children: A Contribution to the Study of Family Structures in Al-Andalus," *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum* 7 (2013): 27–44; Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain, eds., *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Shaun E. Marmon, *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East* (Princeton: Wiener, 1999); Craig Perry, "The Daily Life of Slaves and the Global Reach of Slavery in Medieval Egypt, 969–1250 CE" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2014); Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Serena Tolino, "Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire: Ambiguities, Gender and Sacredness," in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-modern World* (London: Routledge, 2018), 246–67.

4 Joseph C. Miller, "Appreciation and Response: Historical Paths Forward from Here," *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 3 (1 January 2017): 337–77.

5 Matthew S. Gordon, "Abbasid Courtesans and the Question of Social Mobility," in Gordon and Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans*; Kathryn A. Hain, "Epilogue: Avenues to Social Mobility Available to Courtesans and Concubines," in Gordon and Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans.*

6 "C'est par cette double insertion économique et sociale que le capturé devient esclave à proprement parler, et acquiert une *condition* qui peut être aussi variée que les fonctions qui lui sont confiées, sans que pour autant son *état* ne se transforme" (Claude Meillassoux, *L'Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* [Paris: Maspero, 1975], 35; emphasis added).

been described as "genderless"[7] or as inhabiting a "third gender".[8] Biographical evidence from the Rasulid period offers a new perspective on this subject.

Second, as a study of historical anthropology, the book aims to add temporal depth to contemporary understandings of marginalization and dependency in contemporary Yemen. Anthropologists have analyzed the intricate systems of social stratification prevailing in different parts of contemporary Yemen but have paid less attention to groups at the bottom of the social ladder, whose persistent marginalization is commonly traced back to their (actual or purported) African slave ancestry.[9] The few ethnographic studies that have been conducted among these groups so far show that Yemen's long history of slavery has strong repercussions of discrimination up to this day.[10] Furthermore,

7   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 250.

8   Kathryn M. Ringrose, The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

9   E.g. Marieke Brandt, Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict (London: Hurst, 2017); Susan Dorsky, Women of ʿAmran: A Middle Eastern Ethnographic Study (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986); Walter Dostal, Egalität und Klassengesellschaft in Südarabien. Anthropologische Untersuchungen zur sozialen Evolution (Horn: F. Berger, 1983); Thomas Gerholm, "Market, Mosque and Mafraj: Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town" (PhD diss., University of Stockholm, 1977); Andre Gingrich, "Ehre, Raum und Körper: Zur sozialen Konstruktion der Geschlechter im Nordjemen," in Körper, Religion und Macht: Sozialanthropologie der Geschlechterbeziehungen, ed. Ulrike Davis-Sulikowski, Hildegard Diemberger and Andre Gingrich (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2001); Gingrich, "How the Chiefs' Daughters Marry: Tribes, Marriage Patterns and Hierarchies in Northwest Yemen," in Kinship, Social Change and Evolution: Proceedings of a Symposium Held in Honour of Walter Dostal, ed. Andre Gingrich et al. (Horn: Wiener Beiträge zur Ethnologie und Anthropologie, 1989), 5: 75–85; Anne Meneley, Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town (London: Routledge, 1996); Martha Mundy, Domestic Government: Kinship, Community and Polity in North Yemen (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995); Gabriele vom Bruck, Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

10   Gokh Amin Alshaif, 'Black and Yemeni: Myths, Genealogies, and Race," POMEPS Studies 44 (Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach): 129–34. Connie Christiansen and Sabria Al-Thawr, "Muhamesheen Activism: Enacting Citizenship during Yemen's Transition," Citizenship Studies 23, no. 2 (2019): 115–38. Anne Meneley, "Living Hierarchy in Yemen," Anthropologica 42, no. 1 (2000): 61–73. Luca Nevola, "On Colour and Origin: The Case of the Akhdam in Yemen," Open Democracy: Beyond Trafficking and Slavery, 2018, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/on-colour-and-origin-case-of-akhdam-in-yemen (accessed on 20.12.2023); Bogumila Hall, "'This Is Our Homeland': Yemen's Marginalized and the Quest for Rights and Recognition," Arabian Humanities 9 (7 December 2017): online, https://journals.open-edition.org/cy/3427 (consulted on 20.12.2023); Huda Seif, "Moralities and Outcasts: Domination and Allegories of Resentment in Southern Yemen" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003); Delores Walters, "Perceptions of Social Inequality in the Yemen Arab

slavery still exists in contemporary Yemen: according to media and NGO reports, century-old relations of bondage between families of slaves and owners continue, while human trafficking, mostly of East Africans, has proliferated in recent decades.[11]

Third, this study argues that the medieval history of Yemen cannot fully be written without taking into account the manifold contributions made by slaves. For instance, the Rasulid state relied on eunuchs for the defense of its castles and the completion of complex political missions. Slaves toiling in workshops and palaces sustained the lavish lifestyle of Yemen's upper class. Even the descent and family structure of the elites cannot fully be grasped without considering the practice of concubinage, through which children were born who were of slave descent yet legitimate.

The focus of this study lies on the roles played by slaves at the Najahid (412–553/1021–1158) and Rasulid (626–858/1229–1454) courts of Yemen. The Najahid era was a remarkable and little-known chapter in Yemen's medieval history in which African slave soldiers toppled their owners and established a century-long reign in the country's south-east. The only surviving chronicle of this period yields a depth of insights into the institution of slavery in medieval Yemen that is unmatched by other sources.[12] The Rasulids, on the other hand, have been studied in detail by modern scholars, thanks to a wealth of sources that have survived from that period. The topic of slavery however remains virtually unexplored, a crucial research gap which this book aims to fill. Analysing these two very different political settings not only provides interesting points of comparison but also harnesses the complementary strengths of the source material. For example, Rasulid texts allow for a detailed analysis of the life trajectories of elite eunuchs but yield very few insights on enslaved women and girls, who however figure prominently in the surviving Najahid chronicle. Conversely, the absence of administrative documents from the Najahid era results in an almost total lack of information on slave trading practices at the time, while Rasulid

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Republic" (PhD diss., New York University, 1987). My recent article contributes a historical perspective to this field of inquiry, Magdalena Moorthy Kloss, "Race and the Legacy of Slavery in Yemen," *History and Anthropology* 33, no. 5 (19.01.2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2164927. Consulted online on 11.01.2024.

11   See for example the International Organization of Migration's regular analysis of migration and human trafficking dynamics from the Horn of Africa to Yemen, https://dtm.iom.int/reports/migration-along-eastern-corridor-march-2023 (accessed 15 May 2023).

12   ʿUmāra b. ʿAlī al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, ed. Henry Cassels Kay (London: Arnold, 1892).

texts delineate an active trade between the Horn of Africa and Yemen during the late 7th/13th century.

This study draws upon the theoretical and methodological tools of two anthropological subfields: historical anthropology and the anthropology of slavery. Although the analysis of social hierarchies is central to anthropological research, the issue of slavery has long remained surprisingly marginal within the discipline.[13] Meillassoux's seminal studies, which built upon Emmanuel Terray's Marxist analysis of a "slave mode of production",[14] were published in 1975 and 1986, arguably making him the most influential anthropologist within slavery research.[15] His analytical focus on kinship and gender, two of anthropology's fortes, proved fruitful for detecting slavery's manifold effects on premodern societies in West Africa. The clarity and boldness of his conceptual model is alluring but also problematic, when observations on specific societies are held to represent the phenomenon of slavery in general. Meillassoux's central theories will be discussed and challenged throughout this book. Today, anthropologists are at the forefront of research on the history and legacy of slavery in various contexts, notably in Africa.[16] Examining the lived experiences of slaves and slave descendants through fieldwork and/or textual research enables anthropologists to scrutinize commonly held understandings of slavery and other forms of exploitation and dependence, and, by implication, notions of freedom and agency.

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13 Philip Thomas, "Slavery," in *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Alan Barnard (London: Routledge, 2004).

14 Emmanuel Terray, "Long-Distance Exchange and the Formation of the State: The Case of the Abron Kingdom of Gyaman," *Economy and Society* 3, no. 3 (1974): 315–45.

15 Meillassoux, *L'Esclavage en Afrique précoloniale*; Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage: Le ventre de fer et d'argent* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986). The latter was also published in English: *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnois (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

16 E.g. Alice Bellagamba, ed., *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Alice Bellagamba, Marco Gardini, and Laura Menin, "Shadows of Slavery: Refractions of the Past, Challenges of the Present," Open Democracy, 2018, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/shadows-of -slavery-refractions-of-past-chal (accessed on 20.12.2023). Baz Lecocq and Éric Komlavi Hahonou, "Introduction: Exploring Post-slavery in Contemporary Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (2015): 181–92. E. Ann McDougall, Emmanuel Martinoli, and Sebastien Boulay, eds., *Devenir visibles dans le sillage de l'esclavage: La question haratin en Mauritanie et au Maroc L'Ouest saharien volumes 10 & 11*, vols. 10 and 11 (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2020). Benedetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Bellagamba, *African Voices on Slavery*.

Alice Bellagamba has proposed a "bottom-up approach to valorize the point of view of the enslaved and the unfree",[17] which I have adopted as a guiding principle throughout this study. Working on a subject as highly charged with value judgements and as closely associated with European imperialism as slavery also requires the researcher to reflect on her own positionality. As Benedetta Rossi has noted, scholars publishing in Western academic publications usually "perceive freedom as the norm, and slavery as a moral aberration. [...] This perception is a historical legacy of European abolitionism. Its discursive grip is so entrenched that it makes freedom appear as self-evidently desirable, and dependence as irremediably flawed."[18] These preconceived notions risk obfuscating the researcher's view on what slavery meant in the medieval Yemeni setting, and her ability to analyse how individuals at the time perceived of the phenomenon. This problem is exacerbated when local terms are casually translated as "slavery" and "slaves", thereby integrating them into a Western tradition they were not born out of. At the same time, simply ascribing the practices and views of individuals to their "cultural context" would mean falling into the trap of essentialism. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff have controversially argued that Africans prioritize belonging over freedom and that slavery was but an extreme form of the dependence characterizing kin relations,[19] a theory refuted by case studies highlighting the variety of ways in which enslaved persons sought to evade their owners' grip or gain at least some degree of control over their lives.[20]

Within the limits posed by the methodological challenges inherent in slavery research, I have sought to provide a balanced account grounded in critical source analysis. The use of the terms "slavery" and "slave" in this book is warranted by the fact that medieval Islamic jurisprudence makes an unambiguous

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17   Alice Bellagamba, "Freedom from Below: Some Introductory Thoughts," *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, nos. 1–2 (1 January 2017): 3.

18   Benedetta Rossi, "African Post-slavery: A History of the Future," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (2015): 306.

19   Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977). In a similar vein, James Ferguson has published a study on social welfare programmes in Southern Africa, raising the provocative question of whether "dependence is actually a good thing" (*Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015], 155).

20   E.g. Susan J. Rasmussen, "The Slave Narrative in Life History and Myth, and Problems of Ethnographic Representation of the Tuareg Cultural Predicament," *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 1 (1999): 67–108. Bellagamba, *African Voices on Slavery*.

distinction between free and enslaved persons. All individuals subsumed under the category "slave" thus shared the basic legal state of unfreedom. At the same time, the category comprised persons with varying degrees of (un)freedom: for example, an enslaved person obtained a set of additional rights upon entering a manumission agreement with their owner, as did an enslaved woman when she became pregnant with her owner's child. Beyond legal considerations, the roles assigned to slaves also strongly impacted their scope of action. Close attention was therefore paid to the terminology used for subcategories of slaves in the sources. An initial research step consisted of identifying the complex and often ambiguous vocabulary associated with slavery and slaves in medieval Yemeni texts. For example, only after analysing hundreds of source passages mentioning the word *khādim* could I confirm that in Rasulid Yemen, this term was consistently and exclusively used for castrated slaves. The sources yielded a diverse range of evidence related to slaves and slavery which was analysed in its textual and broader socio-political context. The biographies of individual slaves were traced through narrative sources, an undertaking rendered difficult by the fact that slaves in medieval Yemen left no known sources of their own, meaning that any available information reaches us via male elite narratives. Throughout the book, I often chose the wording "enslaved woman/man/child" rather than "slave". Doing so aims to emphasize that the unfreedom of these individuals was not a natural or unchangeable state, and that it certainly did not define who they were.[21]

Most slaves left no traces whatsoever in the surviving source material. Due to a strong bias towards a historiography of the elites, only slaves who closely associated with influential individuals appear regularly in chronicles from medieval Yemen. High-ranking eunuchs and concubines are therefore over-represented in narrative sources even though they were probably far outnumbered by slaves performing menial work for their owners. Administrative documents only partly compensate for this shortcoming as they provide rare glimpses into the lives of slaves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This imbalance in source evidence meant that the lives of eunuchs and concubines could be reconstructed in much greater detail than those of enslaved workers of low rank. While these categories of slaves lived under different conditions, they shared the same basic state of unfreedom. The study of slaves in relatively elevated

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21   See also Elizabeth Urban, Conquered Populations in Early Islam: Non-Arabs, Slaves and the Sons of Slave Mothers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 14n14.

positions thus also offers valuable insights into the practice of slavery in medieval Yemen in general.[22]

The sources' many silences surrounding slavery often tell their own stories and should also be considered as evidence. For example, that slaves' origins are rarely mentioned is symptomatic of the uprooting suffered through enslavement. The renaming of slaves further erased any indication of their family and geographical background and anonymized individuals behind generic names that labelled them as unfree. The mamluks (slave soldiers) of medieval Yemen are a case in point here. Despite being omnipresent in the textual record, their origins and life trajectories in Yemen remain largely unknown.[23] Other source silences might point to matters that were simply taken for granted. One of my initial research questions concerned the religious denomination of slaves and the frequency of conversion to Islam, but these issues are wholly absent from the textual record. However, the fact that eunuchs were given religiously connoted name epithets and sponsored religious monuments suggests that slave conversions to Islam were a common practice even though the sources provide no hard evidence to that effect. Even more surprisingly, manumission, considered a central instrument of Islamic law pertaining to slavery, is hardly discussed in medieval Yemeni sources.[24] Only the biographies of former slaves turned Sufis or merchants mention their manumission with a certain regularity.[25] Does this overall scarcity of evidence mean that slaves were rarely manumitted, or was their manumission such a standard practice that it did not deserve to be mentioned? More importantly, were the enslaved individuals who can be traced through the sources manumitted at some point in their lives and, if so, when? Only the case of concubines who bore their owners children (sg. *umm walad*) allows for conjecture, since Islamic law stipulated

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22   Similarly, Matthew Gordon has argued that the lives of Abbasid courtesans can inform our understanding of Abbasid-era slavery more broadly. "Abbasid Courtesans and the Question of Social Mobility," 28.

23   The sparse evidence found on mamluks in medieval Yemen will be summarized in chapter 3.

24   Exceptions include al-Khazrajī's report that the Rasulid queen Jihat Taghā, wife of the sixth sultan al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās (r. 764–78/1363–77), manumitted upon her death large numbers of slaves (*Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir al-ḥasan fī ṭabaqāt akābir ahl al-Yaman, wa huwa ṭirāz aʿlām al-zaman fī ṭabaqāt aʿyān al-Yaman*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh b. Qāʾid ʿAbbādī et al. [Sanaʿa: Maktabat al-jīl al-jadīd, 2009], 2502).

25   For example, Abū al-Ḍiyāʾ Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣūfī was the manumitted slave of a merchant who also engaged in trade and later became a famous Sufi saint (Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Aḥmad al-Sharjī al-Zabīdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ ahl al-ṣidq wa-l-ikhlāṣ*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥibshī [Ṣanʿāʾ: Al-dār al-yamaniya li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1992], 120–1. His biography is also found in Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 630–3).

that they be freed upon their owner's death. Conversely, despite rich evidence on the lives of high-raking eunuchs at the Rasulid court, it is unknown whether and when these men were manumitted.[26]

This book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the context to this study by offering an overview of the Najahid and Rasulid periods and introducing the main sources underlying it. Since the Najahid era has received little attention from modern scholarship, I will offer a detailed account of its chronology and character as described in its only surviving source, the chronicle *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*[27] written by ʿUmāra b. ʿAlī al-Ḥakamī in the 6th/12th century. This remarkable work offers invaluable insights into the phenomenon of slavery at a time when kings of Ethiopian slave descent ruled over parts of Southern Yemen. The comparatively well-researched Rasulid era will be discussed in relation to a number of central sources, chiefly the chronicle *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya fī taʾrīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya* and the biographical dictionary *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir al-ḥasan fī ṭabaqāt akābir ahl al-Yama*, both written by ʿAlī b. Ḥasan al-Khazrajī, as well as the anonymous collection of administrative documents from the late 8th/13th century known as *Nūr al-maʿārif*.[28] Furthermore, an influential work of Islamic jurisprudence, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn wa ʿumdat al-muftīn* by the Syrian jurist Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, will also be introduced as an indispensable key to understanding how slavery was understood and managed at the time.

Chapter 2 seeks to answer two basic questions: Where did the enslaved people mentioned in medieval Yemeni sources come from, and how did they get to Yemen? Compounded source evidence allows for a partial reconstruction of the medieval slave trade to Yemen. The focus will be on slave trading between the Horn of Africa and Yemen and on Rasulid practices of slave selection and acquisition, which are richly documented in the surviving sources.

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26 A rare exception is the information that the eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ (d. 666/1267) had been the freed slave (*mawlā*) of Ghāzī b. Jibrīl, a notorious amir thought to have poisoned his master, the Ayyubid ruler al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ayyūb (r. 608–10/ca. 1212–14) (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1688). The fact that eunuchs in Mamluk Cairo were always freed before reaching their prime is well documented (Carl F. Petry, "From Slaves to Benefactors: The Ḥabashīs of Mamlūk Cairo," *Sudanic Africa* 5 [1994]: 59).

27 Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd Fī Akhbār Zabīd*. The source is also known as "History of Yemen", the title chosen by its English editor H. C. Kay in 1892. Hartwig Derenbourg, *ʿOumāra du Yémen: sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Leroux, 1897), 7.

28 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*; Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿiqd al-Fākhir*; anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*; Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn wa ʿumdat al-muftīn*, ed. Muḥammad Ṭāhir Shaʿbān (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 2005).

The remaining three chapters focus on different categories of enslaved persons. Chapter 3 analyses the importance of eunuchs to the Rasulid court.[29] While administrative documents record prices paid for eunuchs and selection practices, historiographic and biographical writings enable us to trace the careers of individual eunuchs and examine the complex relationships tying them to their Rasulid owners. Eunuchs figured prominently in the highest ranks of the political, administrative and military hierarchy, as well as in the most intimate realms of royal households.

Chapter 4 turns the focus to female slaves, who due to the double bias of male and elite narratives are starkly underrepresented in the sources. Four rare case studies reveal a number of broader patterns characterizing the institution of concubinage during the Najahid and Rasulid eras.

Chapter 5 strives to overcome an even greater blind spot in textual evidence by investigating the lives of enslaved workers of low rank. Although it is impossible to reconstruct the full extent of unfree labour in medieval Yemen, the combined evidence of chronicles and administrative documents from the Rasulid period shows a remarkable breadth of menial tasks carried out by slaves.

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29   An abridged version of this chapter was first published in Moorthy Kloss, "Eunuchs at the Service of Yemen's Rasulid Dynasty (626-858 H /1229–1454 CE)", *Der Islam*, Vol. 98/1 (2021), pp. 6–26.

Historical Context and Sources

While a small but dedicated group of researchers has produced excellent studies on the Rasulid dynasty,[1] the Najahid kingdom has barely been considered by modern scholarship due to scant sources and its limited temporal and geographical reach. Therefore, this chapter contains a brief summary of the Rasulid period and a more detailed description of the Najahid era, highlighting its relevance for slavery research. The two dynasties will be discussed in relation to key sources underlying this study.[2]

1 The Najahids – a Dynasty of (Former) Slaves

The Najahids were a little-known dynasty founded by Ethiopian slaves who ruled parts of Southern Yemen between around 412–553/1021–1158. The only surviving source from this period is the 6th/12th-century chronicle *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, written by ʿUmāra b. ʿAlī al-Ḥakamī, also known as al-Yamanī ("the Yemeni"), who was born around 514/1120 in Yemen's northernmost coastal region.[3] This work not only portrays an exceptional period in the country's history but is also a striking first-hand description of a complex society deeply impacted on all levels by slaves and former slaves. Later authors such as Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn[4] and al-Khazrajī largely reproduced the information given by al-Ḥakamī. The only other contemporary source on the Najahid era, the *Tārīkh Jayyāshī* written by the Najahid king Jayyāsh himself, is lost. It is said that the book was intentionally destroyed by members of the

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1 An updated bibliography of Rasulid research curated by Daniel M. Varisco can be found at http://ahjur.org/rasulid/rasulid.html (accessed 8 December 2023).

2 Additional sources will be introduced throughout the book.

3 Derenbourg, *ʿOumāra du Yémen*, 4. In the 4th/10th century, the famous Yemeni geographer al-Hamdānī describes this as a "land ruled by the Ḥakamis [*al-Ḥakamiyīn*]" (*Ṣifat jazīrat al-ʿarab*, ed. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Al-Akwaʿ [Sanaʿa: Maktabat al-irshād, 1990]). Today, the area belongs to Saudi Arabia's Jizān province.

4 As per standard convention, the Arabic name component "ibn" ("son of") will be shortened to "b.", with the exception of individuals known by their given name and *nasab* (patronym), such as ʿAlī ibn Mahdī.

Yemeni elite because it contested the Arab pedigree they prided themselves with.[5] The chronicle *Qurrat al-ʿuyūn bi-akhbār al-Yaman al-maymūn* written by the Tahirid scholar Ibn al-Daybaʿ (d. 944/1537) contains direct speech by Jayyāsh which is found neither in al-Ḥakamī's chronicle nor in al-Khazrajī's works, the two sources the author claims to rely on. It is thus possible that Ibn al-Daybaʿ had access to Jajāsh's account either directly or via other works that relayed some of its content.[6]

1.1 *Al-Ḥakamī's Chronicle of the Najahid Era*

ʿUmāra b. ʿAlī al-Ḥakamī recorded the cornerstones of his own life in an autobiography which survives in three manuscripts.[7] He was born in 514 or 515/1120 or 1121 in the town of Martān in Yemen's northernmost coastal region into a family of rich landowners with a long tradition of learning and scholarship. At the age of seventeen, his parents sent him to Zabīd to study jurisprudence. This city had been the capital of the Ziyadid dynasty until the early 5th/11th century, when an Ethiopian slave called Najāḥ took power. A few years after al-Ḥakamī had moved to Zabīd, the Najahid dynasty was shaken by internal power struggles, forcing him to flee to the Red Sea coast. There he fell under the charismatic spell of ʿAlī ibn Mahdī, a religious zealot with political ambitions who was to conquer Zabīd three decades later. After a year spent among ʿAlī ibn Mahdī's early followers, al-Ḥakamī returned to Zabīd, completed his studies and gained a reputation as scholar and poet. He also took up frequent commercial travels to Aden. This major port city at the southernmost tip of Yemen was at the time ruled by the Zurayʿids (473–569/1080–1173), an Ismaili Shia dynasty that recognized the suzerainty of the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt. Despite adhering to Sunni doctrines, al-Ḥakamī was able to forge close ties with the Zurayʿid ruler. Soon, the young scholar was sought after as a court chronicler and eulogist both by the Najahids of Zabīd and the Zurayʿids of Aden. Al-Ḥakamī took advantage of this situation, alternating between the two cities and enjoying the favours of both dynasties. According to the author's own account, his luck and achievements provoked the jealousy of less successful contemporaries who instigated the people of Zabīd against him. Fearing for his life, he hid in his Zabīd residence for a full year and then fled to Mecca. There, the sharif of Mecca sent him on diplomatic and commercial missions to Egypt. His eloquence and judicial knowledge won al-Ḥakamī the favour of the Fatimid court, and, unable to return to Yemen, he decided to settle in Egypt permanently. After many years

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5   Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭaiyib b. ʿAbdallāh Bā Makhrama, *Taʾrīkh thaghr ʿAdan wa-tarājim ʿulamāʾihā*, ed. ʿAlī Ḥasan ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: Dār al-jīl, 1987), 79.

6   ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī Ibn al-Daybaʿ, *Qurrat al-ʿuyūn bi-akhbār al-Yaman al-maymūn*, ed. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Al-Akwaʿ, 2nd ed. (Sanaʿa: Maktabat Abū Dhar al-Ghafārī, 1988), 181–2.

7   Derenbourg, *ʿOumāra du Yémen*, 4.

of service as Fatimid judge and poet, al-Ḥakamī retired and began composing works on subjects of his own choice. Among these was his chronicle *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, written between 563/1167–8 and 564/1168–9, based on material he had gathered in Yemen from personal experience, eyewitness accounts and literary sources. Al-Ḥakamī thus became the first Yemeni author to describe his country's early Islamic political history. His ability to forge alliances with influential actors enabled him to survive many complicated shifts of political power, both in Yemen and in Egypt. However, after the fall of the Fatimid dynasty and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's establishment of Ayyubid rule, al-Ḥakamī was accused of taking part in a plot against the new sovereign and was executed in Cairo in 569/1174.[8]

A transcript of al-Ḥakamī's *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, dated to the 18th or early 19th century CE, has survived in the library of the British Museum and was edited and translated by Henry C. Kay in 1892.[9] It was one of the first works on Yemen's history published in Europe. Al-Ḥakamī's chronicle consists of five chapters describing the following political eras of medieval lower Yemen: the Ziyadids (203–409/819–1018), the Najahids (412–553/1021–1158), the Sulayhids (439–532/1047–1138), the Zurayʿids (473–569/1080–1173) and Ibn Maḥdī's conquest of Zabīd (554/1159).[10] Modern scholarship has lent insufficient attention to this work, consulting it mainly to reconstruct the chronology of an otherwise unknown period in Yemen's medieval history. The author's taste for colourful anecdotes may frustrate modern historians looking for hard facts, but these stories constitute a veritable goldmine of contextual information on society at the time in general and on slavery in particular.[11] While the political narrative may be partially inaccurate or biased due to al-Ḥakamī's own positionality as Najahid court poet, his side remarks and incidental clues are much less at risk of ideological distortion. Slaves are mentioned throughout the work, but the chapter describing the Najahid dynasty is of particular interest. The number of slaves and ex-slaves intimately portrayed here is unmatched in Yemeni historiography. This rare account shows how men and women of slave descent shaped the course of Yemeni history and highlights the shifts in social hierarchies that followed their rise to power. As such, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd* is an apt introduction to the complex phenomenon of slavery in medieval Yemen.

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8   Biographical information on al-Ḥakamī largely relies on Derenbourg's *ʿOumāra du Yémen*.

9   I used the Arabic text of this edition for my translations and analysis.

10   All dates except the Najahids are taken from Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 299. The Najahid dates are based on al-Ḥakamī's account. Audrey Peli has proposed an alternative dating of the Ziyadid and Najahid dynasties (see the section "Emergence of the Najahids" below).

11   As Yossef Rapaport has noted, modern scholars have often disregarded sources "that are short on political violence but strong on trivial, mundane private lives" ("Women and Gender in Mamluk Society: An Overview," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 [2007]: 3).

TABLE 1   Succession of the Najahids according to Umāra b. ʿAlī al-Ḥakamī (in *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, written between 563/1167–8 and 564/1168–9)

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1. Najāḥ (412–52/1021–60)

↓son

2. Saʿīd b. Najāḥ (452?–481/1060?–1088) → brother **3. Jayyāsh b. Najāḥ** (482–98/1089–1104)

↓ son with unnamed Indian concubine

4. Fātik I b. Jayyāsh (ca. 500–3/1089–1109)

↓ son

5. Manṣūr b. Fātik (504–17/1110–23) → brother Muḥammad

↓son with wife ʿAlam ↓son

6. Fātik II b. Manṣūr (517–31/1123–36) **7. Fātik III** (531–53/1136–58)

1.2   *Rise of the Najahids*

For the purpose of critical source analysis, al-Ḥakamī's account of early Najahid rule must be distinguished from his account of its later years. The author was a direct witness to political and social developments in Najahid Zabīd from his arrival there in 531/1137 until his flight to Egypt in 550/1155, having gained the position of court poet. His close association with the ruling family and high officials enabled him to gain rich information about current events and recent history. However, in recounting the beginnings of the Najahids' rise to power, al-Ḥakamī relied on the now lost chronicle written by the dynasty's third ruler Jayyāsh b. Najāḥ (482–98/1089–1104), who likely sought to aggrandize the achievements of his father Najāḥ in order to substantiate his own claim to power. In fact, numismatic evidence has challenged al-Ḥakamī's (and thereby Jayyāsh's) account of the early days of the Najahid dynasty.[12] The last Ziyadid coin was minted in 440/1048, while al-Ḥakamī reports that Najāḥ conquered Zabīd in 412/1022. Despite these differences in chronology, the coins do attest to Najāḥ's rise to political influence. His name appears on five coins minted between 423/1032 and 439/1047–8, together with the Ziyadid ruler ʿAlī b. al-Muẓaffar (whom al-Ḥakamī's chronicle omits).[13] This evidence suggests that the Ziyadids kept nominal control over the Tihāma, Yemen's Red Sea coast, for

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12   Audrey Peli, "A History of the Ziyadids through Their Coinage (203–442/818–1050)," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 38 (2008): 251–63. Sobhi Bouderbala, "Les Najāḥides," ed. Amélie Chekroun, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, Islam éthiopien: une histoire connectée de la Corne de l'Afrique médiévale, no. 153 (2023): 135–52.

13   Peli, 255.

a longer timespan than reported by al-Ḥakamī, while Ethiopian viziers such as Najāḥ gained influence as high state officials.[14] Hence, although al-Ḥakamī's account of the early Najahid years is probably distorted by Jayyāsh's political agenda, the basic trend is clear: the Ziyadids increasingly lost power to their Ethiopian slaves who would eventually claim legitimacy in their own right. With these reservations in mind, let us now examine al-Ḥakamī's account of Najahid rule.

In 371/981, the Ziyadid king Abū al-Jaysh who had ruled over Yemen's Tihāma coast passed away. The royal title devolved upon his son, a child at the time. He was placed under the guardianship of a Nubian slave called Ḥusayn b. Salāma, who thereupon acted as de facto ruler of the Ziyadid empire. After thirty years at the helm, Ḥusayn died and another Ziyadid child was enthroned. Al-Ḥakamī's description of the subsequent events deserves to be quoted at length:

> His paternal aunt and a eunuch (ustādh)[15] called Marjān[16] became his guardians. [Marjān] was one of the slaves of Ḥusayn b. Salāma, and the office of vizier fell upon him. He had two uncastrated (faḥlān)[17] Ethiopian slaves whom he had raised from their childhood. When they reached adulthood, he appointed them to the management of affairs. One of them was called Nafīs[18] and was appointed to the handling of the residence (al-ḥaḍara).[19] The other was named Najāḥ,[20] and he was the grandfather of the kings of Zabīd […]. [The child] was the last of the

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14   Peli, 258.

15   *Ustādh* literally means master or tutor. Since eunuchs were often entrusted with the education of elite children, the term became a euphemism for eunuch. Charles Pellat, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Cengiz Orhonlu, "Khāṣī". In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, 2012. Consulted online on 11.01.2024 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573 -3912_islam_COM_0499); Edward William Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1863).

16   *Marjān* means "small pearls" and is thus a typical slave name (see chapter 4) (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ʿAlī al-Kabīr, Ḥasab Allāh Ḥāshim Muḥammad, and Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Shādhilī [Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif, 1981], 4169).

17   *Faḥl* can signify male, stallion, strong man. As an adjective for slaves, it is usually juxtaposed to eunuchs, thus meaning "uncastrated" (e.g. in anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*).

18   Nafīs is also a typical slave name and means "precious" (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2829).

19   In this context, probably the Ziyadid court in Zabīd (see Francis J. Steingass, *Arabic–English Dictionary* [London: W. H. Allen, 1884], 283).

20   Najāḥ, "success", is another classic slave name (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2766).

people. With him the Ziyadid dynasty ended in Yemen and their power devolved to their slaves' slaves.[21]

At the dawn of the 4th/10th century, the Ziyadid realm was thus governed by a trio of powerful slaves. The eunuch Marjān not only acted as guardian of the young Ziyadid ruler; he also occupied the position of vizier, the highest office in the Ziyadid government. In the absence of any higher authority, Marjān effectively ruled the realm as his predecessor Ḥusayn had done before him. Nafīs, one of Marjān's slaves, governed the Ziyadid residence in Zabīd. Najāḥ, who also belonged to Marjān, was appointed governor over four wealthy provinces north of the capital.[22]

Such remarkable slave careers can only be understood in their larger political context. Yemen was at the time divided into numerous local polities that acquired slave armies to secure their territories. Nafīs and Najāḥ are perfect examples for the careers of slave soldiers: al-Ḥakamī writes that the eunuch Marjān had brought them up "from their childhood". As young boys, Nafīs and Najāḥ must have entered a rigorous military training under Marjān's supervision. Having shown potential, they were appointed to high administrative positions in the Ziyadid government but soon developed a fierce rivalry. When Nafīs realized that Marjān favoured Najāḥ over him, he asserted his prevalence by resorting to drastic measures. Having abducted both the Ziyadid boy king and his aunt, he purportedly immured them alive and declared himself the new Ziyadid ruler. We can only speculate why Nafīs chose to kill the young sovereign rather than following a common pattern of medieval Yemeni history by keeping him as a puppet ruler. His character, which was described as cruel and irascible, may have played a role. Furthermore, the Ziyadids had broken off ties with the Abbasid caliphs, their former suzerains, and had begun exercising authority independently.[23] In this political climate, Nafīs may have felt emboldened to grasp power without resorting to customary compromises.

1.3   *Early Najahid Rule and First Setbacks*

Soon after his takeover, Nafīs was killed by his nemesis Najāḥ, who subsequently conquered Zabīd in 412/1021 and declared himself king. He then entered into correspondence with the Abbasid authorities and was recognized as sovereign. The new ruler immediately faced opposition: tribal leaders who had occupied positions as provincial governors (*wulāt*) under the Ziyadids started seizing

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21   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 10–11.

22   Al-Kadrā, al-Mahjam, Mawr and al-Wadiyīn. Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 11.

23   This political shift was probably due to the weakening of the Abbasid dynasty since the assassination of the caliph al-Mutawakkil in 247/861.

territory for themselves. Unfortunately, al-Ḥakamī does not relate whether Najāḥ was able to subdue or appease the rebellious governors or whether his rule was confined to Zabīd and its vicinity. In any case, this fragmentation of political power ultimately led to the emergence of a new player who soon challenged Najāḥ's supremacy. In 429/1037, ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Ṣulayḥī declared himself leader of the Ismaili doctrine in Yemen and soon gathered a large following among the mountain tribesmen. According to al-Ḥakamī, al-Ṣulayḥī brought about Najāḥ's death in 452/1060 by sending him a beautiful enslaved girl who poisoned him. The figure of the murderous slave girl appears frequently enough in medieval Arabic sources to be considered a narrative trope.[24] The practice of bestowing enslaved women as gifts is however attested by various sources from medieval Yemen.[25]

Najāḥ, himself of slave origin, may have died at the hands of a female slave. Aided by his slave soldiers and administrators, he had successfully ruled over Zabīd (and possibly surrounding regions) for decades. Despite his foreign slave origins, he had been able to assert his authority in a society where lineage and descent were determining factors of a person's honour and social status. After his death, his arch-rival al-Ṣulayḥī took over Zabīd; once again, a member of the Yemeni tribal elite held power. At this point, it seemed as if Najāḥ's rule had been an odd exception, a short period in which the standards of who was deemed a worthy ruler were temporarily suspended. The Najahid dynasty would have crumbled as quickly as it had emerged, had it not been for Najāḥ's sons Saʿīd and Jayyāsh. After their father's murder, they were able to keep control of the Tihāma region for a while, until Sulayhid pressure forced them to flee to the Red Sea archipelago of Dahlak.

1.4   Saʿīd and Jayyāsh Retaliate

After a period of exile, the two brothers launched a counterattack on al-Ṣulayḥī. The narrative of these events shows the Najahids strategically exploiting one crucial advantage they had over their Yemeni rivals. Al-Ḥakamī describes the events from Saʿīd's perspective:

> When al-Ṣulayḥī heard of our movement, he dispatched against us five thousand Ethiopian spearmen, most of whom were our slave soldiers

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24   For example, the Mamluk historian Ibn al-Furāt relates that the Rasulid sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar was poisoned by two enslaved girls given to him by his brother al-Muʾayyad Dawūd (Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Ibn al-Furāt, *Taʾrīkh al-duwal wa al-mulūk*, ed. Qusṭanṭīn Zurayq [Beirut: Al-maṭbaʿa al-amrīkānīya, 1936], VIII.233).

25   E.g. Badr al-Dīn Ibn Ḥātim, *Al-Simṭ al-Ghālī Aṭ-Ṭaman Fī Akhbār al-Mulūk Min al-Ghuzz Bi-l-Yaman*. Edited by G. Rex Smith. London: Luzac and Co., 1974, 8.

(*mamālīkuna*) and cousins. He said: take the heads of the squint-eyed [Saʿīd], of his brother, and of anyone who is with him.[26]

Two points are implied in this passage. First, it appears that some of al-Ṣulayḥī's Ethiopian slaves had previously belonged to the Najahids. This is hardly surprising – in conflicts, slaves were usually considered spoils of war and became the victor's property. After the collapse of Najahid rule, most Ethiopian slave soldiers were presumably incorporated into the Sulayhid army. As unfree mercenaries, they would have had few other choices, and al-Ṣulayḥī would have been foolish not to harness their manpower. The second point deserves closer attention: al-Ḥakamī describes these Ethiopian slaves as *cousins* of Saʿīd and Jayyāsh. This should not be understood in the strict genealogical sense but as a common phrase denoting shared ancestry. As we shall see, it is precisely this shared Ethiopian ancestry that enabled the Najahids to gain victory over the Sulayhids, despite their military disadvantage. The narrative proceeds:

> [W]e arrived on the road of the camp. People thought that we were from the group of al-Ṣulayḥī's slaves and his retinue, and no one paid attention to us except for ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad, the brother of al-Ṣulayḥī.[27]

Passing for al-Ṣulayḥī's slaves, the two brothers were able to advance into his camp, kill him and capture his wife Asmāʾ. Yet, not all was won: al-Ṣulayḥī's troops still dominated the region, and the brothers could have never subdued them by force. Instead, Saʿīd attempted to win them over with words, sending them the following message: "Al-Ṣulayḥī […] has suffered death. I am one of you, and the honours I gain are acquired by you."[28] A powerful argument of belonging, based on shared ancestry, ultimately earned Saʿīd the support of the troops. Granted, the quote was probably invented by Jayyāsh on whose chronicle al-Ḥakamī relied rather than conveyed to the slave soldiers as such. Yet, it encapsulates a key characteristic of this and later conflicts: time and again, Najahid rulers used arguments of shared origin to rally Ethiopian soldiers behind them and thereby gain a military advantage over their adversaries.

The brothers' victory was swift but short-lived. Their first mistake had been to abduct al-Ṣulayḥī's wife Asmāʾ, an able stateswoman who was to take over Sulayhid rule later in life. Imprisoned in Zabīd, Asmāʾ succeeded in sending a letter to her son al-Mukarram Aḥmad, heir to the Sulayhid throne. It read:

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26   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 62.

27   Al-Ḥakamī, 62.

28   Al-Ḥakamī, 63.

"I became pregnant by the squint slave [Saʿīd]; reach me before I give birth, or it will be an endless disgrace."[29] Asmāʾ's letter (again according to al-Ḥakamī, who likely copied it from Jayyāsh) could not have been more poignant. With a single sentence, it announced to Aḥmad the greatest imaginable assault on his honour: his own mother, a queen, impregnated by an enslaved man. In fact, Asmāʾ had invented the story in order to force her son's hand. Soon enough, Aḥmad invaded Zabīd, rescued his mother and sent Saʿīd and Jayyāsh into exile again. Shortly afterwards, Saʿīd briefly regained control over Zabīd, only to be killed by a Sulayhid plot in 481/1088.

1.5   *Jayyāsh Reconquers Zabīd*

The hope for a Najahid revival now rested solely upon Jayyāsh, who after his brother's death had fled to India. Why Jayyāsh chose India as his place of exile and who might have hosted or supported him there remains unclear due to a lack of source information. It would certainly have been easy for him to board one of the many merchant ships leaving Yemen for India in the early 5th/11th century. African traders, scholars and slaves were already a common presence in India, and by the 9th/15th and 10th/16th centuries, enslaved African soldiers had seized power in the Bengal and Gujarat sultanates, as well as in parts of the Deccan.[30]

A year after fleeing from Yemen, Jayyāsh returned with an Indian concubine who was expecting a child. He travelled to Yemen in disguise in order to assess the chances of restoring Najahid rule. Al-Ḥakamī's descriptions are particularly intriguing if we consider that he relied on a chronicle written by Jayyāsh himself. As such, the narrative represents less the perspective of the Yemeni establishment than the political rhetoric deployed by an outsider of Ethiopian slave descent who sought to regain power. Al-Ḥakamī mentions that Jayyāsh "wrote to the Ethiopians who were dispersed in different occupations, commanding them to be prepared".[31] The sentence suggests that after the collapse of Najahid rule, many Ethiopian slave soldiers were once more reincorporated into the Sulayhid administration. However, as soon as Jayyāsh returned, the Ethiopians again took the side of their fellow countryman. Al-Ḥakamī relates Jayyāsh's direct speech: "Not a month had passed, and I was mastering twenty thousand spearmen, men who were our servants and relatives and who had been oppressed in the provinces."[32] Again, the wording "our servants and relatives [literally: cousins]" is used, and the slaves' oppression

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29   Al-Ḥakamī, 23.

30   For a remarkable biography of an African slave soldier turned ruler in India, see Omar H. Ali, *Malik Ambar: Power and Slavery across the Indian Ocean*, The World in a Life Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

31   Al-Ḥakamī, 66.

32   Al-Ḥakamī, 68.

under Sulayhid rule is alluded to – another possible reason why they might
have chosen Jayyāsh over al-Ṣulayḥī. Not only the Ethiopians but also local
townspeople in Zabīd supposedly took Jayyāsh's side. Upon returning to the
city in disguise, Jayyāsh had presumably heard a Sulayhid vizier exclaim: "By
God, if I could find a dog of the family of Najāḥ, I would make him the owner of
Zabīd."[33] The city's common people are also portrayed as taking Jayyāsh's side:
al-Ḥakamī writes that "[t]he people of the city and five thousand[34] Ethiopians
revolted with him".[35] These anecdotes might however have been mere propa-
ganda taken directly from Jayyāsh's chronicle. In fact, it is likely that great parts
of the Yemeni establishment considered the Najahids to be unworthy rulers,
given their obscure origins and lack of social prestige. This theory is strength-
ened by the fact that throughout their subsequent rule over Southern Yemen,
the Najahids never fully integrated into local elites: their administration and
military were mainly staffed by men of African slave descent like themselves,
and, even more revealingly, they did not marry women from local high-class
families. By contrast, as shall be discussed in chapter 5, the Rasulids were
strongly connected to high-ranking Yemeni families through marriage and
patronage networks.

1.6   *Internal Strife and Rule of the Viziers*

Seeing that Jayyāsh was backed by the slave soldiers, Zabīd's inhabitants had
little choice but to accept his authority. After successfully recapturing the city,
Jayyāsh remained on the throne until his death in 498/1104. From this year
onwards, al-Ḥakamī could no longer rely on Jayyāsh's chronicle but instead
began drawing upon eyewitness accounts he collected in Zabīd and on his own
observations. This shift in method translated into a more detailed and nuanced
assessment of political developments at the Najahid court. Jayyāsh's first-born
son Fātik I (whose mother was an Indian concubine) could assert his claim to
succession despite the challenges posed by two of his brothers. After Fātik I's
death around 503/1109, his young son Manṣūr inherited the throne. In this way,
power fell again into the hands of slave viziers, as al-Ḥakamī aptly describes:

> The sons of Fātik [I] b. Jayyāsh did not possess the rule except for the
> outward reputation, in that the Friday sermon (*khuṭba*) was held in their

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33   Al-Ḥakamī, 68.
34   Yemeni authors often mention strikingly high numbers of slaves. While these cannot be
      taken at face value, the frequency of such mentions at least points to a large slave popula-
      tion in medieval Yemen.
35   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 67.

name after the Abbasids, and they minted the coins and rode under the
royal umbrella during the festive days, and confirmed the views in their
assemblies. Absolute authority and management, the adherence to pre-
scribed rules (*ḥudūd*)[36] and the appointment of delegations lay with their
slaves, the viziers. They are the slaves of Fātik b. Jayyāsh and the slaves of
Manṣūr, his son. Despite being Ethiopian, the kings of the Arabs did not
surpass them in merit, except for their descent (*nasab*). Otherwise, they
possessed admirable generosity and evident glory and combined famous
events with the mentioned achievements.[37]

The descendants of Najāḥ still visibly enacted their roles as rulers by being
mentioned in the Friday sermon, minting coins and riding under the royal
umbrella, which were the customary signs of sovereignty at the time. However,
in a development mirroring the end of the Ziyadid era, de facto authority lay
with their slave viziers. Al-Ḥakamī, himself one of the few members of the
established Yemeni upper class working at the Najahid court, neatly summa-
rizes the challenge which this dynasty posed in the eyes of the local elites:
"Despite being Ethiopian, the kings of the Arabs did not surpass them in merit,
except for their descent." As the histories of Ethiopia and South Arabia had
been entangled for centuries, the sight of Ethiopian rulers in Yemen was of
course hardly a novelty.[38] In fact, the Najahids might not even have been the
first Ethiopian slaves to gain power in Yemen. The Byzantine scholar Procopius

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36 *Ḥudūd Allāh* are "[p]rescribed rules guiding behavior, which one should not transgress."
    Richard Kimber, "Boundaries and Precepts," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Brill Online,
    2016), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran
    /boundaries-and-precepts-EQSIM_00059. Consulted on 10.01.2024.

37 Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 70.

38 In the early 3rd century CE, the Aksumite king Gadarat had gained control over west-
    ern Yemen, but a few decades later the Himyarite king of Yemen expelled the Aksumites.
    Around 500 CE, Aksum regained control over Ḥimyar and placed a tributary king on its
    throne. In 521–2 CE, the Himyarite prince Joseph (Dhu Nuwās) rose to power, prompt-
    ing the Aksumite king Kaleb to send a fleet to Yemen. This fleet defeated the Himyarite
    army sometime between 525 and 531 CE, and another tributary king was installed. He was
    soon toppled by Abraha, the leader of the Aksumite army in Arabia. After this defeat in
    the 560s, the era of direct Ethiopian political involvement in Yemen ended. A Himyarite
    prince took power with the help of Sassanid Persia, and shortly afterwards Yemen was
    reduced to a Sassanid province with a Persian governor in Sanaʿa. For an overview of
    Ethiopia's political influence in Arabia, see Christian Julien Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia,"
    in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). An
    in-depth study of Aksum's relations with Ḥimyar in the 6th century CE is provided by
    George Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite Relations with Ḥimyar in the Sixth
    Century C.E." (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011).

reports that Abraha, an Aksumite ruler who dominated large parts of Yemen in the 6th century CE, had previously been enslaved.[39] He became famous in the Islamic tradition for failing to conquer Mecca in 570 CE, the year of the Prophet Muḥammad's birth.[40] Al-Ḥakamī's statement leaves no doubt that Ethiopian descent was considered inferior to Arab origins but nevertheless acknowledges that the Najahid slave viziers were equal in merit to Arab kings. As such, it demonstrates how personal qualities such as generosity could override the lack of noble descent and legitimize slaves and ex-slaves as rightful rulers. Even al-Ḥakamī, who almost fell victim to a Najahid murder plot, continued to speak highly of the dynasty and its top officials.

Besides such favourable descriptions, the author also recorded the fierce power struggles marking this period. Several factions of influential slaves fought over primacy, allying with local tribes to strengthen their positions. Amid this turbulence, both Manṣūr and his son and successor Fātik II were killed by slave viziers. In addition to these internal power struggles, Najahid sovereignty was challenged externally by local rulers, tribal leaders, Turkic mercenaries and rebellious religious scholars. One member of the royal family who outlived this period of lethal power games and became a key political player was ʿAlam, an enslaved singer who became the wife of the Najahid ruler Manṣūr (r. 504–17/1110–23).[41] After the powerful vizier Mann Allāh had poisoned her husband and taken over power from her underage son Fātik II, she left the royal court but increased her influence there through a group of trusted slaves acting upon her command (see chapter 4). ʿAlam's son was poisoned by a vizier in 531/1136. His successor was a paternal cousin who also bore the name of Fātik (III). Real authority, however, was held by Surūr, an enslaved vizier who acted in close cooperation with Queen ʿAlam.

1.7   *The Dynasty's Demise*

Meanwhile, the religious zealot Ibn Mahdī under whose influence al-Ḥakamī had come as a young man was becoming a political force to reckon with. Allying with local tribes, he had acquired a significant following in the Tihāma plain. When the vizier Surūr died in 551/1156, Ibn Mahdī marched on Zabīd and lay siege to the city. The inhabitants of Zabīd, encircled by his troops, felt

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39   Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," 291.

40   According to Robin, the actual date of his defeat was between 555 and 565 CE ("Arabia and Ethiopia," 301).

41   While Manṣūr's date of death is never directly mentioned, al-Ḥakamī notes that Mann Allāh poisoned him right after having been appointed vizier in 517/1123 (*Al-Mufīd Fī Akhbār Zabīd*, 71).

compelled to seek the help of the Zaydi imam[42] who controlled Yemen's north-ernmost regions. The imam offered his support under the condition that Fātik's slaves kill their owner. Thus a dynasty established, managed and defended by slaves and former slaves was ultimately also vanquished by slaves. Al-Ḥakamī reports: "The slaves of Fātik b. Jayyāsh b. Najāḥ rose. [...] They killed him in the months of the year 53 [553/1158]."[43] The betrayal of Fātik III, however, did not pay off, as the Zaydi imam was unable to protect the people of Zabīd from their invader. In 554/1159, Ibn Mahdī conquered the city and declared himself their lord.

What became of the Najahids? Al-Ḥakamī's chronicle ends here, only mentioning that the women and children of the Najahids became the property of Ibn Mahdī – as did their slaves, presumably. Thus, while slaves no longer ruled south-western Yemen, they continued to form an essential element of local society. Al-Ḥakamī's account of the Najahid dynasty offers striking insights into the political dynamics between slaves-turned-rulers, their slave soldiers, administrators and concubines, and society around them. Tracing the life stories of these individuals as they intertwine with political developments, the author masterfully describes their characters, choices and constraints. It is a fortunate coincidence for slavery research that al-Ḥakamī was an eyewitness to a period of Yemeni history in which enslaved women and men took centre stage.

After the demise of the Najahids, several local dynasties – the Sulaymanids, Zurayʿids, Hamdanids and Mahdids – ruled over parts of Southern Yemen, until the Ayyubids invaded the country in 569/1173.[44]

2 The Rasulids

The Rasulid dynasty ruled over large parts of lower Yemen from 626/1229 until 858/1454. Of Turkoman descent, the Rasulids had come to the country with the Ayyubids, whom they served as high military and administrative officers. Around 626/1229, the last Ayyubid ruler al-Masʿūd Yūsuf left Yemen in order

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42   Al-Mutawakkil Aḥmad b. Sulaymān (d. 566/1171). Al-Ḥakamī calls him "the Zaydi sharif, the Rassī Aḥmad b. Sulaymān, the ruler of Ṣaʿada" (*ʿUmāra Ibn-ʿAlī al-Yamanī*, 96).

43   Al-Ḥakamī, 96.

44   See G. Rex Smith, "The Political History of the Islamic Yemen down to the First Turkish Invasion (1–945/622–1538)," in *Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilization in Arabia Felix*, ed. Werner Daum (Innsbruck: Pinguin-Verlag, 1987), for a full discussion of Yemen's Islamic history.

to take up a governor post in Damascus and assigned the Rasulid Nūr al-Dīn ʿUmar as interim representative of Ayyubid sovereignty. However, al-Masʿūd died in Mecca on his way to Egypt, and the Ayyubids never sent a replacement. Meanwhile, Nūr al-Dīn was able to consolidate his power in Yemen. In 632/1234, he was recognized as the first Rasulid sultan by the Abbasid caliph al-Mustanṣir and adopted the regal name al-Mālik al-Manṣūr ʿUmar.[45] Next, he sought to secure the northern borders of his reign by concluding a peace treaty with the Zaydi imam in 628/1230 and putting his nephew Asad al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ḥasan in charge of Sanaʿa. However, Asad al-Dīn soon betrayed him and in 647/1250 brought about his death by instigating the royal mamluks to murder him.[46] This crisis led to a conflict of succession between al-Manṣūr's first-born son al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf and his younger half-brother al-Mufaḍḍal, whose mother Bint Hawza actively promoted his career. To further complicate matters, the royal mamluks swore allegiance to a paternal cousin.[47] Al-Muẓaffar eventually emerged victorious and set out to consolidate Rasulid sovereignty through military campaigns in the south and east as well as by concluding treaties with various Zaydi factions to the north. Al-Muẓaffar's rule lasted for almost fifty years (647–94/1250–95) and constituted a heyday of economic and cultural productivity. Shortly before his death in 694/1295, he made his son al-Ashraf ʿUmar co-regent, who held the throne for only two years (694–6/1295–6) before passing away. Al-Ashraf ʿUmar's brother al-Muʾayyad Dawūd, who had been imprisoned after an attempted coup, took over the reins of power in 696/1296. He was able to negotiate a truce with the imam in 712/1312 which prevented armed confrontations between the Rasulids and the Zaydis until the late 8th/14th century. Al-Muʾayyad Dawūd's reign was characterized by strong ties with Mamluk Egypt and the great influence wielded by mamluk amirs and soldiers.[48] After his death in 721/1321 and the accession to power of his son al-Mujāhid ʿAlī, the mamluk advisors were deposed, upon which they arrested the young sultan and swore allegiance to his uncle al-Manṣūr Ayyūb and later to his cousin al-Ẓāhir. A decade-long crisis

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45   According to Nayef A. al-Shamrookh, al-Manṣūr's son al-Muẓaffar was the first Rasulid ruler to adopt the title of sultan (*The Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids in the Yemen, 630–858/1231–1454* [Kuwait: State of Kuwait, 1996]). To simplify matters and per common scholarly practice, I will refer to all Rasulid rulers as sultans.

46   ʿAlī b. Ḥasan Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya fī taʾrīkh al-dāwla al-rasūliyya* (*The Pearl-Strings; A History of the Resúliyy Dynasty of Yemen*), ed. James William Redhouse and Alexander Rogers (Leiden: Brill, 1906), I.83.

47   Al-Khazrajī, I.88, II.120. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 575.

48   See for example the biography of the influential mamluk amir Sayf al-Dīn Taghrīl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Turkī in Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1087.

of succession ensued, until al-Mujāhid was finally able to secure sovereignty for himself. It did not take long until Rasulid state power suffered another blow when al-Mujāhid was captured in Mecca by the Mamluk pilgrim caravan in 751/1351 and abducted to Egypt. Only the decisive action of his mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ and her entourage secured the continuation of Rasulid sovereignty until the sultan's return a year later (see chapter 3). Al-Mujāhid died in 764/1363. The following two sultans, al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās (764–78/1363–77) and his son al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl (778–803/1377–1400), were known for their literary activity and patronage of scholarship, best exemplified by an extensive anthology covering historical, agricultural, astronomical and medical texts that was transcribed at the behest of Sultan al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās.[49] Politically, however, both sultans struggled with constant tribal rebellions and Zaydi raids into the Rasulid heartland. Their successor al-Nāṣir Aḥmad (803–27/1400–24) was the last Rasulid sultan to occupy the throne for a longer time span. After his death, sovereignty shifted rapidly between different rulers until the Tahirids, a powerful Yemeni family of sheikhs, brought the Rasulid dynasty to an end by conquering Aden in 858/1454.

TABLE 2 Rasulid Genealogy

The Rasulid Sultans (626–858/1229–1454)

1. Al-Manṣūr ʿUmar 626–647/1229–1250
2. Al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf b. ʿUmar 647–694/1250–1295
3. Al-Ashraf ʿUmar b. Yūsuf 694–696/1295–1296
4. Al-Muʾayyad Dāwūd b. Yūsuf 696–721/1296–1321
5. Al-Mujāhid ʿAlī b. Dāwūd 721–764/1321–1363
6. Al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī 764–778/1363–1377
7. Al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl b. al-ʿAbbas 778–803/1377–1400
8. Al-Nāṣir Aḥmad b. Ismāʿīl 803–827/1400–1424
9. Al-Manṣūr ʿAbd Allāh b. Aḥmad 827–830/1424–1427
10. Al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd Allāh 830–831/1427–1428
11. Al-Ẓāhir Yaḥyā b. Ismāʿīl 831–842/1428–1438
12. Al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl b. Yaḥyā 842–845/1438–1442
13. Rival claimants 845–858/1442–1454

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49   Al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās, The Manuscript of Al-Malik al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī b. Dāʾūd b. Yūsuf b. ʿUmar b. ʿAlī Ibn Rasūl (d. 778/1377): A Medieval Arabic Anthology from the Yemen, ed. Daniel M. Varisco and G. Rex Smith (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1998).

The Rasulids built upon and further elaborated the political, adminis-trative and military traditions established by their Ayyubid predecessors while also incorporating local practices. Close relations with the Mamluk sultanate led to strong Egyptian influences, for example on army positions and terminology.[50] The sultans held absolute authority over their subjects but were also dependent upon their loyalty.[51] This loyalty was won by grant-ing estates and gifts to compliant relatives and members of the elite. Being outsiders, the Rasulids sought to further reinforce their legitimacy as rulers over Yemen by fabricating a South Arabian genealogy linking them to the Ghassanid princes of Southern Yemen[52] and by marrying into local elite fami-lies. Nevertheless, rebellions and intrigues were commonplace throughout the Rasulid era, and the state used military power and harsh punishments to exact obedience from its subjects. The army consisted largely of enslaved soldiers and was at times supported by Kurdish and tribal mercenaries.[53] The court moved between two seasonal capitals, Zabīd in the Tihāma and Taʿizz in the central highlands. Thanks to Yemen's strategic location along important car-avan trade routes and at the intersection of Indian Ocean and Red Sea trade networks, international commerce flourished. The Rasulids actively supported the merchant class by providing infrastructure, administrative and security services while also extracting lucrative taxes and customs from them. The port city of Aden, Yemen's main commercial hub, attracted many traders of foreign descent. Jewish merchant communities were well established here, as the famous Geniza letters attest.[54] Hindu traders from India, the so-called

50   These Mamluk positions and related terms were often of Ilkhanid and Mongol origin. G. Rex Smith, "The Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen: Some Government Departments and Officials," *Studia Semitica: The Journal of Semitic Studies Jubilee Volume* (2005): 228–9.

51   Daniel M. Varisco, "Why the Sultan Is Rich: A Case Study of Bureaucracy in Rasulid Yemen (13th–14th Centuries)," unpublished paper presented at the conference "Land and Power in the Ancient World," Vienna, 21.02.2013.

52   This claim first appears in *Ṭurfat al-aṣḥāb fī maʿrifat al-ansāb*, ed. K. W. Zettersteen (Damascus: Maṭbaʿat al-Tarqī, 1949), a genealogical work composed by the third Rasulid Sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar (r. 694–6/1295–6). It was later taken up by al-Khazrajī in his intro-duction to *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*.

53   Daniel Mahoney, "The Political Agency of Kurds as an Ethnic Group in Late Medieval South Arabia," *Medieval Worlds* 3 (2016): 146–57.

54   Shelomo Dov Goitein, A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967); Dov Goitein, Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Dov Goitein, Studies in Islamic History and Institutions (Leiden: Brill, 1968); Dov Goitein, "Portrait of a Medieval India Trader: Three Letters from the Cairo Geniza," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 50, no. 3

Bānyān, were active in the eastbound Indian Ocean trade and had their own living quarters in Aden.[55] Businessmen from different parts of Eastern Africa played a pivotal role in maritime commerce across the Red Sea.[56] The Rasulids also promoted local agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as industry such as the production of textiles, leather and metal.[57]

In what follows, three key sources from the Rasulid period will be discussed which form the foundation of this study.

2.1 *Nūr al-maʿārif: a Collection of Rasulid Administrative Texts*

In the early 2000s, Muḥammad Jāzim published a remarkable collection of administrative documents from the late 8th/13th century that had survived in a private library in Sanaʿa. The source was given the title *Nūr al-maʿārif fī nuẓum wa-qawānīn wa-aʿrāf al-Yaman fī al-ʿahd al-muẓaffarī al-wārif*.[58] It consists of 224 folios written by anonymous scribes in 690–5/1290–5, the last years of al-Muẓaffar Yusuf's rule and the early reign of his son and successor al-Ashraf ʿUmar. The original manuscript is not consistently arranged chronologically or thematically but includes several levels of headings written in red ink; however, many sections end abruptly, and the same topic is often discussed in different parts of the work. Eric Vallet has convincingly characterized *Nūr al-maʿārif* as an archive of administrative documents in use in Yemen during the late 7th/13th century.[59] Hence, the apparent disorder resulted from the fact that different scribes independently copied various existing lists which were then assembled into one compilation. Vallet also noted that the work strongly focuses on all processes related to the maintenance of the sultanic court while remaining silent on many other aspects of Rasulid administration.[60] Considering this

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(1987): 449–64. Shelomo Dov Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ("India Book") (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Roxani Eleni Margariti, Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

55 Bā Makhrama, *Taʾrīkh Thaghr ʿAdan Wa-Tarājim ʿulamāʾihā*. Éric Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande: État et commerce sous les sultans rasūlides du Yémen* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2010), 139. Shelomo Dov Goitein, "From Aden to India: Specimens of the Correspondence of India Traders of the Twelfth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23, nos. 1/2 (1980): 53. Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade*, 157.

56 Ibn al-Mujāwir, Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia, 135.

57 Al-Shamrookh, *Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids*, 99–156.

58 The work is also known by its French title Lumière de la connaissance des règles, lois et coutumes du Yémen sous le règne du sultan al-Muẓaffar.

59 Éric Vallet, "Pouvoir, commerce et marchands dans le Yémen Rasūlide (626–858/1229–1454)" (PhD diss., Université Paris 1 – Panthéon – Sorbonne, 2006), 90.

60 Vallet, 93.

fact and the timing of the documents, the compilation was likely created as a sort of administrative manual for the newly enthroned sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar. The greater portion of the work consists of lists specifying taxes and prices for various artisanal, agricultural and import products. Another common source category are lists of monthly allowances and provisions, as well as of gifts distributed to members of the royal family and their entourage. These texts offer rare insights into the composition of royal households and their staff. Of particular interest to this study are lists of salaries disbursed to servants and slaves working for the Rasulids. The collection also includes a number of descriptive texts, for example on trading practices, and a truce concluded between Sultan al-Muẓaffar and the Zaydi imam ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza in 693/1294.

2.2 *Al-Khazrajī's Chronicle and Biographical Collection*

Few details are known about the life of ʿAlī b. Ḥasan al-Khazrajī (b. 732–812/ ca. 1332–1409).[61] He began his service to the Rasulid dynasty by supervising the construction of monuments during the reign of Sultan al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās[62] and then worked as court historian for his son and successor al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl. Al-Khazrajī contributed to a state-sponsored historiography intended to display and preserve Rasulid power and prestige.[63] The glorifying diction characterizing his works reflects the fact that he wrote directly at the behest of the sultan at a time when the Rasulids were experiencing a dramatic decline. At the same time, his position at the court of two sultans enabled him to follow political developments during their reigns at close range.

Al-Khazrajī's main work, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya fī taʾrīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*, is a chronicle of the Rasulid era until the turn of the 9th/15th century, arranged annalistically. The surviving manuscript had originally been part of a larger historiographical work by the author which circulated in various formats. In 1906 CE, the first edited and translated version of a manuscript found in India was published.[64]

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61   The author mentions the year of his birth in the biography of a man who was born in the same year (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1362).

62   Noha Sadek, "Notes on the Rasulid Historian Al-Ḥazraǧī's Career as a Craftsman," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 27 (1997): 231–3.

63   For a detailed analysis of the Rasulid historiographic tradition, see Eric Vallet, "L'historiographie Rasūlide (Yémen, VIIᵉ–IXᵉ/XIIIᵉ–XVᵉ Siècle)," *Studia Islamica*, no. 102/103 (2006): 35–69. Smith has compared Ibn Ḥātim's and al-Khazrajī's narratives of the transfer of power from the Ayyubids to the Rasulids, concluding that the latter prioritized a favourable depiction of the Rasulids over historical accuracy ("The Ayyubids and Rasulids: The Transfer of Power in 7th/13th Century Yemen," *Islamic Culture* 43 [1969]: 175–88).

64   India Office MS 710. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*. The Arabic text of this edition formed the basis of my translations and analysis. In 1983, Muḥammad al-Akwaʿ published another edition in Sanaʿa which displays minor differences from Redhouse's version.

The beginning of al-Khazrajī's chronicle relies heavily on earlier works which deserve a brief introduction. The *Kitāb al-simṭ al-ghālī al-thaman fī akhbār al-mulūk min al-Ghuzz bi-l-Yaman* was written around 694/1295 by Ibn Ḥātim, who came from an influential Ismaili family of the Hamdān tribal confederation[65] and rose to the position of amir under the second Rasulid sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf. The author started his book in 694/1295; it is thus the earliest chronicle of Rasulid history, covering the dynasty until al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf's death in 694/1295. A few decades later, an influential amir of Sultan al-Muʾayyad Dawūd named Idrīs al-Ḥamzī composed *Kanz al-akhyār fī maʿrifat al-siyar wa-l-akhyār*.[66] Part of this universal history is dedicated to Rasulid events. Al-Ḥamzī's Zaydi origins explain the work's strong focus on events that took place in Yemen's Zaydi stronghold in the highlands. Finally, Ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd's *Bahjat al-zaman*, written in 724/1324, contains first-hand accounts of al-Muʾayyad Dāwūd's reign, the conflicts of succession following his death and al-Ẓāhir's accession to power.[67]

Earlier Yemeni chronicles recorded Rasulid history until six years before al-Khazrajī's birth. The main contribution of *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* to our understanding of the Rasulid era therefore lies in the author's description of the reigns of al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās (764–78/1363–77) and al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl (778–803/1377–1400). The decline of Rasulid power that began with the death of al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl's successor al-Nāṣir Aḥmad in 827/1424 and ended with the dynasty's demise in 846/1454 is not part of al-Khazrajī's account and was not examined in this study. Vallet has noted that the author's strength lay in composing a skilful synthesis of previous genres, combining epic battlefield narratives with genealogical texts and descriptions of the Rasulid courtly milieu.[68] *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* circulated widely and became the standard chronicle of the Rasulid era.

Another of al-Khazrajī's well-known works is the biographical dictionary *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir al-ḥasan fī ṭabaqāt akābir ahl al-Yaman*, also known as *Ṭirāz aʿlām al-zaman fī ṭabaqāt aʿyān al-Yaman*.[69] The work consists of 1,500 alphabetically arranged biographies. Again, al-Khazrajī drew heavily upon

65 Badr al-Dīn Ibn Ḥātim, *Al-simṭ al-ghālī al-thaman fī akhbār al-mulūk min al-ghuzz bi-l-Yaman*, ed. G. Rex Smith (London: Luzac and Co., 1974).

66 Imād al-Dīn b. ʿAlī Idrīs al-Ḥamzī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman min kitāb kanz al-akhyār fī maʿrifat al-siyar wa-l-akhyār*, ed. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Mudʿij al-Mudʿij (Kuwait: Muʾassasat al-shirāʿ al-ʿarabī, 1992).

67 ʿAbd al-Bāqī al-Yamānī Ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Bahjat al-zaman fī tārīkh al-Yaman*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥibshī and Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Sanabānī (Sanaʿa: Dār al-ḥikma al-yamāniyya, 1988).

68 Vallet, "L'historiographie Rasūlide," 67.

69 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*.

earlier Yemeni biographical collections, chiefly the highly influential *Al-Sulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-mulūk* written in the 720s/1320s by the Shāfiʿī jurist Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Janadī which focuses on the lives of religious men but also portrays sultans and important personalities at court.[70] An edition of *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir* was published in 2009 CE by ʿAbd Allāh b. Qāʾid al-ʿAbbādī, Mubārak b. Muḥammad al-Dūsarī, ʿAlī ʿAbd Allāh Ṣāliḥ al-Wusābī and Jamīl Aḥmad Saʿd al-Ashwal and forms the basis of this research.

2.3　　*Legal Sources on Slavery*

Studying Islamic legal works from the medieval period is critical to understanding how slavery as a legal institution was defined and managed at the time. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) was a thriving field of scholarly debate and writing during the medieval period and reflects the formation of Islamic thought on a broad range of moral and societal issues, including slavery.[71] Hend Gilli-Elewy has noted that "[r]eferences to slaves are especially prevalent in legal texts, as slaves provided useful cases to Muslim jurists to think through legal questions".[72] *Fiqh* literature elaborated upon the ethical principles stipulated in the Qurʾān and the hadith tradition and adapted these to practical requirements. As such, it both impacted and was impacted by the reality of slavery in a given society. Legal texts therefore constitute rare sources of information on the normative framework surrounding slavery. However, the field of medieval Islamic legal writing is broad and varied. Legal opinions and guidelines changed over time and space and differed for each school of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*, pl. *madhāhib*). Since the Shāfiʿī *madhhab* was prevalent both during the Najahid and the Rasulid period, discussions of Islamic legal principles on slavery in this book will focus mainly on this school's teachings as outlined in a work that was widely taught and commented upon in medieval Yemen. *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn wa ʿumdat al-muftīn* was written by the Syrian jurist Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1278) and represents the popular genre of abbreviated *fiqh* manual (*matn*) intended for memorization and practical use.[73] It is

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70　　Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf Al-Janadī, *Al-Sulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Al-Akwaʿ, 2 vols. (Ṣanʿāʾ: Maktabat al-irshād, 1993).

71　　The explanatory power of judicial works for understanding slavery in Islamic societies has been harnessed with much success, for example, by de la Puente (e. g. "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children").

72　　"On the Provenance of Slaves in Mecca during the Time of the Prophet Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Roundtable "Locating Slavery in Middle Eastern and Islamic History," 49 (2017): 164.

73　　Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn*. This work is mentioned in several medieval sources from Yemen (ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saksakī al-Yamanī al-Burayhī, *Ṭabaqāt ṣulaḥāʾ al-Yaman*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥibshī [Sanaʿa: Markaz al-dirāsāt wa-l-buḥūt

a synopsis of al-Rāfiʿī's *al-Muḥarrar* which was in turn based on al-Ghazālī's *al-Khulāṣa*.[74] The admiration for the book and its author in medieval Yemen is exemplified by an anecdote from the 9th/15th century, in which a religious scholar prayed for rain holding *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn* in his hands and asking for al-Nawawī's intercession.[75]

Medieval Islamic jurisprudence granted slaves many rights but did not offer a consistent system of sanctions that would have effectively prevented owners from disregarding them. The normative framework set out by jurists cannot be equated with lived practice. In fact, modern scholars have noted that Islamic law remained focused on domestic slavery as it was practised in Arabia at the dawn of Islam, thereby increasingly failing to account for the changes in slavery practices over time and space.[76] Nevertheless, it is clear that in the medieval Yemeni context, legal norms delimited scopes of action. Furthermore, the literature on Islamic jurisprudence vividly illustrates how people thought about the complex issue of slavery and attempted to manage its manifold ramifications in everyday life. Islamic legal texts also shed light on central tensions related to slavery such as the perception of slaves as both objects to be bought and sold and persons whose human capabilities were intrinsic to their value. Hence, the genre is an indispensable key to the interpretation of source material.

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al-yamanī, 1983], 38, 86, 211, 234, 264, 342; al-Sharji, *Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ ahl al-ṣidq wa al-ikhlāṣ*, 225; Bā Makhrama, Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭayyib b. ʿAbd Allāh, "Tārīkh taghr ʿAdan," in *Arabische Texte zur Kenntnis der Stadt Aden im Mittelalter*, ed. Oscar Löfgren [Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1936], 126, 164). The book's relevance in contemporary Yemen is discussed in detail in Brinkley M. Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 16 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 18–35.

74 Oussama Arabi, David S. Powers, and Susan A. Spectorsky, eds., *Islamic Legal Thought: A Compendium of Muslim Jurists*, Studies in Islamic Law and Society 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 275. Mahmood Kooria, *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shāfiʿī Texts across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), see especially chapter 4.

75 Al-Burayhī, *Ṭabaqāt ṣulaḥāʾ al-Yaman*, 38.

76 Kurt Franz, "Slavery in Islam: Legal Norms and Social Practice," in *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean* (*c. 1000–1500 CE*), ed. Reuven Amitai and Christopher Cluse (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); Urban, *Conquered Populations*, 8.

The Medieval Slave Trade to Yemen

1 Overview

The historical slave trade into Yemen remains under-researched.[1] However, central facts were established by scholars studying related topics such as historical commercial connections including slave trading across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and the history of slavery in Africa.[2]

Most slaves reached medieval Yemen from East Africa via the Red Sea. This route is attested as early as the 1st century CE in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* but may have been older still.[3] The same source attests to Arab merchants shipping slaves to the island of Socotra off Yemen's southern coast.[4] The third to

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1 To my knowledge, the medieval slave trade between Ethiopia and Yemen specifically is only addressed in al-ʿAmrī, *Al-Umarāʾ wa al-ʿabīd wa al-mamālīk fī al-Yaman*. Thomas Vernet has analysed the slave trade from the Swahili coast into Yemen from the 16th to the mid-18th century CE ("Slave Trade and Slavery on the Swahili Coast [1500–1750]," in *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, ed. Behnaz A. Mirzai, Ismael M. Montana, and Paul E. Lovejoy [n.p.: Africa World Press, 2009], 37–76).

2 Craig Perry, "Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Western Indian Ocean World," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 2, *AD 500–AD 1420*, ed. Craig Perry et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jonathan Miran, "Red Sea Slave Trade," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); W. G. Clarence-Smith, *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Frank Cass, 1989); Gwyn Campbell, "Slavery and the Trans-Indian Ocean World Slave Trade," in *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Himanshu Prabha Ray and Edward A. Alpers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani. "Slavery and Bondage in the Indian Ocean World, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery 4*, edited by David Eltis et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

3 Richard Pankhurst, "Across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden: Ethiopia's Historic Ties with Yaman," *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di Studi e documentazione dell'istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 57, no. 3 (2002): 398.

4 Himanshu Prabha Ray, "The West Coast of India and the Maritime World of the Western Indian Ocean," *African Archaeological Review* 31, no. 4 (2014): 589. Socotra had been an important junction of the maritime trade connecting the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea. Cave inscriptions from the 2nd to 4th centuries CE in Indic, South Arabian, Ethiopic and Aramaic were discovered on the island, attesting to a highly diverse early trading community

sixth centuries CE marked a period of several Aksumite invasions and defeats in South Arabia which presumably led to the enslavement of many Ethiopian prisoners of war.[5] In fact, the presence of East African slaves in Mecca during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad has been linked to the defeat of the Aksumite army in Yemen in 575 CE and the subsequent enslavement of Ethiopian soldiers by the victorious Himyarite king Sayf b. Dhī Yazan and the Persian military leader Wahriz.[6] The emergence of Islam in the 7th century CE impacted the availability of slaves in the broader region in different ways. Initially, wars of expansion secured a steady supply of slaves captured during warfare, but once Islamic polities stabilized, local populations either converted to Islam or accepted *dhimmī* status[7] and were thereby protected from slavery.[8] The only remaining source for acquiring slaves was therefore trafficking from abroad. This option exploited a loophole in Islamic slavery regulations: whereas the strict limitations on enslavement and the promotion of manumission in Islamic territories caused the slave population to decrease constantly, no specific provisions existed which regulated the commercial acquisition of slaves from abroad. Granted, the principle of freedom still applied, banning a Muslim merchant from engaging in slave raiding for commercial purposes – after all, a free person, Muslim or not, ought to remain free. However, it could easily be argued that an individual bought from middlemen abroad had already been enslaved at the moment of their acquisition. Furthermore, slave raiding in non-Islamic regions could be stylized as a holy war aimed at capturing infidels

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(Ingo Strauch and Michael D. Bukharin, "Indian Inscriptions from the Cave Ḥoq on Suquṭrā," *Annali Dell'Università Degli Studi Di Napoli "L'Orientale"* 64 [2004]: 121–2).

5   In the early 3rd century, the Aksumite king Gadarat gained control over western Yemen but was expelled a few decades later by the Himyarite king of Yemen. Around 500 CE, Aksum regained control over Ḥimyar and placed a tributary king on its throne. In 521–2 CE, the Himyarite prince Joseph (Dhu Nuwās in Arabic sources) rose to power, prompting the Aksumite king Kaleb to send a fleet to Yemen. This fleet defeated the Himyarite army some time between 525 and 531 CE, and another tributary king was installed. This king was soon toppled by Abraha, the leader of the Aksumite army in Arabia. He took control over large parts of Yemen and became famous in Islamic tradition for his failed attempt to conquer Mecca around 570 CE, the year of the Prophet Muḥammad's birth. After this defeat, a Himyarite prince took power with the help of Sassanid Persia. Shortly afterwards, Yemen was reduced to a Sassanid province with a Persian governor in Sanaʿa. See Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia." For a detailed study of Aksum–Ḥimyar relations, see Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix."

6   Gilli-Elewy, "On the Provenance of Slaves in Mecca," 165.

7   Non-Muslim citizens of Islamic polities, whose enslavement was forbidden.

8   Al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn*, 525–7.

and incorporating them into the Muslim community through enslavement and conversion.[9] The argument was also made that enslavement constituted an improvement over the slave's former condition of ignorance and unbelief.[10] The result was the development of a commercialized slave trade.

During the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries, two dynamics led to a marked increase in the demand for African slaves in Yemen. First, a boom in mineral exploitations on the Arabian Peninsula meant that cheap and abundant manpower was urgently needed.[11] Second, the 3rd/9th century saw the first establishment of an enslaved army in Yemen by the Ziyadids (ca. 203–371/818–981, see chapter 1). Since the founder of this dynasty, Muḥammad b. Ziyād, had been sent to Yemen by the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn, it is quite possible that he fashioned his army after the mamluk armies of Iraq. The growing trade in slaves for mining and military use promoted bustling port economies on both sides of the Red Sea littoral. In early medieval times, Aden and Al-Shiḥr had been the principal Yemeni harbours.[12] When Zabīd was established in the 2nd/8th century, the nearby ports of Al-ʿAthar (probably founded in pre-Islamic times) and Ghulāfiqa gained prominence.[13] Sudanese ports became among the most active in the Red Sea area, also due to a gold rush in the East Desert of southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In the 4th/10th century, the Palestinian geographer al-Muqaddasī (born ca. 330/941) noted the presence of African slaves in Zabīd, whom he identified as of Nubian, Beja and Ethiopian origin.[14] Al-Ḥakamī

9   Brunschvig calls this a "fiction of the Holy War" ("ʿAbd." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, 2012. Consulted online on 11.01.2024 (http://dx.doi .org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0003).

10   The highly questionable idea that slavery resulted in an improvement in living conditions is also sustained by some modern scholars of slavery. In his seminal study of eunuchs in Islamic societies, Ayalon writes: "Even the blacks were, on the average, far better off within *Dar al-Islam* than in the lands from which they had been brought over" (*Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999], 30).

11   Al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad Al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Gawharatayn al-ʿatīqatayn al-māʾiʿatayn aṣ-ṣafrāʾ wa al-bayḍāʾ* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968). Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500–1000* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012).

12   Claire Hardy-Guilbert, "The Harbour of Al-Shiḥr, Ḥaḍramawt, Yemen: Sources and Archae-ological Data on Trade," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 35 (2005): 71–85.

13   Power, *Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate*, 103. For a detailed discussion of how the ports of Zabīd changed over time, see Edward J. Keall, "The Changing Positions of Zabîd's Red Sea Port Sites," *Arabian Humanities* 15 (2008): 111–25.

14   Al-Muqaddasī specified that the Beja lived beyond the port of Aydhāb in today's Ḥalāyeb triangle between Egypt and Sudan (Power, *Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate*, 137). Enslaved Beja do not appear in any Yemeni source examined for this study.

reports that around the same time, the Ziyadids of Zabīd imposed a tribute on the ruler of the Dahlak archipelago that included one thousand slaves, five hundred of whom were female Ethiopian and Nubian slaves.[15] By the 5th/11th century, Dahlak had become a major slave trading hub and remained so until its decline in the 9th/15th century.[16] Al-Ḥakamī also relates that a Nubian slave called Ḥusayn b. Salāma became de facto ruler of the Ziyadid state in the late 4th/10th century, remaining in power for thirty years.[17] When the Persian scholar Nāṣir Khusraw (b. 394/1004) travelled to the Islamic holy sites, he did not venture as far south as Yemen but recorded the presence of agricultural slaves from Zanzibar and Ethiopia in the oasis of Al-Aḥsāʾ in today's Saudi Arabia, thereby confirming an active slave trade to Eastern Arabia, likely via the Persian Gulf.[18] Bā Makhrama's history of Aden informs us that the city's first Zurayʿid governor who ruled on behalf of the Sulayhids between 476/1083 and 569/1173 possessed slaves who were forced to quarry stones in the mountains of Aden and carry them to town on their backs.[19] These slaves are identified as *zanjī*, an ethnonym assigned to individuals from Somalia and coastal regions farther south. Slaves labelled as *zanjī* appear regularly in medieval Yemeni sources, most frequently as a group trafficked to Yemen. Once incorporated into local society, they disappear from view, suggesting that they might have been assigned to low-ranking occupations and tasks. This hypothesis is corroborated by a few other facts. The prices for *zanjī* slaves in *Nūr al-maʿārif* are consistently quoted as half the amounts paid for *ḥabashī* slaves.[20] Furthermore, the Zanj have been stereotyped as tough in Arabic

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15   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 6. Similar information is found in Ibn Ḥawqal's 10th-century work *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*: "He [the Zurayʿid ruler of Yemen] receives from the lord of the Dahlak islands according to a convention presents which consist of slaves, amber and panther skin of high quality, and other objects" (Muḥammad Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* [Cairo: Sharikat nawābigh al-fikr, 2006]).

16   Marie-Laure Derat, "Chrétiens et Musulmans d'Ethiopie face à la traite et à l'esclavage aux xvᵉ et xv1ᵉ siècles," in *Traites et esclavages en Afrique Orientale et dans l'océan Indien*, ed. H. Médard et al. (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 142. Margariti has analysed medieval funerary stelae on the archipelago and found that by the 5th/11th century, a cosmopolitan maritime state active in the Red Sea trade had been established ("Thieves or Sultans? Dahlak and the Rulers and Merchants of Indian Ocean Port Cities, 11th–13th Centuries AD," *Archaeopress*, Society for Arabian Studies Monographs, Proceedings of Red Sea Project 4 [2009]: 155–64).

17   Al-Ḥakamī, 6.

18   Nasir-i Khusraw, *Nasir-i Khusraw's Book of Travels* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 112.

19   Bā Makhrama, "Tārīkh taghr ʿAdan," 9.

20   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 429, 461.

sources at least since the 3rd/9th century.[21] Al-Ḥakamī's 6th/12th-century chronicle of the Najahid dynasty is heavily populated by individuals labelled as *ḥabashī*, commonly denoting individuals from today's Ethiopia and Eritrea. The author even specified the tribal affiliations of several Ethiopian individuals as *amḥara*, *saḥart* and *jizlī*.[22] The first ethnonym refers to the well-known Amhara people whose heartland still lies in Ethiopia's northern and central highlands. Sahart was in the medieval period one of the provinces of today's Tigray region in Ethiopia.[23] A leading personality of the Najahid dynasty, the military commander Farrāj al-Saḥartī, stemmed from this region, as did the eunuch Mufliḥ al-Fātikī and the military leader Isḥāq b. Marzūq al-Saḥratī.[24] *Jizlī* refers to the Juzuliyūn, who according to Al-Ḥakamī were an Ethiopian tribe (*baṭn*) to which the Najahid kings themselves belonged.[25] His account of the Najahid dynasty contains two individuals specifically identified as *jizlī*: the vizier Anīs al-Fātikī and a certain Aḥmad ibn Masʿūd al-Jizlī.[26] According to al-Khazrajī, the Najahid vizier Surūr al-Fātikī was also of *jizlī* descent.[27] The term is also mentioned in *Nūr al-maʿārif*;[28] beyond these sources, however, the ethnonym remains rare. Al-Ḥakamī's information offers rare information on (presumably) ethnic affiliations among Ethiopian slaves in medieval Yemen. Also in the 6th/12th century, the geographer Muḥammad al-Idrīsī tells the story of Arab traders luring children on the coast of *bilād al-zanj* (East Africa, roughly from today's Somalia southwards) with dates in order to capture them

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21   Al-Jāḥiẓ (who was himself of Ethiopian descent) praises the Zanj for their generosity and eloquence and states: "No other nation can surpass them in bodily strength and physical toughness." (Abū ʿUthmān ʿAmr b. Baḥr Al-Jāḥiẓ, *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ: Translations of Selected Texts*, trans. Charles Pellat and D. M. Hawke [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969], 196). The anonymous 10th-century geographical work *Ḥudūd al-ʿālam* describes them less favourably: "Their nature is that of wild animals" (*Ḥudūd al-ʿālam: A Persian Geography, 372 A.H.–982 A.D.; The Regions of the World*, ed. Vladimir F. Minorskij, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937], 163). Al-Idrīsī, describing the *zanjī* coast, depicts its inhabitants as wild pagans (*Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, ed. Alessio Bombacci, Umberto Rizzitano, and Laura Veccia Vaglieri [Napoli: Istituto universitario orientale di Napoli, 1970], 58–66).

22   Alternatively, Kay renders this term as *jazalī* (al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 96).

23   Richard Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century*, Äthiopistische Forschungen 8 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982), 201. The province is also mentioned in Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmārī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, ed. Kāmil Salmān al-Jubūrī and Mahdī al-Najm (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiya, 2010), 40.

24   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 20ff., 76, 79. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2190.

25   *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 96. The spelling follows al-Zabīdī's in Tāj al-ʿArūs, root j-z-l.

26   Al-Ḥakamī, 70.

27   Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir, 944.

28   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.362.

as slaves. Mombasa and Malindi in present-day Kenya are mentioned by name in this passage.[29] During the same era, letters preserved in the Cairo Geniza attest to slaves trafficked to Aden from *bilād al-zanj*.[30] As will be discussed below, *Nūr al-maʿārif* provides evidence that in the late 7th/13th century, *zanjī* and Ethiopian eunuchs, female slaves and uncastrated male slaves, were trafficked from the port of Zaylaʿ to Aden.[31] Several sources attest to slaves being shipped out of Zaylaʿ,[32] which was the main medieval entrepôt for trade with Aden and Zabīd throughout the medieval period.[33] Its location is commonly identified with today's Saylac in Somaliland, although it has also alternatively been associated with today's Zula in Eritrea.[34] Zaylaʿ seems to have been a prominent slave trading hub over a long time period. The Italian traveller Ludovico de Varthema, who visited the port in the 10th/16th century, remarked:

> Over there are also sold very large quantities of slaves, who are those of the Prester John [i.e. Ethiopians],[35] which the Moors take in war. And from here they bring them to Persia, Arabia felix [Yemen], Mecca, Cairo and India.[36]

Ibn al-Mujāwir, writing in the first half of the 7th/13th century, noted that ten-year old slave girls were brought from Ethiopia to Zabīd.[37] A number of references to Ethiopian slaves from Damūt (Damot, in what today is central Ethiopia) are contained in a judicial manual from the Ḥaḍramī port of Al-Shiḥr,

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29   Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, *Kitāb nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, 3: 58–66.

30   Goitein and Friedman, India Traders of the Middle Ages, 453.

31   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.365, I.429, I.461.

32   E.g. anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.365, I.403. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2339.

33   Ṣubḥī Labīb, Handelsgeschichte Ägyptens im Spätmittelalter: (1171–1517) (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1965).

34   Power, Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, 185.

35   The legend of Prester John, a mythical Nestorian king living in the East and potential ally against Muslims, arose during the crusades. From the 14th century CE onwards, Prester John was associated with the Christian king of Ethiopia.

36   Ludovico de Varthema, *Itinerario di Ludovico de Varthema, bolognese: Nello Egypto, nella Surria, nella Arabia deserta et felice, nella Persia, nella India et nella Etiopia; La fede, el vivere et costumi de tutte le prefate provincie*, ed. Paolo Giudici (Milan: Alpes, 1928), 158. "Quivi anco se vende grandissima quantità de schiavi, li quali sonno de quelli del Prete Ianni, che li Mori li pigliano in guerra. E de qui se portano nella Persia, nella Arabia felice et alla Meca et al Cairo et in India" (my translation).

37   Yūsuf ibn Yaʿqūb al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, ed. Oscar Löfgren (Leiden: Brill, 1951), 89.

written between the late 9th/15th and early 10th/16th century.[38] During this time, the Sultanate of Adal dominated the slave trade on the Horn of Africa out of Zaylaʿ, and its ruler Aḥmad Grāñ was about to launch a holy war against the Christian empire.[39] Ethiopian hagiographical evidence confirms that Christian merchants were also active in the slave trade and controlled the port of Massawa from the 9th/15th century onwards.[40] Nubian slaves appear in a Ḥaḍramī chronicle from the 16th century.[41]

Such evidence, scattered throughout the medieval period and all across the Red Sea littoral, leaves many questions unanswered, but it clearly confirms the existence of an active medieval slave trade across the Red Sea to Yemen.

However, not all slaves who were brought to Yemen in the medieval period came from Africa. Considering the strong trade links between India and Yemen since ancient times,[42] it is unsurprising that slaves labelled as Indian (*hindī*) occasionally make their appearance in our sources. For instance, after his defeat by the Sulayhids in 481/1088, the Najahid ruler Jayyāsh fled to India and returned a year later with his pregnant Indian concubine who soon bore him a son, Fātik.[43] Craig Perry has noted that bills of sale from al-Fusṭāṭ only begin to feature Indian slaves and acquisitions of slaves from Aden starting in the 6th/12th century. He argues that restrictions on the trafficking of slaves from Europe during that time led Egypt to seek other sources in Sudan and the Indian Ocean.[44] Indian slaves also appear in Geniza documents pertaining to Jewish traders active in Aden.[45] A letter recounts that an enslaved Indian girl, six years of age, was gifted away, while in another letter, an India trader in Aden mentions the delivery of an enslaved person from India to his nephew in Cairo.[46] The

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38   Robert B. Serjeant, "Forms of Plea: A Shafiʾi Manual from al-Shihr," in *Customary and Shariʾah Law in Arabian Society*, Rivista degli Studi Orientali xxx (1992), 6, 9, 13.

39   Amélie Chekroun, "Le Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša: écriture de l'histoire, guerre et société dans le Barr Saʿd ad-Dīn (Éthiopie, xvie siècle)" (PhD diss., Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2013).

40   Derat, "Chrétiens et Musulmans d'Ethiopie," 122.

41   R. B. Serjeant, The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast: Ḥaḍramī Chronicles, with Yemeni and European Accounts of Dutch Pirates off Mocha in the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 73.

42   Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ray, "West Coast of India and the Maritime World."

43   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 1892, 65.

44   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 63.

45   Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 55–58.

46   Goitein and Friedman, 10, 481.

household of the Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yijū, whose letters have been
published by Shelomo Dov Goitein and Mordechai Friedman, included Bama,
his trusted Indian slave agent, and Ashū, his slave concubine from Mangalore
whom he later freed and married.[47] This Geniza evidence dovetails neatly with
Ibn al-Mujāwir's descriptions from the mid-7th/13th century in which a resi-
dent of Aden sells an enslaved Indian girl to a buyer from Alexandria.[48] The
author not only notes that enslaved boys (*ghilmān*) were trafficked from India
to Aden but also lists the customs due on slaves who were probably Goan;
interestingly, their dues were four times higher than those of slaves of unspec-
ified origin mentioned in the preceding sentence.[49] Furthermore, he mentions
that enslaved Indian boys entering Yemen via the Ḥaḍramī port of Al-Shiḥr
were not taxed at all.[50] The passage records both import and export dues, cor-
roborating the evidence from Geniza sources that Aden was at the time an
entrepôt for Indian slaves who were traded onwards to Egypt.[51] *Nūr al-maʿārif*
features a eunuch called ʿAnbar the Indian.[52] This man might plausibly have
stemmed from India, but it is just as likely that he obtained his *nisba* from his
owner. In contrast to Mamluk Egypt, where Indian eunuchs were common,
no eunuch in the Yemeni sources can with certainty be identified as Indian.
When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited Aden around 728/1328, he met a prominent judge
whose father had been enslaved and employed as a porter.[53] His name – Sālim
b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Hindī – strongly suggests Indian origins. Yemen also seems to
have served as an entrepôt for the trade of Ethiopian slaves to India in the
medieval period. For instance, the Muzaffarid sultanate established in Cambay
at the dawn of the 9th/15th century relied heavily on *ḥabashī* slaves acquired
in Yemen.[54]

Isolated mentions of slaves from other parts of the world in sources on
Yemen further complicate the picture. Ibn Ḥātim's chronicle of the Ayyubid

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47   Goitein and Friedman, 55–58, 66, 632. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, 13, 191,
      202. Goitein, "From Aden to India," 52.

48   Al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, 146.

49   Al-Mujāwir, 140, 143.

50   Al-Mujāwir, 142–3.

51   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 50.

52   Nūr al-maʿārif, I.526.

53   Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: A.D. 1325–1354*, ed. H. A.
      R. Gibb (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), II.373.

54   Engseng Ho, "The Two Arms of Cambay: Diasporic Texts of Ecumenical Islam in the
      Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 2/3
      (2007): 353.

era mentions Turkish enslaved girls (*jawāri*) owned by the Zaydi imam.[55] Al-Khazrajī describes the arrival of an Arab merchant[56] from Khaṭā (northern/north-western China)[57] in the year 703/1303–4 with a ship full of treasures that included mamluks (*mamālīk*) and enslaved girls (*jawārī*) destined as alms for the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina.[58] The absence of similar evidence renders it unlikely that these slaves were of Chinese origin; in fact, they could have been bought anywhere along the merchant's way across the Indian Ocean.[59] In the year 800/1397, the author reports the arrival of a present from Mamluk Egypt at the Rasulid court:

> It was a sublime present, including around thirty Turkish mamluks (*mamālīk turkīyan*), twelve heads of horses with ornamented saddles and beautiful equipment, a number of Byzantine and Armenian slave girls (*jawār*[60] *min al-rūmiyāt wa al-armaniyāt*), and a skilful doctor from among the Jews of Egypt.[61]

Otherwise, Byzantine and Armenian slaves hardly appear in the sources analysed. A mamluk bearing the name Balbāl Rūmī features in *Nūr al-maʿārif*; however, neither his state of (un)freedom nor his ethnic origin can be established with any certainty.[62] Four hundred Armenian (*arman*) and seven hundred "Black" (*aswad*) archers fighting in Yemen around 515/1121 are featured in *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, but it is unclear whether they were slave soldiers or

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55   The author recounts that the eighteenth Zaydi imam al-Manṣūr ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza, who rose to power in 583/1187–8, was presented with the gift of a Turkish slave girl (*jāriya turkiyya*) (Ibn Ḥātim, *Al-Simṭ al-Ghālī Aṭ-Ṭaman Fī Akhbār al-Mulūk Min al-Ghuzz Bi-l-Yaman*, 87). He also describes the wife of a jurist during the reign of the last Ayyubid sultan al-Masʿūd (r. 612–26/1215–28) as "Turkish from among the imam's slave girls [*jawāri*]" (Ibn Ḥātim, 179.)

56   His name – ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Manṣūr al-Ḥalabī ("the Aleppine") – suggests Syrian origins.

57   "Khaṭā or Khīṭāy ('Cathay') was the name given to the northern and north-western provinces of China, which constituted a separate kingdom under the Khitan or Liao dynasty" (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: A.D. 1325–1354*, 551n44).

58   "[M]in al-mamālīk wa al-jawārī shayʾ kathīr." Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.350.

59   The *nisba* of the eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣīnī ("the Chinese") who appears several times in *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* probably links him to his owner, who might have been active in trade with China (al-Khazrajī, II.154, II.184, II.208.)

60   Medieval Yemeni sources often give the plural of *jāriya* as *jawār* instead of the standard plural form *jawārī*.

61   Al-Khazrajī, II.294 This is a rare mention of the shipment of mamluks into Yemen.

62   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.568.

mercenaries.[63] A Ḥaḍramī chronicle from the 10th/16th century mentions a eunuch labelled as *rūmī*.[64] It is noteworthy that none of the enslaved individuals mentioned in the sources are identified as Yemeni, and that no evidence for the trade in Yemeni slaves during the period of interest has surfaced.[65] The overwhelming majority of Yemen's native inhabitants were Muslims and could therefore not be sold into slavery. The country's Jewish minority possessed *dhimmī* status which, according to Islamic law, protected them from enslavement. Based on our sources, it appears that these prohibitions were respected. An exception to this rule is reported by al-Khazrajī. In the year 725/1325, Egyptian troops arrived in Yemen to support Sultan al-Mujāhid, who was facing multiple threats to his sovereignty. Initially welcomed with open arms, the soldiers immediately set out to loot the countryside, abusing and murdering civilians. Worse yet, they invaded a village and sold the women "like slaves (*raqīq*) are sold".[66] The wording implies that someone must have bought these women, even though as free-born Muslims they could not be enslaved. Outraged at this behaviour, the sultan captured and executed the Egyptian military leaders; what became of their troops is not mentioned.

Arabic designations such as *hindī*, *rūmī*, *armanī* and *ṣīnī* must be read as umbrella terms for individuals coming from wider regions. For example, a *hindī* slave could also have come from Sri Lanka, where Arab trading ships often anchored before their westward journey home. Unfortunately, the sources analysed for this study offer insufficient data to reconstruct the slave trade from these regions. Thus, in what follows, the focus will be exclusively on the better-documented slave trade from East Africa via the Red Sea to Yemen during the Rasulid era. First, however, a category of slaves whose origins and journeys to Yemen remain a mystery requires a brief discussion.

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63   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 43. Bā Makhrama relates the same information, but designates them as horsemen (*fāris*) rather than archers (Bā Makhrama, "Tārīkh taghr ʿAdan," 133.3).

64   Serjeant, *Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast*, 42.

65   Al-Ṭabarī relates that the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr owned a Yemeni eunuch from Khawlān who had been captured and castrated. When he discovered his Arab origins, he immediately set him free (Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 74).

66   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.33. This incident is also reported by Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn, according to whom it took place in Ghulāfiqa, one of Zabīd's Red Sea ports (*Ghāyat al-amānī fī akhbār al-quṭr al-yamānī*, ed. Saʿīd ʿĀshūr, 2 vols. [Cairo: Dār al-kātib al-ʿarabī li-l-ṭabaʿa wa-l-nashr, 1968], 503).

2   The Unknown Origins of Enslaved Soldiers in Medieval Yemen

Although mamluks (slave soldiers) are omnipresent in medieval Yemeni
sources, neither their origins nor related slave trading routes could be estab-
lished. In fact, the institution of slave soldiery in Yemen has proven to be
surprisingly difficult to characterize in general. The earliest evidence for the
deployment of mamluks in Yemen concerns the 3rd/9th century, when the
emerging Ziyadid ruler of Zabīd acquired enslaved African soldiers to bolster
his military might.[67] Two centuries later, Ethiopian mamluks took over power
from the Ziyadids and established the Najahid dynasty, which itself relied on
enslaved Ethiopian and Nubian soldiers as well as on mercenaries from Central
Asia known as Ghuzz.[68] In Rasulid sources, mamluks feature both as securing
the dynasty's sovereignty through military and punitive expeditions and as
threatening it by plotting and revolting against their owners. Nevertheless, the
sources largely remain silent on their origins and life trajectories in Yemen,
with the exception of high-ranking mamluk officials represented in chronicles
and biographical dictionaries.

The scarcity of information on mamluk slave trading practices to Yemen
and on the mamluk institution there in general stands in stark contrast to
Mamluk Egypt, where rich evidence documents the acquisition of mamluks
in Central Asia, their rigorous military training and subsequent manumission
and incorporation into the army corps of their former owners.[69] The only cer-
tainty gained from Yemeni sources is that some mamluks came to the country
in the entourage of Egyptian military commanders.[70] Minimal evidence sug-
gests that the Rasulid mamluk institution might have been at least partly a
multi-generational phenomenon,[71] which would pose a stark contrast to the
institution in Mamluk Egypt, where the sons of mamluks were excluded from

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67   At least some of these mamluks were a tribute received from the ruler of the Dahlak
     archipelago (al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 6).

68   Al-Ḥakamī reports that the Najahid king Jayyāsh had sent for three thousand *Ghuzz* arch-
     ers, but when two thousand of them made their way from Mecca to Zabīd, he began to
     fear their military power and ordered most of them to be poisoned before they reached
     Yemen (77).

69   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade."

70   For example, in the early 8th/14th century, the Egyptian amir ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Kashdghudī
     joined the service of the Rasulid sultan al-Muʾayyad Dawūd, bringing with him a group of
     mamluks known as *baḥariyya*, a prominent military division in Mamluk Egypt which sub-
     sequently became a permanent feature of the Rasulid army as well (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd
     al-fākhir*, 848).

71   For example, the Rasulid amir Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Abū al-ʿAbbās b. Izdamar was of
     Turkish origin but born in Yemen to a father who had also been an amir (al-Khazrajī, 245).

joining the military elite.[72] The Turkic names given to mamluks in Yemen prompt the assumption that they stemmed from Central Asia, as did many of their Egyptian counterparts. Furthermore, the Rasulids, themselves of Turkoman descent, might have preferred military slaves coming from a similar ethnic background. However, no proof for a slave trading network connecting Yemen and Central Asia could be found. Furthermore, as David Ayalon has pointed out, even non-Turkic mamluks in medieval Egypt were given Turkic names as markers of group identity.[73] Another hypothesis then is that most mamluks of Rasulid Yemen, like those of the Najahid era, were of African origin but were given Turkic slave names in order to mark their position as unfree soldiers. Further evidence for the continued presence of African slave soldiers in medieval Yemen is provided by the 10th/16th-century Italian traveller Varthema, who noted that the Tahirid army consisted of Ethiopian mamluks who had been bought at the age of eight or nine years and then trained for battle.[74] While the origins and trading routes of Rasulid mamluks thus remain somewhat of a mystery, it is likely that they encompassed both men of African and of Turkic descent.

In sum, the source references confirm beyond doubt that slaves, most of them of African origin, constituted a significant population group in medieval Yemen. They reveal that slaves were trafficked to Yemen from places as far afield as the Dahlak archipelago and Mombasa. This geographical breadth of slave trading centres corroborates the hypothesis that African slaves in medieval Yemen came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. However, the exact origins of these individuals remain unknown. Several studies of medieval slave trading patterns in the African hinterland suggest that the catchment area for slaves not only comprised zones around the mostly coastal trading centres but extended deep into the African continent. For example, reports from the 5th/11th century attribute the presence of Nubian slaves in Egypt to systematic slave trading and raiding around Aswan.[75] An illuminating case study from Ethiopia shows the strong involvement of the understudied kingdoms of Damot, Janjero and Gamo (located in today's central Ethiopia) in the domestic and international slave trade from the 7th/13th century

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72 Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 30.

73 David Ayalon, "Names, Titles and Nisbas of the Mamluks," in *The Mamluk Military Society*, Collected Studies Series 104 (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979), 194–5.

74 *Itinerario di Ludovico de Varthema*, 137. The Tahirids took power from the Rasulids and ruled over southern Yemen from 858/1454 until 923/1517 (Smith, "Political History of the Islamic Yemen," 137).

75 Nāsir Khusraw and Benjamin of Tuleda in Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 34–5.

onwards (see the section "The Horn of Africa in the 7th/13th century" below).[76] Around 730/1330, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa relates that the inhabitants of Kulwā (the island of Kilwa off modern-day Tanzania) "engage in jihad, because they are on a common mainland with the heathen Zinj people and contiguous to them".[77] The passage obviously refers to slave raiding. Ethiopian Christian hagiographies from the 15th and 16th centuries CE suggest that most individuals sold into slavery abroad during that period were captives of warfare and raids in the border regions between the Christian kingdom and the Islamic sultanate of Adal that controlled the port of Zaylaʿ.[78]

Recently, genetic studies have been drawn upon to study historical slavery. This body of evidence shows that female African contributions to the Arabian Peninsula's gene pool are on average triple that of the male contributions, pointing to slavery and specifically to the practice of concubinage. Most of this African genetic input is of Ethio-Somali and Nilo-Saharan origin, roughly validating the geographical information given by medieval Arabic authors.[79]

3   Trade Procedures to Rasulid Yemen

Evidence stemming mostly from the Rasulid period allows us to piece together the steps leading from the embarkment of slaves onto ships bound for Yemen to the delivery into the hands of their Yemeni owners. *Nūr al-maʿārif* is the richest source in this respect, offering information on the acquisition of slaves in Ethiopia, their departure from the port of Zaylaʿ across the Red Sea, arrival on Yemeni soil and onward overland journey. In addition, this source reveals that the Rasulid administration reserved for itself the right to pre-select the best eunuchs and female slaves from any slave cargo that arrived in Aden, a practice also attested to in the 11th/15th-century *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*.[80] Furthermore, we possess evidence on the humiliating examination process that female slaves were subjected to on the public slave market of Aden

76   Ayda Bouanga, "Gold, Slaves, and Trading Routes in Southern Blue Nile (Abbay) Societies, Ethiopia, 13th–16th Centuries," *Northeast African Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 31–60.

77   Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, II.380–1.

78   Derat, "Chrétiens et musulmans d'Éthiopie." It is possible that similar dynamics occurred during the Ifad sultanate (late 7th/13th to the turn of the 8th/14th century) which preceded the sultanate of Adal and was also in control of commerce through Zaylaʿ (Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century* [Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997], 40).

79   For an overview of this research, see Perry, "Slavery and the Slave Trade," 149.

80   Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*.

during the 7th/13th century. Before delving into the source material, however, it is necessary to briefly consider the political landscape in the Horn of Africa during the period when *Nūr al-maʿārif* was compiled.

3.1   *The Horn of Africa in the 7th/13th Century*

The trajectory and timeline of Islamization in the Horn of Africa remains elusive. Early Western scholarship has presumed that Muslim traders had first reached the region via a network of north–south caravan routes; however, this hypothesis is poorly supported by textual or archaeological evidence. In the early 2000s, archaeological data has led to the identification of two main routes of trade and Islamic influence that successively linked the Ethiopian heartland to the Red Sea coast. The first route ran from the Dahlak archipelago and/or the neighbouring port of Massawa southwards along the escarpment of the central Ethiopian highlands to the Shewa region in today's central Ethiopia and was in place from at least the 4th/10th century onwards.[81] The second axis developed in the 9th/13th century, when Mamluk pacification of the Red Sea and the maritime activities of the Rasulids saw the rise of the port of Zaylaʿ and the establishment of "a chain of Muslim polities extending from Zaylaʿ to the Ethiopian lakes".[82] The port of Zaylaʿ had already been trading with Arabia since at least the 3rd/9th century, as documented in al-Yaʿqūbī's 3rd/9th-century geographical work *Kitāb al-buldān*.[83] Half a century later, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmārī relates that Zaylaʿ was ruled by the king of Afwāt, one of seven Islamic kingdoms in Ethiopia.[84] In fact, the sultanate of Afwāt (also known as Ifat) was dominant among a number of Muslim polities linking the Red Sea coast and the Ethiopian lakes. Founded in the late 7th/13th century, it controlled Zaylaʿ and extended deep into the African hinterland, taking control of Shewa in what is today central Ethiopia. The same period saw the rise of the Solomonic dynasty that would dominate the highlands in the Ethiopian heartland until the 20th century.[85] While modern scholarship had initially assumed a neat separation between territories under Christian and Islamic

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[81]   François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Bertrand Hirsch, "Muslim Historical Spaces in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: A Reassessment," *Northeast African Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004): 41.

[82]   Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch, 41.

[83]   François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar et al., "Le port de Zeyla et son arrière-pays au Moyen Âge: Investigations archéologiques et retour aux sources écrites," in *Espaces musulmans de la Corne de l'Afrique au Moyen Âge*, Annales d'Éthiopie hors-série (Addis Ababa: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2017), 31.

[84]   Al-ʿUmārī, Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār, 33–6.

[85]   Mordechai Abir, Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim European Rivalry in the Region (London: Frank Cass, 1980), 13.

influence and violent conflict between them, this has by now been recognized as a retrospective misinterpretation. In fact, the two polities had strong cultural and political similarities and both stood to profit from commerce linking the Ethiopian heartland to the Red Sea coast.[86] This led to the following dynamic: "As the Christians were in possession of the resources of the highlands and the Muslims were in charge of the routes, for a while, a 'competitive symbiosis' ensued between the competing Muslim and Christian powers."[87] This tenuous balance gave way to open conflict in the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries, followed by an outright religious war in the 10th/16th century.

Beyond the better-known Christian and Islamic polities, Ayda Bouanga has shown that the Ethiopian kingdoms of Damot, Janjero and Gamo were heavily involved in the domestic and international slave trade, as well as in gold production, from the 7th/13th century onwards.[88] The kingdom of Damot, populated by farmers and pastoralists united by language and religion, likely raided slaves at its margins who were then either put to internal use or transported along the trade routes leading to the Red Sea. Slaves were traded along the same routes and on the same markets by the same merchants who dealt in other Ethiopian export products.[89] Even after the Solomonic dynasty began exerting its control upon the kingdom from the 8th/14th century onwards, it left intact its political, religious and economic system in order to benefit from its trade.

3.2   *The Slave Trade Reflected in Nūr al-maʿārif*

After this short historical background, we return to the Yemeni evidence. The scribes who compiled *Nūr al-maʿārif* in the late 7th/13th century referred to an "Ethiopia" that was politically complex but united by commercial activities oriented towards the flourishing port of Zaylaʿ. The slave trade reverberating through this source may have originated in the little-known polities of Damot, Janjero and Gamo, while the slaves themselves likely stemmed from even more remote regions farther inland. Little is known about the Yemeni traders active in Zaylaʿ, but according to our source, they dealt in

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86   Bertrand Hirsch and François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, "L'Éthiopie médiévale. État des lieux et nouveaux éclairages (Ethiopia in the Middle Ages. Present Research and New Results)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 42, no. 166 (2002): 316.

87   Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch, "Muslim Historical Spaces in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa," 42.

88   Bouanga, "Gold, Slaves, and Trading Routes." Damot and Janjero were located in today's central Ethiopia, and Gamo corresponds to the country's modern Gamo Gofa region farther south.

89   Bouanga, 45.

mixed cargo depending on availability. *Nūr al-maʿārif* provides no evidence for direct Rasulid state intervention in the commerce with Ethiopia, in stark contrast to its heavy regulation of trade with Egypt and India.[90] At the time, no money was produced in Ethiopia.[91] The standard currency in the regions under Islamic rule was the *kāmiliya*, a silver dirham first minted in Egypt by the Ayyubid al-Malik al-Kāmil Muḥammad in 622/1225, as well as a coin of inferior silver called *ḥaras*.[92] The dirham's value was most frequently measured by weight (*wuqīya*, roughly translatable as ounce) rather than by coin amounts. Four *kāmilī* dirhams were worth one dinar; however, given that Ethiopia was a gold-exporting country lacking silver, Ethiopian traders were only interested in silver coins.[93] Furthermore, barter was frequent, and textiles from the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean were highly valued exchange objects.[94]

The diverse range of administrative documents constituting *Nūr al-maʿārif* includes a sizeable section on trade between Rasulid Yemen and Ethiopia. Here, information is given on the import of a variety of Ethiopian trade goods, including slaves. Details on the exact geographical origins of these goods is missing, but the breadth of items mentioned makes clear that they came from diverse African regions. The slave trade across the Red Sea into Yemen is addressed in six separate passages. The first two passages are found in a section listing prices for export products from Ethiopia and taxes due upon their import to Yemen.[95] The section is composed of three versions based on different source documents, a common feature of *Nūr al-maʿārif* that is usually introduced by the set phrase "Wa min nuskhat ukhrā [...]" (And in another copy [...]). This feature underlines the source's character as a collection of practical information on the management of the Rasulid state that was probably intended as an archive or handbook of good administrative practice. Two of these three versions contain information pertaining to slaves. Additional insights can be gained by two texts that form part of a large section on customs

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90 Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 417. According to Mamluk sources, however, the Rasulid sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf did attempt to exercise political influence in the port by building a mosque. When the local inhabitants sabotaged his plans, he banned ships from Zaylaʿ anchoring in Aden for a whole year (Vallet, 419).

91 Al-ʿUmārī, Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār, 36.

92 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.360. Al-ʿUmārī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, 36. Paul Balog, "History of the Dirhem in Egypt from the Fāṭimid Conquest until the Collapse of the Mamlūk Empire," *Revue numismatique* 6, no. 3 (1961): 123. Warren C. Schultz, "Mamlūk Metrology and the Numismatic Evidence," *Al-Masāq* 15, no. 1 (2003): 59–75.

93 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.269, 1.359.

94 Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 412–13.

95 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.361–7.

levied in Aden and on the Dahlak archipelago,[96] where slaves appear in two passages concerning the import of products to Aden.[97] Finally, a section on the port administration of Aden[98] and another on its administrators[99] portray the Rasulid state as a purchaser of eunuchs, and of slaves in general.[100] Taken together, these texts not only establish that slaves were shipped from the Horn of Africa to Yemen in the Rasulid period but also specify prices, taxes and additional expenses to be paid for different categories of slaves. For the sake of clarity, we shall examine these passages topic by topic rather than in their entirety, beginning with information on prices paid for slaves.

3.3   *Prices Paid for Slaves in Ethiopia*

Nūr al-maʿārif provides a remarkable level of detail on the prices paid for African slaves destined for the Yemeni market. The most telling (albeit difficult and convoluted) passage reads:

> The eunuch (*khādim*) is also of differing price, the one of absolutely high quality for seventy *wuqīya* and for eighty *wuqīya* silver paid. If there was an exchange, it would be for one hundred and for ninety *wuqīya*. This is fixed in silver coins for fifty or sixty. The good eunuch is expensive up to a hundred *wuqīya* in coins and that is precious. […] The eunuch of medium quality is for fifty or sixty *wuqīya*. The regular eunuch is for forty *wuqīya*.
>
> The uncastrated slaves (*al-ʿabīd al-fuḥūl*): the slave of excellent quality is the pure Ethiopian slave boy (*waṣīf*), such as the *jizlī* and the *amḥarī*, or the *saḥartī* or any kind (*jins*) as long as he is flawless. His price in Ethiopia is twenty *wuqīya*, and the one of medium quality fifteen or fourteen, and the one of lesser quality twelve, eleven or ten.
>
> As for female slaves (*al-jawār*): the good slave girl (*waṣīfa*) of excellent quality is for 20 *wuqīya*, and of medium quality for 15 or 16, and of lesser quality for 12 or 10.[101]

This passage categorizes slaves shipped out of Ethiopia into eunuchs, uncastrated male slaves and female slaves, with each group classified into "high", "medium" and "low-quality" individuals. Tellingly, the exact same categorization

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96   Anonymous, I.409–91.
97   Anonymous, I.429, I.471.
98   Anonymous, I.491–507.
99   Anonymous, I.508–14.
100   Anonymous, I.492–4.
101   Anonymous, I.362.

by quality is used for Ethiopian mules which were also imported to Yemen and are described in the same section.[102]

The difference in value associated with the various groups of slaves and their respective subcategories is underlined by the prices quoted. Here, it is important to note that these were prices for acquiring slaves in *Ethiopia* – i.e. the pre-import prices paid by Yemeni merchants to their Ethiopian counterparts – not the final prices fetched upon sale to the slave's first Yemeni owner. This is clearly spelled out with regard to uncastrated Ethiopian slaves and seems to apply to the passage as a whole. A eunuch of "high quality" fetched over triple, possibly five times the price of an uncastrated or female slave of the same perceived quality. A different text in *Nūr al-maʿārif* provides matching information: "The eunuch in most cases and in its majority is between sixty and seventy *wuqīya*, until eighty."[103] Finally, a section on currencies used in the exchange with Ethiopia from a different copy states that "a eunuch can reach 100 *wuqīya*. And some things are for 70 and until 50 or 40. Everything according to its price which is valued in linen/cloth."[104] These statements are consistent with other medieval Islamic sources confirming that eunuchs were significantly more expensive than other slaves.[105] Female and uncastrated male slaves of the same "quality" cost about the same. To quote an uneasy but instructive comparison, *Nūr al-maʿārif* states that Ethiopian mules of high quality sold for ten to eleven, those of medium quality for six to seven and low-quality animals for four to five *wuqīya*. A high-quality mule thus cost about as much as a "low-quality" female or uncastrated male slave; the least desirable slaves were equal in price to two cheap mules. Furthermore, a male slave's ethnicity clearly affected his price. The "good slave" had to be a "pure Ethiopian slave boy" who belonged to one of three well-known ethnic groups or was at least flawless.[106] It is surprising that the ethnicity and/or physical appearance

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102 Anonymous, 1.362. Ethiopian mules were important riding animals for the retinue of the Rasulid sultans.

103 Anonymous, 1.365.

104 Anonymous, 1.360. This passage again confirms that eunuchs were not only bought for money but also bartered in exchange for cloth.

105 See an overview of sources in Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 63. The author states that prices for eunuchs in the Roman and Byzantine empires were four times higher than those for ordinary slaves (301). Toledano reports that eunuchs in the Ottoman empire were also significantly more expensive than other slaves ("The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Heart of Islam," *Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 3 [1984]: 380). The high cost of eunuchs had already been known to Herodot, who noted: "For it is among the barbarians that eunuchs fetch a much higher price than whole men, because they are trustworthy in every respect" (in Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 14).

106 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.362.

of female slaves is not discussed, factors that were considered crucial in deter-mining suitability for sexual slavery.[107] These factors might however have been implicit in the qualitative ranking.

3.4   *Additional Expenses Associated with the Slave Trade to Yemen*

Nūr al-maʿārif also specifies additional costs associated with shipping slaves to Yemen, broken down into taxes, transport charges and provisions. The most detailed passage is the following:

> The additional expenses upon the eunuch are twenty-one dinars. From this, the tithes (*ʿushūr*) in Zabīd are five and a half, and the hire[108] [of the boat] is two dinars or three. The rest are provisions, because he eats meat and butter and is sustained by it. The eunuch can be taxed a little more than that. The tithes of Aden on the eunuch are four and a half. […] The additional expense is the same for all. […]
>
> The additional expenses per male and female slave's head are ten dinars from Ethiopia to Zabīd. The tithes are included in the ten dinars also, and they are three per head, and the rest is provisions for the road.[109]

The first information of interest is the specific mention of Zabīd and Aden as destinations for slaves shipped out of Ethiopia. The predominance of Aden for Rasulid commerce is amply documented. Conversely, the ports of Zabīd changed every few centuries due to a shifting shoreline, and *Nūr al-maʿārif* specifies no port in the Tihāma as entry point for slaves trafficked to Yemen.[110] Extra costs were the same for high-, medium- and low-"quality" slaves. However,

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107   These factors are discussed in Islamic *shurūṭ* manuals. These are collections of legal model contracts which contain a rich vocabulary describing slaves' skin colour (Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 63–81). A Shāfiʿī manual from 10th/16th-century Yemen features a "yellow-coloured Ethiopian *jāriya* of age from Damūt" (Serjeant, "Forms of Plea," 13). Regarding the 19th-century Ethiopian context, Lovejoy has remarked that a "distinction was made between 'red' slaves and 'black' slaves, a difference relating to physical characteristics associated with various ethnic groups. In general, 'red' slave girls were worth more in the export trade, whereas the 'black' slaves, shanqalla, were often retained in Christian Ethiopia, the Galla principalities, or the Muslim towns as menial laborers." *Transformations in Slavery*, 150.

108   *Kirāʾ*. The term's basic meaning is "hire, rental", but in the context of *Nūr al-maʿārif* it usu-ally denotes charges paid for transporting merchandise, usually by boat. The collection includes a number of documents specifying amounts to be paid for transportation from various foreign ports and cities to destinations in Yemen (e.g. *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.107–15, 1.365–6).

109   Anonymous, 1.363.

110   Keall, "Changing Positions of Zabîd's Red Sea Port Sites."

we again find significantly higher expenses associated with trafficking eunuchs compared to other slaves. A later passage from a different source confirms and roughly summarizes the above calculation: "The uncastrated slaves and the female slaves: [the expenses] on them are half that of the eunuchs."[111]
In what follows, the different additional costs shall be examined separately, starting with taxes.

4   Import Taxes

Merchandise imported to Rasulid Yemen was usually charged with three types of state-controlled taxes: *ʿushūr* (tithes), *shawānī* (galley tax) and *dilāla* (broker fee).[112] The *shawānī* was a fee which financed a fleet of armed galleys provided by the Rasulids and their Ayyubid predecessors to ensure the safety of merchant ships heading for Aden.[113] However, it appears that goods arriving from across the Red Sea and those coming from Al-Shiḥr on Yemen's southern Indian Ocean coast were not taxed with *shawānī*, suggesting that these routes were less prone to piracy.[114] Correspondingly, *Nūr al-maʿārif* does not mention this tax in relation to slave trafficking from the Horn of Africa. Another confirmation of this practice comes from Ibn al-Mujāwir's list of customs dues levied in Aden, which shows that no galley tax was paid for the "import" of slaves in the Ayyubid period, with the exception of slaves from Goa.[115] The *dilāla* was the fee paid to a broker (*dallāl*) who acted as intermediary between merchants and the *dīwān* in Aden, as well as between merchants and retailers.[116] Surprisingly, no *dilāla* related to slave "imports" features in *Nūr al-maʿārif*. In Mamluk Egypt, the *dallāl* was a general broker while the *nakhhās* was a broker dealing specifically with slaves and animals. Perhaps a similar role existed in contemporary Yemen but has not been recorded in our sources.

111   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.366.
112   G. Rex Smith, "More on the Port Practices and Taxes of Medieval Aden," *New Arabian Studies* 3 (1996): 211.
113   For information on how the galley system and related taxes were established by the Ayyubids, see G. Rex Smith, "Have You Anything to Declare? Maritime Trade and Commerce in Ayyubid Aden: Practices and Taxes," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 25 (1995): 131.
114   Al-Shamrookh, *Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids in the Yemen*, 244. Smith, "More on the Port Practices and Taxes of Medieval Aden," 212.
115   Al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, 140–1.
116   Al-Shamrookh, *Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids in the Yemen*, 239. See also Robert B. Serjeant, "Ports of Aden and Al-Shihr," in *Studies in Arabian History and Civilization* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981), 223.

The tithes (ʿushūr) were import and export taxes due to be paid to the customhouse (al-furḍa).[117] The term stems from the Arabic root for the number ten and was used in early Islamic lawbooks to denote a tax on land and property.[118] In Yemen, the designation was used for import taxes from at least the Zurayʿid period onwards.[119] Information on the tithes due for different categories of slaves in Aden and Zabīd comes from the text quoted above and from two passages on customs duties in Aden.[120] The numbers given are slightly inconsistent but place the tithes for Ethiopian eunuchs trafficked to Aden at around four dinars, and those for female and uncastrated male slaves at two. This information is consistent with Ibn al-Mujāwir's account from the late Ayyubid period, where slaves of unspecified category (raqīq) were taxed for two dinars, and Goanese slaves for eight.[121] G. Rex Smith's translation of ʿawīlī as Goanese is tentative, but the mention of export taxes for this category of slaves strengthens the assumption that the slaves in question came from India and were therefore first "imported" to Aden and later "re-exported", probably to Egypt. In any case, the import taxes mentioned by Ibn al-Mujāwir closely match the numbers given by Nūr al-maʿārif around sixty years later. Interestingly, Nūr al-maʿārif names Zaylaʿ as an export point not only for Ethiopian slaves but also for those coming from bilād al-zanj.[122] Zanjī slaves and female slaves were taxed a little more than those from Ethiopia (2.25 dinars). Also mentioned is an additional category of zanjī slaves labelled ʿulūj. This is a rare term that I only found in Nūr al-maʿārif which most likely designated particularly strong male slaves.[123] The 9th/15th-century administrative treatise Mulakhkhaṣṣ al-Fiṭan notes that slaves arriving in Aden on a merchant ship from Mogadishu were taxed with two and a half dinars. No ethnonym is mentioned, but given the route taken,

117   A thorough analysis of the taxation practices of the customhouse in Aden in Rasulid times was undertaken by Smith ("Have You Anything to Declare?" and "More on the Port Practices and Taxes of Medieval Aden"). Al-Shamrookh provides useful overview tables (Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids in the Yemen, 259–81, 315–36).

118   T. Sato, "ʿUshr," in Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Edited by Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford E. Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel, Wolfhart P. Heinrichs, 2012. Consulted online on 11.01.2024 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1309).

119   Margariti, Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade, 126.

120   Anonymous, Nūr al-maʿārif, 1.429–1.471.

121   Al-Mujāwir, Tārīkh al-mustabṣir, 140.

122   Anonymous, Nūr al-maʿārif, 1.429.

123   ʿIlj, pl. ʿulūj, means strong or sturdy, but also infidel (Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 2128). In the early Islamic period, the term designated farmers (Elizabeth Urban, "The Early Islamic Mawālī: A Window onto Processes of Identity Construction and Social Change" [PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012], 90).

it can be assumed that they were *zanjī*.[124] The tithes in Zabīd were generally higher than those in Aden: five and a half dinars for eunuchs, and three for female and uncastrated male slaves.

The fact that slaves were taxed suggests that the Rasulids likely did not benefit directly from this line of business,[125] as opposed to the Mamluks, who exempted slave traders, including those operating in the Red Sea, from import taxes.[126] As shall be discussed below, however, the Rasulid court was a major customer for eunuchs and thus had an interest in keeping the slave trade stable. It should be noted that none of the passages in *Nūr al-maʿārif* mention any export tax from Ethiopia. Vallet has argued that local rulers did not dispose of a sufficiently developed administration to collect dues from foreign merchants.[127] An alternative interpretation would be that the authors of *Nūr al-maʿārif* simply did not mention such taxes because they did not pertain directly to Rasulid administrative practices, which constitute the focus of this collection.

5 Transport Charges and Travel Provisions

In the source quote above, the exact breakdown between transport charges and travel provisions is only specified for eunuchs, while information pertaining to other slave categories is given in summary. Nevertheless, it is clear that travel provisions for eunuchs were significantly more expensive. If we assume that the cost of hiring a boat was the same for all categories of slaves, then only three to four dinars would be left to supply regular slaves with food, compared to thirteen to fourteen dinars spent on eunuchs for that purpose. According to the anonymous scribe, the eunuch "eats meat and butter and is sustained by it", which would explain the enormous travel expenses.[128] As will be mentioned below, eunuchs with a stout physique were preferred on the slave markets. Moreover, later sources show that the castration procedure

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124 Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 41. The import of slaves "from Aden and its environs" is also mentioned, with the same amount of taxes due. This passage is unclear, since no other evidence for the enslavement of Yemenis is found in any other source, and it seems illogical that slaves from Aden and nearby regions would be shipped into the port and charged with import tax.

125 Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 415.

126 Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 273. Labīb, *Handelsgeschichte Ägyptens*, 85.

127 Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 416.

128 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.362.

caused severe physical harm, and that many did not survive this mutilation.[129] From the perspective of slave buyers, it thus made sense to put meat on the bones of newly castrated boys, both to increase their chances of surviving the arduous journey across land and sea and to increase their selling price.

Nūr al-maʿārif reveals that in the 7th/13th-century Red Sea region, merchants transported their wares on rented boats owned by small-scale boat owners.[130] The almanac of Sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar (r. 694–6/1295–6) records the departure of ships bound for Zaylaʿ in mid-October, stating: "Their sailing is not restrained, nor is their arrival broken off, as they sail from Aden to Zaylaʿ on the *azyab* [southern] wind."[131] In the year 730/1330, this passage took Ibn Baṭṭūṭa four days.[132] The transport charge (*kirāʾ*) was fixed according to the route taken, and the sea voyage from Zaylaʿ to Yemen cost two to three dinars per individual eunuch. We can assume that the boat charge was the same for all enslaved passengers. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the transport costs for mules on the same route amounted to four to five dinars – almost double the price for eunuchs, suggesting that the boat charges were determined by volume and perhaps weight.[133]

The second source in *Nūr al-maʿārif* dealing with slave trading discusses overland transportation costs, both in Ethiopia and in Yemen. The first passage reads:

> The additional expenses on the Ethiopian eunuch and the *zanjī* eunuch from Ethiopia to Zaylaʿ, the hire [of transportation] is three *wuqīya*, apart from his provisions and his food, and [what is] for the *nazīl* in Ethiopia.[134]

While the boat charges above are given in dinars, the charge for overland transport is quoted in *wuqīya*. One *wuqīya* was equivalent to twelve dirhams.

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129   Jan Hogendorn, "The Hideous Trade: Economic Aspects of the 'Manufacture' and Sale of Eunuchs." *Paideuma* 45 (1999): 137–60.

130   Eric Vallet has traced this practice with respect to merchants active between Yemen and the Hijāz (Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 426–33).

131   Daniel M. Varisco, *Medieval Agriculture and Islamic Science: The Almanac of a Yemeni Sultan*, Publications on the Near East 6 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 24.

132   Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, II.373.

133   The dimensions of medieval Ethiopian mules are difficult to estimate, as contemporary mules come in varying sizes and weights.

134   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.365. The passage goes on to state: "The tax *jibāʾ* is normally two dinars and a quarter, and six *fulūs*." Since *jibāʾ* was a general term for taxes, the reference is unclear. However, regarding the next item discussed (*anṭāʿ* – leather carpets), it is specified that the *jibāʾ* was due at the customshouse in Aden.

Therefore, the overland transportation from an unspecified location in Ethiopia to the port of Zaylaʿ amounted to thirty-six dirhams (i.e. nine dinars). It is interesting that the source so confidently quotes a fixed price without specifying the departure point inland. This might indicate the existence of a well-known slave trading hub, possibly at the foothills of Ethiopia's central highlands, where slaves changed hands before they were taken on a final leg of overland travel towards Zaylaʿ. It is hoped that a recent increase in scholarship on the history of slavery in Ethiopia will provide further insights in the near future.[135]

The section then proceeds to mention seven Yemeni locations that linked Aden to Taʿizz, one of the two capitals of the Rasulid sultanate.[136] The cost of transporting slaves along each of the eight (presumably one-day) travel segments ranged between one and two dinars, totalling ten dinars. While the existence of slave markets in Aden and Zabīd is documented by Ibn al-Mujāwir's account and pictorial evidence (see the section "Sale on the public market" below), we do not know whether Taʿizz was also a slave trading centre. Given Aden's unrivalled position as Yemen's main trading hub, it is more likely that slaves entering the country through this port were sold directly after their arrival, while only those slaves chosen for government service were taken onwards to Taʿizz. Slaves working for the Rasulids in their second capital Zabīd were probably sourced from the shipments arriving at the city's own Red Sea ports. Only once is one of these ports mentioned by name in relation to slave "imports": the *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan* notes that female and male slaves entered Yemen via the "port of al-Buqʿah, belonging to Zabīd the protected".[137]

The passage also reveals that Zaylaʿ was not only a shipping point for Ethiopian but also for *zanjī* eunuchs. This is surprising given that *zanjī* slaves were also trafficked to Yemen from ports of *bilād al-zanj* such as Mogadishu (see below). However, the label *zanjī* was not a clearly defined ethnonym pointing to an exact geographical region,[138] and it is therefore possible that some eunuchs categorized as such actually came from regions closer to Zaylaʿ than to Mogadishu. Since Zaylaʿ was an important departure point for caravans

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135   The *Journal of Northeast African* studies published a special issue on slavery in Ethiopia in 2017. For an overview of the research field, see the introduction (Giulia Bonacci and Alexander Meckelburg, "Revisiting Slavery and the Slave Trade in Ethiopia," ed. Lee V. Cassanelli, *Northeast African Studies* 17, no. 2 [2017]: 5–30).

136   Muḥayn, Qaṣr Munīf, As-Samdān, Ḥuṣn as-Sawaʾ, An-Nashama, As-Ṣīna and the descent into Taʿizz country (anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.365–6).

137   Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 40.

138   G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville and A. Popovic, "Al-Zandj," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012.

and mule transports between the coast and the African hinterland,[139] it
might have been more convenient for slave traders to traffick them via Zaylaʿ.
Alternatively, given the existence of "castration centres" in Ethiopia (see
chapter 4), it is possible that *zanjī* slave boys were sent there to be castrated
and were then brought to Zaylaʿ together with their Ethiopian peers before
departing to Yemen. Unfortunately, our evidence is too scant to offer a conclu-
sive answer.

Finally, the source quote above also mentions an expense paid to the *nazīl*
and later specifies: "For the *nazīl*, per head one dinar and a quarter."[140] The
document goes on to describe the role of this figure in Yemeni–Ethiopian trade
relations:

> That *nazīl* is a man from those of high rank in Ethiopia. The merchant
> (*tājir*) relies on him to keep unlawful charges and deviation from him.
> He takes from him this specific amount of the articles, on account of his
> great prestige.[141]

From this characterization, it is clear that the *nazīl* was a local intermedi-
ary whose rank and connections enabled him to establish links between
Yemeni and Ethiopian merchants and to guarantee the proper execution of
transactions. In return for his services, he obtained a commission. His role was
not confined to the trade in slaves; indeed, the same passage also mentions the
commission due to the *nazīl* for facilitating the commerce of ivory, honey and
other products. Unfortunately, both the function of the *nazīl* and the profiles
of the other merchants involved in the slave trade between East Africa and
Yemen remain elusive. Vallet has noted that this lacuna extends to merchants
active in Yemeni–Ethiopian commerce in general. His research suggests that
some of them must have been occasional traders passing through, while other
Yemenis, among them Ḥaḍramī traders, settled in Zaylaʿ or in other African
entrepôts for longer periods of time.[142] The passages related to slave trading in
Nūr al-maʿārif suggest that African merchants handled the overland trade and
transport of slaves up until Zaylaʿ, where they were consigned into the hands of
Yemenis who undertook the shipment to Yemen, Yemeni overland travel and
onward sale to Yemeni owners. This hypothesis can be deduced from the fact
that prices paid for slaves in Ethiopia, overland transport charges in Ethiopia

139   Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 415.
140   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.366.
141   Anonymous, I.366–7.
142   Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 414.

and fees for the *nazīl* are quoted in *wuqīya* while boat charges and provisions for the passage to Yemen, as well as overland travel costs in Yemen, are quoted in dinars. As previously mentioned, Ethiopian merchants only accepted silver dirhams as payment (measured by weight in *wuqīya*), while gold dinars were standard for business transactions in Yemen. In this context, a group known as Jabartī further elucidate the analysis. The term has been used by medieval Arab writers to denote Muslim inhabitants of the Horn of Africa.[143] Al-Janadī has noted that Yemenis call most "Black people (*al-Sūdān*)" coming from Ethiopia Jabartī, while slaves are called Ḥabashī.[144] Generally, however, the term Jabartī was used not to distinguish free men from slaves but Muslims from Christians and "unbelievers", who were called Ḥabashī.[145] Since Arab merchants in East Africa tended to do business with local Muslim merchants, the designation *Jabartī* appears to have become a shorthand for Muslim merchants from the Horn of Africa. For example, al-Khazrajī's biographical collection features a number of individuals bearing this *nisba*,[146] and his chronicle mentions a mosque in Zabīd called Masjid al-Jabartī.[147] In the 11th/17th and 12th/18th centuries, traders known as *Jabartī* controlled most of the slave trade in Ethiopia.[148] In 1966, Robert B. Serjeant described a minority population of African descent known as Jabart/Gabart who worked as scavengers in Aden and were famed as musicians but also feared for the magic they purportedly practised.[149]

As has been shown, *Nūr al-maʿārif* richly documents the slave trading networks that connected Ethiopia via Zaylaʿ to Aden and Zabīd. It offers unique information on categories of slaves and their prices, as well as on import taxes and travel expenses both overland and across the Red Sea. However, the source remains silent on other routes that might have led slaves to Yemen in the late 7th/13th century. This lacuna is particularly obvious regarding the Dahlak archipelago which was clearly involved in the slave trade in earlier centuries and whose importance as a commercial hub only declined in the 9th/15th century.[150] It is possible that the rise of Zaylaʿ in the 9th/13th century meant that by the time *Nūr al-maʿārif* was compiled in the 890s/1290s, the port had eclipsed the

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143   Haggai Erlich, "Jabarti," in Fleet, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*.

144   Al-Janadī, Al-Ṣulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa al-mulūk, II.111.

145   Erlich, "Jabarti."

146   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*.

147   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.214.

148   Lovejoy, Transformations in Slavery, 92.

149   Robert B. Serjeant, "South Arabia and Ethiopia: African Elements in the South Arabian Population," in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa: n.p., 1966).

150   Derat, "Chrétiens et Musulmans d'Ethiopie," 142.

Dahlak archipelago as the main trading hub of slaves destined for Yemen. Another surprising gap in the source concerns slave exports from *bilād al-zanj*. Evidence on the medieval maritime trade between Yemen and the East African coast from Somalia southwards is generally scarce. However, Mogadishu had been one of Aden's primary trading partners since the early 6th/12th century and is the only East African city mentioned regularly in 7th/13th-century Yemeni sources as entertaining links to Aden, Al-Shiḥr and nearby ports.[151] Ibn al-Mujāwir traces a detailed route taken by Arab traders along the East African coast, each step constituting one naval season (*mawsim*): from Aden to Mogadishu (*Maqdishū*), from Mogadishu to the island of Kilwa, and from Kilwa to al-Qumr, a collective term for Madagascar and the Comoros.[152] Almanacs from the Rasulid period discuss the sailing season from Aden to Mogadishu and back. The almanac of Sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar records the arrival of ships from Mogadishu in Aden and the departure of ships bound for Mogadishu from Aden. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa relates that the voyage from Zaylaʿ to Mogadishu took fourteen days.[153] Hence, with an overnight stop in Zaylaʿ, Mogadishu could be reached from Aden within fifteen days. The Rasulid book of fiscal revenues from the late 7th/13th century known as *Irtifāʿ al-dawla al-muʾayyadiyya* attests to commerce between Mogadishu and Al-Shiḥr both in the text and on one of its maps.[154] It is likely that Mogadishu also served as an entrepôt for goods originating in regions farther south and in the African hinterland. The port would have been an obvious export hub for *zanjī* slaves, but as has been shown, *Nūr al-maʿārif* only contains the information that *zanjī* eunuchs were transported overland to Zaylaʿ, from where they were shipped across the Red Sea to Yemen.[155] To my knowledge, the only evidence for the direct trafficking of slaves from *bilād al-zanj* to Yemen comes from the 9th/15-century *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan* which features slaves arriving in Aden on merchant ships from Mogadishu.[156]

The port of ʿAydhāb, of chief importance for trade relations between Rasulid Yemen and Egypt, could not be directly linked to the slave trade across the Red Sea into Yemen. It is however well known that the region between ʿAydhāb and Aswan constituted one of the most important slave reservoirs for the Egyptian market between the 5th/11th and 7th/13th centuries.[157] The presence of Nubian

151   Varisco, Medieval Agriculture and Islamic Science, 222. Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 558.

152   Al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, 117.

153   Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, II.373.

154   Anonymous, *Irtifāʿ al-dawla al-muʾayyadiyya*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Jāzim (Ṣanʿāʾ: Al-maʿhad al-faransī li-l-thār wa-l-ʿulūm al-ijtimāʿiyya bi-Ṣanʿāʾ, 2008), 132, 133.

155   Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 41.

156   Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 41.

157   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 214.

slaves in Yemen is only strongly attested during the 4th/10th century (see above); however, it is quite likely that slaves from this region were at least occasionally added to Yemeni mixed-cargo ships landing at ʿAydhāb.

Moving on to the South Arabian coast, *Nūr al-maʿārif* does not assign any slave trading role to the bustling commercial towns of Al-Shiḥr and Ẓafār (also known as Dhofar). Al-Shiḥr, which had been the biggest port of the Ḥaḍramawt[158] until the 13th/19th century and an ancient centre of the incense trade, is rather poorly documented in medieval sources overall. Serjeant notes that it was probably controlled by the Ziyadids until the late 4th/10th century and then fell under the reign of the Banū Maʿn who were vassals of the Sulayhids.[159] The port is rarely mentioned in Rasulid times, and *Nūr al-maʿārif* offers no information on slave trading activity there. However, the early 9th/15-century administrative treatise *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan* reports that enslaved Indian dancing girls (*jawār raqassāt hunūd*) were sent as gifts from Al-Shiḥr to the Rasulid sovereign.[160] Furthermore, archaeological research in Sharma, a port east of Al-Shiḥr, brought to light an important transit point in the commerce between India and East Africa that was active from the late 4th/10th to the mid-6th/12th century. Large amounts of African pottery were found at the site, which might indicate that African slaves were either brought there before their onward journey to India or settled in Sharma itself and produced pottery there.[161] Ẓafār, an ancient city on the Indian Ocean coast of today's Oman, was taken over by the Rasulids in 677/1278 and was thus under the dynasty's direct control when *Nūr al-maʿārif* was compiled.[162] The port is mentioned frequently in this source but without any reference to slave trading. According to *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, however, enslaved Indian singing girls (*jawār hunūd maghānī*) were sent from Ẓafār as gifts to the Rasulid sultan.[163] It thus appears that the ports on Yemen's southern coast served as transhipment points for slaves from India. Unfortunately, despite containing rich information

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158 The Ḥaḍramawt is a region in today's south-east Yemen, consisting of a narrow plain on the Indian Ocean coast and a high arid plateau interspersed by inhabited wadis.

159 Robert B. Serjeant, "Al-S̲h̲iḥr," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012.

160 Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 40.

161 Axelle Rougeulle, ed., *Sharma: un entrepôt de commerce medieval sur la côte du Ḥaḍramawt (Yémen, ca. 980–1180)*, British Foundation for the Study of Arabia monographs (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 476.

162 Robert B. Serjeant, "Ẓafār," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012 The town had been controlled by the Ḥabūḍi family from Ḥaḍramawt since the early 7th/13th century; Yemeni sources often refer to it as Ẓafār al-Ḥabūḍī.

163 Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 40.

on commercial relations with India in general, *Nūr al-maʿārif* does not offer any clues about the shipping of Indian slaves into Rasulid Yemen.

6   Trade Procedures in Yemen

After having been transported overland to Zaylaʿ, sold to merchants and taken over the Red Sea, African slaves finally arrived on Yemeni soil. Here, they had to endure selection and sale procedures and possibly further overland travel before arriving at the unknown household or palace they would serve in. *Nūr al-maʿārif* also proves to be a valuable source on slave trading within Yemen, revealing that the Rasulid state not only benefitted by charging import taxes on slaves but also secured the best individuals for itself through a preselection process.

6.1   *Selection by the Rasulid Administration*

A passage from *Nūr al-maʿārif* describes the arrival of slave shipments at the port of Aden and reveals how the Rasulid state intervened even before their sale had begun. The passage begins abruptly, as it is preceded by a gap in the manuscript:

> [...] that every boat arrives. The import of slaves[164] is displayed, and the good eunuchs (*khuddām*) are chosen from it, all of them heavyset.[165] And the good enslaved girls (*jawārī*), if they are needed. Concerning the eunuchs, from them is chosen what is suitable without hesitation, and they are bought for the *dīwān*,[166] dressed, and handed over to the commanding eunuch. When a dispute is feared between the eunuch and his owner in Aden and a sale becomes agreeable, and he is suitable, he is bought for the *dīwān*. And when someone offers his eunuch for sale and he is suitable, he is also bought for the *dīwān*. Or if [the eunuch] desires the market and his lord brings him out, the *dīwān* is informed that he is suitable, and he is

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164   Instead of "al-jalb al-raqīq", I chose to read the correct genitive construction "jalb al-raqīq", meaning "the import of slaves". *Raqīq* is generally a collective term for slaves but can also be an adjective which, referring to humans, signifies "weak, abject, mean, paltry, contemptible, soft" (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 1131). The literal translation would thus be "the abject import", but despite the grammatical inaccuracy, the basic meaning of *raqīq* here seems more plausible.

165   This is a tentative translation of the rather unclear phrase "kull ghalīẓ al-qiṭʿa" (Lane, 2338). I thank Stephan Procházka for his suggestion of this interpretation.

166   *Dīwān* usually designates a specific government bureau but can also, as is the case here, stand for the Rasulid civil service as a whole (Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/ Fifteenth Century Yemen," 230).

taken. Even if his lord is not interested in selling him, he does not return to him at all, but is bought for the *dīwān*, God-willing, the exalted.[167]

This passage clearly shows that the Rasulid administration reserved for itself the right to lay claim to the most desirable eunuchs and female slaves who arrived in Yemen.[168] Another passage from *Nūr al-maʿārif* illustrates how the government controlled slave trafficking into Yemen during the Rasulid period:

> The secretary of arrivals (*kātib al-wūṣūlāt*): He writes to the heads of the customshouse (*mashāʾikh al-furḍa*) accounts on the slaves (*al-raqīq*), month by month, so that it is known who died, who is absent, who is desired and who is let go, to satisfy the lords of the palace who call them to account.[169]

Similar evidence comes from a Rasulid administrative treaty written in the early 9th/15th century:

> When slaves arrive from the sea or from the *Bāb* [*al-Mandab*],[170] the officers of the coast (*ʿurafāʾ al-sāhil*) bring them first to the governor and then to the overseer (*al-nāẓir*).[171] The latter is the one who chooses those suitable for the felicitous government bureau as servants etc. The authority for this lies with the overseer. He lets go[172] none after that except by royal order.[173]

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167 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.494.

168 Similarly, the Rasulids chose the best horses imported to Yemen for themselves before all others became available for sale (Daniel Mahoney, "The Role of Horses in the Politics of Late Medieval South Arabia," *Arabian Humanities*, no. 8 [2017]: online (https://journals .openedition.org/cy/3287. Consulted on 08.01.2024.

169 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.514. The last part of this passage ("who is desired", etc.) is not clear, and I translated it rather freely. Lane gives the meaning of *muḥāsaba* as "the reckoning with/calling to account" (*Arabic–English Lexicon*, 565).

170 *Min al-baḥr aw min al-bāb*, i. e. from the Indian Ocean or the Bāb al-Mandab, the strait between the Arabian peninsula and the Horn of Africa connecting the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea.

171 My translation of this term follows Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen," 231.

172 Smith's translation reads: "He sets free none after that except by royal order", which could be read to mean that the overseer freed slaves. However, the verb used for manumitting slaves is usually *ʿ-t-q*. In line with the preceding passage from *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I interpret this sentence as meaning that no slave could be sold until it had been established that they were not required for government service, and therefore made a slight change to Smith's translation.

173 Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 65. Similarly, sheep imported from Somalia were kept in a pen near the customshouse until Rasulid officials had selected the best animals for the *dīwān*.

As soon as slaves reached Yemeni territory, they were inspected by Rasulid offi-
cials. Unlike the previous source passage, no slave categories are mentioned
here, raising the question whether the Rasulid administration took a prese-
lection of all categories of slaves – eunuchs, female and uncastrated male
slaves – or whether the focus lay on eunuchs and female slaves who were per-
haps harder to come by or more sought-after. Given the prominent roles of
some eunuchs and female slaves as close confidants and sexual partners of
the Rasulid elite, it is likely they had to meet far stricter selection criteria than
slaves who performed menial tasks. Slave traders could only proceed to sell-
ing their slaves on the regular market after a royal order had exempted them
from government service. The first source passage indicates that the state did
not simply confiscate the slaves it had chosen but paid for them. This practice
again proves that the Rasulids were not directly involved in the slave trade but
benefitted from it indirectly by exacting taxes from their import and laying
claim to the most desirable individuals.

The first source quote above further suggests that the administration also
acquired eunuchs at a later stage, for example if they had conflicts with their
owners, were sold or wished to change owners. This statement is corroborated
by anecdotes related by al-Khazrajī in which slaves abandoned their owners
and joined the service of the Rasulid court. These stories also suggest a remark-
able degree of autonomy possessed by individual eunuchs.[174]

Taken together, these strategies suggest that in the Rasulid era, the government
was the main purchaser of eunuchs in Yemen and maintained the practice of
selecting the best newly arrived slaves for itself for the whole duration of its rule.
It is interesting to compare this evidence with data from the Mamluk era, where
the sultans actively interfered in slave trading to Egypt, acquiring a large portion
of all arriving slaves, both from independent slave traders and from agents they
commissioned with funds from the state treasury. Similar to the Rasulid practice
just described, independent merchants were urged to sell their best slaves to the
Mamluk sultan before offering all others on the free market.[175]

Another question raised by the sources is whether slaves were transported
on specialized ships or added to mixed-cargo vessels. The above descriptions
of routine pre-selections of slaves by the Rasulid administration imply that
they arrived in numbers high enough to enable the Rasulid administration to
choose the best candidates for government service, but evidence discussed
above reveals that slaves were taken over the Red Sea in small boats. The
Geniza documents usually discuss the sale and shipments of individual slaves,

174   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, Uqud II.205, II.238.
175   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 243ff.

with the notable exception of a wholesale shipment of slaves from *bilād al-zanj* to Yemen mentioned in a 6th/12th-century letter from Aden.[176] Evidence from Mamluk Egypt shows that slaves usually arrived on mixed-cargo ships; only very few Italian and Egyptian traders were solely specialized in slaves and trafficked larger numbers.[177] A Ḥaḍramī chronicle from the early 10th/16th century mentions a Portuguese ship intercepting a slave cargo.[178] The question of whether the transportation of slaves to Yemen in the medieval period occurred in small numbers or in bulk can therefore not be answered conclusively at this point.

6.2   *Sale on the Public Market*

After having undergone an examination and selection process by Rasulid officials, those slaves who were not chosen had to face prospective buyers in a public market. Ibn al-Mujāwir left a graphic description of the degrading sale procedure awaiting female slaves in such a venue:

> **Selling slave girls.** The slave girl is fumigated with an aromatic smoke, perfumed, adorned and a waist-wrapper fastened round her middle. The seller[179] takes her by the hand and walks around the souk with her; he calls out that she is for sale. The wicked merchants appear, examining her hands, feet, calves, thighs, navel, chest and breasts. He examines her back and measures her buttocks in spans. He examines her tongue, teeth, hair and spares no effort. If she is wearing clothes, he takes them off; he examines and looks. Finally, he casts a direct eye over her vagina and anus, without her having on any covering or veil. When he has examined, expressed his approval and bought the slave girl, she remains with him for about ten days. When he has taken care of her, had his fill, become bored and tired of her and got what he wanted from her, his lust is at an end. Zayd, the buyer, says to ʿAmr, the vendor, "Indeed, sir, we have a case to settle in court!" So they attend in front of the judge and one makes a claim against the other, [suggesting there is] a defect [in the slave girl].[180]

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176   Goitein and Friedman, India Traders of the Middle Ages, 453.

177   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 217, 231.

178   Serjeant, *Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast*, 66.

179   The *munādī* (literally "someone who calls out") is known from Mamluk sources as the public crier announcing the sale of slaves (Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 301).

180   Al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, 145 (translation G. Rex Smith).

Although Ibn al-Mujāwir had a taste for scandalous tales and exaggeration,[181] the level of detail in his description suggests that he had indeed witnessed the sale of a female slave in Aden. While slave trading is not mentioned in the Qurʾān,[182] legal guidelines on the sale and acquisition of slaves formed part of a broader set of rules pertaining to sale and barter in general.[183] According to medieval Islamic law, a sale was only valid after the buyer had inspected the goods, understood their value and agreed to buy them. The inspection of slaves before their sale was thus standard procedure, as two genres of Mamluk manuals vividly illustrate: slave buying manuals written by doctors advised prospective buyers on how to examine slaves and assess their physical and intellectual qualities, and *ḥisba* manuals served as guidelines for market inspectors whose role was to uphold Islamic legal and moral principles in the marketplace. Hannah Barker has noted that "[s]lave-buying manuals contradicted *ḥisba* manuals by advising slave buyers to inspect the shame zones of both male and female slaves publicly".[184] Ibn al-Mujāwir's description thus matches the advice given by slave-buying manuals but contradicts *ḥisba* manuals that forbade the public examination of an enslaved woman's private parts and only allowed a closed-door inspection by the prospective buyer if another woman was present.[185] Female slaves' potential to serve as sex workers and bear children impacted their economic value. As Shaun Marmon has noted, this is visible by the formula of manumission for female slaves which literally translates to "your sexual organ is free" (*farjuki ḥurrun*).[186] An enslaved woman's or girl's virginity and breastfeeding capacities further augmented her price. The disregard of Islamic legal rules pertaining to the examinations of female slaves noted by Ibn al-Mujāwir seems to have been common.[187] Barker has pointed

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181   G. Rex Smith, "Ibn Al-Mujāwir's 7th/13th-Century Arabia: The Wondrous and Humorous," in *A Miscellany of Middle Eastern Articles: In Memoriam Thomas Muir Johnstone 1924–83* (Harlow: Longman, 1988).

182   Bernard K. Freamon, Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 146.

183   Hans Müller, Die Kunst des Sklavenkaufs: Nach arabischen, persischen und türkischen Ratgebern vom 10. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 57 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Schwarz, 1980).

184   Hannah Barker, "Purchasing a Slave in Fourteenth-Century Cairo: Ibn al-Akfānī's Book of Observation and Inspection in the Examination of Slaves," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 19 (2016): 12.

185   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 315.

186   Slavery in the Islamic Middle East, 4.

187   For example, the Swiss traveller Felix Fabri witnessed the public examination of both male and female slaves' genitals on the slave market of Alexandria in the late 9th/15th century. Cited in Barker, "Purchasing a Slave in Fourteenth-Century Cairo," 14–15.

out that "[t]he disrespect with which the bodies of slaves, especially women, were treated in the marketplace was all the more humiliating because it was expressed publicly and witnessed by an audience".[188] Islamic legal scholars recognized the humanity and legal capacity of slaves but placed them in the same category as cattle when it came to their sale and acquisition.[189] The moment of sale marked the point in the life of enslaved persons when they were primarily seen as commodities to be bought and sold, and their humanity was suppressed through humiliation and coercion.

Ibn al-Mujāwir's account alludes to another principle of Islamic law pertaining to the slave trade, namely the right to annul the acquisition of an enslaved person due to a defect undisclosed by the seller.[190] The buyer in Ibn al-Mujāwir's account attempts to misuse this right in order to return the enslaved girl after a short period of time. The author does not reveal how this particular story ended but goes on to recount how an acquaintance of his had sold an enslaved Indian girl in Aden to a man from Alexandria, who kept her for seven days and then claimed that she had a defect, namely "a wide and soft vagina". He was derided in court and his case dismissed.[191]

A rare final piece of evidence on the sale of enslaved individuals in medieval Yemen is an image found in a manuscript of the famous collection of short stories known as *Maqāmāt* by the Basran poet Abū Muhammad al-Qāsim al-Harīrī (d. 516/1122). This manuscript was probably copied and illustrated in Baghdad in 634/1237 by a certain Yahyā b. Maḥmūd al-Wāsitī, and is now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.[192] In one story, the narrator al-Ḥārith arrives in Zabīd with his enslaved attendant, who suddenly dies. The first illustration shows al-Ḥārith mourning at the deathbed of his slave, whom he had trained from a young age "until he had perfected his right conduct, and he was fully familiar with my ways, and knew how to draw forth my goodwill, so as not to over-step my intentions, nor

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188   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 307. Yusuf Rāgib has translated sales receipts concerning slaves from 10th- to 11th-century Egypt which contain detailed information on the individuals' bodies that imply a thorough and degrading physical examination prior to the transaction (Yusuf Rāgib, *Actes de Vente d'esclaves et d'animaux d'Égypte médiévale* [Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2002]).

189   Cristina de la Puente, "Slaves in Al-Andalus Through Maliki Watha'iq Works (4th–6th Centuries H/10th–12th Centuries CE): Marriages and Slavery as Factors of Social Categorisation," *Annales Islamiques* (*Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*) 42 (2008): 193.

190   Al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn*, 220–3.

191   Al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, 146.

192   David J. Roxburgh, "In Pursuit of Shadows: Al-Hariri's Maqamat," *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* 30 (2013): 172.

to be remiss in [carrying out] my wishes".[193] Al-Ḥārith then visits the slave market (*sūq al-raqīq*) of Zabīd, where a muffled trader sells him a beautiful young man whom he then discovers to be the son of the *Maqāmāt*'s protagonist Abū Zayd, an astute rogue who outwits him at every turn. The story ends with a judge declaring the sale to be void.

This anecdote is illustrated by a beautiful miniature (see figure 1 below). It features Abū Zayd disguised as slave trader, offering his son for sale (bottom left corner), three men appearing to be of African origin, a barely visible figure in the background and a potential buyer, probably the narrator (bottom right corner).[194] The clothes worn by the Africans are described later in the text as garments in which slaves were displayed (*mi'rad*),[195] confirming the men's enslaved state. The upper register depicts two men weighing coins and seemingly bargaining, and another man to the left. As Lamia Balafrej has recently argued, *Maqāmāt* illustrations often feature dark- and light-skinned slaves as oppositional figures at the margins, the former usually performing menial tasks and the latter engaged in speech or social interaction, thereby underlining a racialized social hierarchy among the enslaved. The example below, however, breaks with this tradition by depicting three enslaved Black men at the very centre of the miniature, with at least one of them speaking.[196] The story and related illustration primarily confirm that in early 6th/12th-century Baghdad, Zabīd was known to (or at least thought to) host a slave market, and that around 120 years later, the illustrator imagined most of the slaves for sale there to be Black, in contrast to al-Ḥārith's deceased slave whom he depicts as light-skinned. On a more subtle level, al-Ḥārith's despair over the death of his slave and the emphasis on the beauty of the newly acquired slave suggest that despite a prohibition by Islamic law, male owners sometimes felt desire and affection for their male slaves.

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193 Francis J. Steingass, *The Assemblies of Hariri, English Text* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1989), 63.

194 For a full interpretation of the illustration, see Oleg Grabar, *The Illustrations of the Maqamat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 84. Shirley Guthrie has used the *Maqāmāt*'s text and illustrations to characterize daily life in Islamic cities ("Everyday Life in the Near East: The Evidence of the 7th/13th-Century Illustrations of Al-Hariri's Maqamat" [PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1991]).

195 Francis J. Steingass, *The Assemblies of Hariri* (London: Sampson Low, 1897), 283.

196 Lamia Balafrej, "Domestic Slavery, Skin Colour, and Image Dialectic in Thirteenth-Century Arabic Manuscripts," *Art History* 44, no. 5 (2021): 1023.

FIGURE 1   Al-Ḥārith at the slave market of Zabīd
MAQĀMĀT OF ABŪ MUHAMMAD AL-QĀSIM AL-ḤARĪRĪ, COPIED AND
ILLUSTRATED BY YAḤYĀ B. MAḤMŪD AL-WĀSIṬĪ, BAGHDAD (?), IRAQ, DATED
634/1237. PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, MS. ARABE 5847,
FOLIO 105. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

7   Conclusion

Evidence from *Nūr al-maʿārif* and other Yemeni sources has allowed us to reconstruct the slave trade between East Africa and Yemen in the Rasulid era in significant detail. It has been established that slaves were captured or bought in the Ethiopian hinterland and transported by Ethiopian traders along commercial routes to Zaylaʿ. There, they were sold to Yemeni merchants with the help of an Ethiopian middleman known as a *nazīl*. Prices depended on the category of slave – eunuch, female or uncastrated male slave – and on their perceived "quality", which in turn was impacted by their origin. Yemeni traders then shipped slaves on small boats to Aden and the ports of Zabīd, where they underwent an inspection by Rasulid officials. Some were selected for government service and taken to Taʿizz, while all others were sold on the public slave market. In addition to the expenses of acquiring slaves in Ethiopia, Yemeni traders also had to pay the *nazīl*, transportation costs and travel provisions, as well as import taxes.

Meillassoux has noted that "[c]apture and the slave trade set in motion a process through which the captive was rendered extraneous and thus prepared for his or her state as absolute alien in the society into which he or she was delivered".[197] The prosaic commercial language of the sources further contributes to reducing the slaves caught up in this trade to mere merchandise that was rated by quality, exported and sold. Occasional phrasings however throw into sharp relief the humanity of enslaved individuals, such as the mention of "an Ethiopian slave, Black, of pure colour, his length about six spans of the hand [around 137 centimetres] and his age about 10 years" in a plea form from 10th/16th-century al-Shiḥr.[198] It is thus instructive to briefly abandon the perspective of merchants and government officials recorded in our sources and attempt to trace the experience of an enslaved person such as this unnamed ten-year-old Ethiopian boy. The dynamics leading to his enslavement are unknown, but its full tragedy probably first revealed itself to him when he was separated from his family and home and found himself under the authority of an unknown trader, perhaps in the company of other recently enslaved individuals. If he was destined to become a eunuch, he would have been taken to a castration centre and forced to undergo an excruciating and highly dangerous amputation of his external genital organs.[199] Assuming he

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197   Meillassoux, Anthropology of Slavery, 67.

198   Serjeant, "Forms of Plea," 6.

199   Although different forms of castration were practised throughout Islamic history, with the removal of the testicles having been the mildest form, Ayalon has concluded that full castration – the removal of penis and scrotum – was most common. *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 314.

was among the few who survived this procedure, he was then taken on an over-land journey through Ethiopia, likely on foot as part of a larger caravan. Every day, the languages and landscape around him became increasingly foreign, and one wonders whether he understood the fate awaiting him. Perhaps he was sold on to different traders in marketplaces along the way. Eventually, he reached the sea and the port of Zaylaʿ. There, he was likely brought to a slave market where he stood amid other slaves to be inspected by Yemeni traders. When a deal was struck, he was brought on to a small boat and taken out to sea, probably for the first time in his life. After a journey of around four days on the Red Sea's unpredictable waters, he reached the shore of an unknown country. Again, he was rounded up with other slaves and inspected by unknown men, until one of them took him along – either to the next public slave market to yet again face the gaze of strangers, or on another overland journey. At the end of this ordeal stood the arrival at an unknown household or court which would become the boy's home and workplace for an unforeseeable time. By now, he could indeed be characterized as "absolute alien" in Meillassoux's parlance. Unable to speak Arabic and unfamiliar with local circumstances, he nevertheless had to learn quickly how to navigate the microcosm of his owner's extended household or court and perform the duties assigned to him. Thus ended his slave trading ordeal and began his new life as a household or court slave.

Eunuchs

Royal courts in a broad range of temporal and geographical settings relied on the work of eunuchs.[1] The Assyrian queen Semiramis is often credited with founding the eunuch institution, and the ancient Egyptians appear to have castrated their prisoners.[2] Eunuchs are mentioned in the Old Testament,[3] were well established in the Roman emperor's entourage from the 4th century CE onwards[4] and had become key political and religious figures in Byzantium by the 7th century CE.[5]

Their role in premodern Islamic polities has drawn significant scholarly attention, and a number of major works have been published since the 1970s. Ayalon's in-depth study of eunuchs at the Mamluk court of Egypt, published in 1977,[6] was followed in 1999 by a broader work on the role of eunuchs in Islamic societies from their introduction at the Abbasid court to the 10th/16th century.[7] The publication in 1984 of Ehud Toledano's work on African eunuchs at the Ottoman court was another milestone in the study of eunuchs in Islamic societies.[8] Shaun Marmon's case study of the eunuchs who guarded the Prophet's tomb in Medina from the 6th/12th century onwards focused on their role as mediators of societal and sacred boundaries.[9] In 2003, Cristina de la Puente

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1   See for example Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*, SUNY Series in Chinese Local Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); Shaun Tougher and Raʿanan S. Boustan, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, 1st ed. (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002); A. Kirk Grayson, "Eunuchs in Power. Their Role in the Assyrian Bureaucracy," In *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament*. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1995; Walter Stevenson, "The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity," Journal of the History of Sexuality 5, no. 4 (1995): 495–511; Ringrose, Perfect Servant. A good overview is provided by Michael Goodich et al., "Eunuchs and Castrati: A Cultural History," American Historical Review 106, no. 5 (2001): 1750–51.

2   Otto Meinardus, "The Upper Egyptian Practice of the Making of Eunuchs in the XVIIIth and XIXth Century," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 94, no. 1 (1969): 48. Grayson, "Eunuchs in Power."

3   Deuteronomium 23:1, see Stevenson, "Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity," 498.

4   For a detailed description of slavery in the Roman empire, including the institution of eunuchs, see Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

5   Ringrose, *Perfect Servant*.

6   David Ayalon, *The Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1977).

7   Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*.

8   Toledano, "Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul."

9   Shaun E. Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

filled a research gap by elaborating on the position of eunuchs in Umayyad Spain.[10] An illuminating case study of the eunuchs serving the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir[11] was published by Nadia Maria El Cheikh in 2005.[12] Jane Hathaway's book of 2018 examined the evolution of the role of chief eunuch of the Ottoman harem from the 16th to the 19th century in detail.[13] More recent scholarship has brought the gender identity of eunuchs into focus. Kathryn M. Ringrose's work on eunuchs in Byzantium strongly resonated in the field of Islamic slavery studies, especially her claim that eunuchs constituted a "third gender".[14] Serena Tolino analysed the views of early Islamic jurists on eunuchs, concluding that they were legally seen as male.[15] These and other studies offer interesting points of comparison with the case of medieval Yemen.

1   Eunuchs in Islamic Foundational Texts

While the Qurʾān does not explicitly prohibit the castration of men, verses 118 and 119 of the fourth *sūra* have been broadly interpreted as condemning any mutilation of God's creatures. Furthermore, a number of hadiths relate that the Prophet forbade his followers to castrate themselves in order to remain chaste, recommending that they pray and fast instead.[16] Although these sources were subject to diverse interpretations, the castration of and by Muslims was soon prohibited by Islamic law. However, the possession of eunuchs remained permissible because the Prophet himself had accepted as a gift the enslaved Copt Maryam together with her eunuch guardian Maʾbūr, who has received surprisingly little scholarly attention.[17]

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10   Sin linaje, sin alcurnia, sin hogar.

11   Reigned 295–320/908–32.

12   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate."

13   Jane Hathaway, The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

14   Ringrose, Perfect Servant.

15   Tolino, "Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire", "Eunuchs in the Sunnī Legal Discourse: Reflections on the Gender of Castrated Men," *Studi Magrebini* 20, no. 2 (2022): 117–36.

16   Tolino, "Eunuchs in the Sunnī Legal Discourse."

17   Aysha Hidayatullah, "Māriyya the Copt: Gender, Sex and Heritage in the Legacy of Muhammad's Umm Walad," *Islam and Christian – Muslim Relations* 21, no. 3 (2010): 223. Hain, "Epilogue," 327.

2   The Eunuch Institution in the First Islamic Centuries

Classical Arabic writers unanimously agree that Muʿāwiya (r. 41–61/661–80), the founder and first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, introduced the eunuch institution to the Islamic context.[18] The earliest evidence in this respect comes from the 4th/10th-century Persian geographer Ibn al-Faqīh, who lists eunuchs among a number of innovations introduced by this caliph.[19] Muʿāwiya undoubtedly drew upon the example of the Byzantine empire, where eunuchs had played vital roles at court and in the church since the 1st/7th century.[20] The majority of eunuchs in the first Islamic century also seem to have come from Byzantine territories, a practice through which the prohibition of castration could be bypassed.

What was the reason for introducing eunuchs into Islamic court culture? El Cheikh and others have argued that "[i]t was the Muslim women's unique seclusion which made the employment of eunuchs inevitable".[21] Given their physical limitations and dependence on their owners, eunuchs were considered perfectly suitable to act as guardians of royal women. Their function as high harem officials quickly brought about another responsibility, namely that of teaching and educating the sultan's children (hence the title *ustādh* frequently given to eunuchs, see below). This role enabled them to yield significant influence over royal offspring, which they often retained over a lifetime. It was not uncommon for a successor to the throne to be installed as a ruler at a very young age, resulting in his guardian eunuch becoming the de facto ruler.[22]

Having become a permanent fixture of early Islamic court culture, the eunuch institution survived the Abbasid revolution and experienced a significant expansion under the reign of the fifth Abbasid caliph Hārūn Al-Rashīd (170–93/786–809). When the Barmakid family, which had been highly influential in the Abbasid administration, fell from grace in the late 2nd/early 3rd/9th century, the caliph ordered the ousting and execution of its members. Those carrying out his orders were mostly eunuchs, who subsequently filled the high positions previously occupied by the Barmakids.[23] This solidification of the eunuch institution during Hārūn Al-Rashīd's reign also manifested itself in the emergence of the *khuddām al-khāssa*, a body of eunuchs forming

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18   Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 66.

19   Ayalon, 66.

20   Ringrose, Perfect Servant. Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 104.

21   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 236. See also Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 197.

22   For examples of this dynamic, see the section "Eunuchs as educators of royal children".

23   Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 88–90.

the caliph's closest entourage.[24] The expansion in numbers and influence of eunuchs at court continued under al-Rashīd's successors. During the reign of the eighth Abbasid caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 218–27/833–42), the first regiment of mamluks was introduced, causing such antagonism among the established elites that the caliph moved the capital from Baghdad to Sāmarrāʾ. Patricia Crone has characterized the introduction of mamluks in Abbasid Iraq as a "systematic handing over of power to slaves […] to the more or less complete exclusion of the free males".[25] This power shift also benefitted eunuchs, who were given additional responsibilities in connection with mamluks that vastly expanded their powers and prestige. At least from the 3rd/9th century onwards, sources prove that mamluks were placed under the direct supervision of eunuchs. Their responsibility in educating royal children had been logically extended to also include young slave boys in training. Mamluks were not allowed to marry or to have any contact with women during their training period, and sexual relations with and among mamluks were also strictly forbidden. Eunuchs were tasked with enforcing these strict rules of celibacy.[26] The training of young mamluks is well documented for Ottoman times, as described by Halil İnalcık:

> The main aim of the Palace training was to inculcate absolute loyalty and obedience in the service of the sultan. The lads were subjected to a very strict discipline, having no contact with the outside world, or with their families, and so long as they remain in the palaces, leading a monastic life, completely cut off from women. Eunuchs watched over all their actions by day and by night and slept among them in the dormitories.[27]

Having been separated from their families as children, the young slave soldiers became dependent on their eunuch educators and easily accepted their authority once they reached adulthood, which might explain the great number of eunuch military commanders in medieval Islamic polities.

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24   Ayalon, 95. A similar institution seems to have existed in Rasulid times, although evidence is scarce. Al-Khazrajī reports that upon the death of Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf ʿUmar, the *khuddām al-khāṣṣa* convened to arrange his succession. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 1.244.

25   Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 81.

26   Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 47–59. Sourdel makes the same point (EI II).

27   Halil İnalcık, "Ghulām: Ottoman Empire," in Sourdel, D., Bosworth, C. E., Hardy, P. and İnalcık, Halil, "Ghulām", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, online (http://dx.doi.org /10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0237). Consulted on 30.12.2023.

In sum, eunuchs joined the Islamic political and military establishment in the 7th century, when the first Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya entrusted them with supervising the court's female quarters. There, they were also charged with the education of royal children. This responsibility enabled eunuchs to form close relationships with future regents, and occasionally to act as interim rulers on their behalf. The demise of the Barmakid family resulted in a power vacuum at the Abbasid court which was largely filled by eunuchs, whose roles as political administrators and close advisors of the caliph were thereby cemented. Finally, the introduction of mamluks into the Abbasid military system led to a further increase of their influence. Their roles as supervisors and trainers of young mamluks made them crucial members of the Abbasid military elite. While eunuchs' roles changed over time and across the geographical breadth of the medieval Islamic world, their contributions were centred on three key institutions of Islamic polities: the royal household, the political administration and the military. As we shall see, the case studies on the Najahid and Rasulid dynasties match this basic architecture of the eunuch institution to different extents. Before diving into these two historical contexts, a note on terminology is in order.

3   Terminology

Medieval Arabic writers referred to eunuchs by a number of different terms. In his 4th/10th-century geographical work, al-Muqaddasī lists five synonyms for eunuchs: *muʿallim*, *khādim*, *ustādh*, *shaykh* and *khaṣī*.[28] A thorough reading of Yemeni source material reveals local specificities in the terminology used and suggests that some changes occurred between the 5th/11th and 9th/15th centuries.

The overwhelming majority of eunuchs found in Rasulid sources were designated as *khādim* (pl. *khuddām*, collective *khadam*). This word originally means domestic servant, help or attendant[29] but became a common euphemism for eunuchs from at least the 3rd/9th century onwards.[30] Despite the term's original ambiguity – designating both servant and eunuch – it was consistently and exclusively used for castrated slaves in Rasulid sources. A good example here

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28   Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*, ed. Michael J. de Goeje, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1906), 31.

29   Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, 1115. See also the entry for *al-khadam* in Ibn Sīda's 5th/11th-century dictionary *Al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, n.d.), 140.

30   Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 6. For other euphemisms used for eunuchs, see Ayalon, *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 89–92, and Appendix A.

are several passages in *Nūr al-maʿārif* that differentiate between categories of slaves, juxtaposing *al-khuddām* with uncastrated slaves (*al-ʿabīd al-fuḥūl*).[31] In *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, individuals labelled as *khādim* are portrayed as performing roles only assigned to castrated slaves, such as the management of royal women's households.[32] In fact, *khādim* is the standard designation for a eunuch in both *Nūr al-maʿārif* and *al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*. Alternative terms are practically absent in these works, with the exception of *ṭawāshī*.

High-ranking eunuchs are referred to as *ṭawāshī* (pl. *ṭawāshīya*) in Rasulid sources. The Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) contends that the word stems from the Turkish *ṭābūshī*, meaning servant.[33] In the Mamluk context, Marmon has translated the term as "high-ranking eunuch",[34] while Amalia Levanoni defines it as "a eunuch in charge of the mamluks' education".[35] A close examination of the term's use in *Nūr al-maʿārif* and *al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* conveys the strong impression that it not only designates its bearer as a eunuch but also distinguishes him as an individual of elevated rank. Based on a wealth of source material, some of which will be discussed below, it can confidently be concluded that in medieval Yemen, a *ṭawāshī* was a eunuch of superior rank. The term will therefore be translated as "chief eunuch" throughout this book.

The standard definition of *ustādh* (pl. *asātidha*), a word of Persian origin, is professor or tutor; in extension, it was and remains an honorary title given to the learned in parts of the Arabic world. From the 4th/10th century onwards, the term additionally became a euphemism for eunuchs.[36] The reason for this transposition lay in the fact that eunuchs were frequently entrusted with the education of children.[37] *Ustādh* is the common designation for a eunuch in al-Ḥakamī's chronicle of the Najahid dynasty;[38] remarkably, no other available term is ever used here. This choice of terminology is certainly owed to the fact that one of the core responsibilities of eunuchs in the Najahid era was the education of royal children. In Rasulid sources, however, this designation is quite unusual. *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* features an administrator of a royal woman's household named ʿAnbar who is first labelled as *ustādh* and later as *khādim*,

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31 E.g. Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.362.

32 E.g. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.131, II.153, Uqud I.131, II.153.

33 Al-Maqrīzī in Pellat, Lambton, and Orhonlu, "Khāṣī".

34 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society*, 16.

35 Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāsir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310–1341)*. Leiden: Brill, 1995: 202.

36 Pellat, Lambton, and Orhonlu, "Khāṣī".

37 Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 1863, 1877.

38 Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 38, 72, 87, 88.

suggesting that the former term might have specified his position rather than his castrated state.[39]

The most basic Arabic terms for eunuchs are *khaṣī* (pl. *khiṣiyān*) and *makhṣī*, which both derive from the root kh-ṣ-ā meaning to castrate, emasculate or remove the testicles.[40] The term *khaṣī* was also used more specifically to distinguish a eunuch whose testicles had been removed from one who had lost all his sexual organs, who was called *majbūb*.[41] Interestingly, none of these terms appear in the Yemeni sources analysed, nor could any reference to the distinction between different castration procedures be found. As outlined below, evidence strongly suggests that eunuchs were castrated before they reached Yemen and not in Yemen itself. Perhaps all eunuchs traded into the country were either of the *khaṣī* or the *majbūb* category, making it unnecessary to stress the distinction.

4   Early Lives

Although eunuchs constitute by far the best-documented group of slaves in our sources, their origins and early lives are rarely discussed in chronicles and biographical texts. Luckily, the documents pertaining to the slave trade from East Africa to Yemen contained in *Nūr al-maʿārif* (see chapter 3) shed some light on the backgrounds of these individuals. These passages prove that during the 7th/13th century, eunuchs of Ethiopian and *zanjī* origins were trafficked to Yemen. The prices paid for eunuchs in Ethiopia were over triple, possibly five times the price of high-quality uncastrated or female slaves. Such price differences between eunuchs and regular slaves were common throughout the premodern Islamic world.[42]

4.1   *Castration Abroad*
More importantly, however, this evidence strongly suggests that as a rule, eunuchs were castrated before they reached Yemen. This hypothesis is further corroborated by the fact that the sources analysed contain no references to

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39   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.95.

40   Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 755.

41   Marmon, Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society, 62.

42   For an overview of Arabic source evidence, see Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 63. The author also states that prices for eunuchs in the Roman and Byzantine empires were four times higher than those for ordinary slaves (301). Toledano reports that eunuchs in the Ottoman empire were also significantly more expensive than other slaves (Toledano, "Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul," 380).

castration procedures carried out in Yemen.[43] Additionally, Islamic law pro-
hibited the castration of men by Muslims or, in other interpretations, in the
whole *Dār al-Islam*. As a consequence, eunuchs were usually trafficked from
beyond the Islamic territories.[44] This was also the case in Mamluk Egypt.[45]
Furthermore, Jan Hogendorn offers a convincing economic argument for
castrating slaves in specialized centres, rather than in their countries of des-
tination. Slaves were usually castrated between the ages of four and twelve,
"with some apparent preference for boys between eight and 10".[46] The high
mortality risk associated with this intervention was a main factor in determin-
ing the location of castration centres: "The operation was usually conducted
at geographical locations far from the market, but where survivability was bet-
ter than at the source."[47] Mild climates such as the mountainous regions of
Ethiopia are far more favourable to wound healing than tropical or hot areas.
Loss of life during the dangerous procedure could be reduced further if it was
carried out by specialists. These factors combined explain why eunuchs were
"made" in castration centres, rather than in their countries of destination.[48]

Scattered references to such castration centres can be found in medieval
Arabic sources. During the 4th/10th century, eunuchs destined for Egypt were
castrated in Sudan.[49] The *Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam*, a Persian geographical work from
372/982, describes the activities of Egyptian merchants in Sudan:

> The merchants steal their children and bring them [with them]. Then they
> castrate (*khiṣi*) them, import them into Egypt, and sell them. Among
> themselves there are people who steal each other's children and sell
> them to the merchants when the latter arrive.[50]

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43 Miers and Hogendorn mention castration centres in Yemen during the Ottoman period:
    Suzanne Miers, *Britain and the Ending of the Slave Trade* (London: Longman, 1975), 57;
    Hogendorn, "Hideous Trade," 149.
44 Hogendorn, "Hideous Trade"; El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate."
45 Ayalon, *The Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 280.
46 Hogendorn, "Hideous Trade," 141, 143.
47 Hogendorn, 153.
48 A number of early modern descriptions of castrations have survived, attesting to the suf-
    fering and risk associated with the procedure: Louis Frank, *Mémoire sur le commerce des
    Nègres au Kaire et sur les maladies auxquelles ils sont sujets en y arrivant* (Paris: Migneret;
    Brigithe Mathe, 1802); Richard R. Madden, *Travels in Turkey, Egypt, Nubia and Palestine
    in 1824, 1825, 1826 and 1827* (London: Henry Colburn, 1829); Antoine B. Clot-Bey, *Aperçu
    général sur l'Égypte* (Paris: Fortin, Masson, et Cie, 1840); John L. Burckhardt, *Travels in
    Nubia* (London: John Murray, 1819).
49 Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam, cf. Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 63.
50 Translation David Ayalon, 64.

The region around Asyūt in Upper Egypt was also a known castration centre from medieval times up until the 13th/19th century.[51] In the 8th/14th century, the Mamluk historian al-ʿUmarī (d. 749/1349) described how slave traders brought their slaves to an Ethiopian town called Washalaw in order to have them castrated and thus raise their price.[52] The inhabitants of this town were "without religion", according to al-ʿUmarī, and thus not subject to the prohibition of castration which both Muslim jurists and the Christian king of Amhara imposed on their co-religionists. The castrated boys would then be taken to the town of Hadiya, where specialists performed a second operation and nursed the boys back to health. Most, however, did not survive the mutilation.[53] It appears from this description that since both the Christian king of Amhara and Islamic jurists condemned the practice of castration, the procedure was performed in a region whose population adhered to neither of these two religions.

The existence of castration centres in Ethiopia can explain why, according to *Nūr al-maʿārif*, *zanjī* eunuchs were first brought to Ethiopia, then sent back to Zaylaʿ, and finally shipped onwards to Yemen together with Ethiopian eunuchs.[54] The serious health risk of the operation combined with a taxing journey to the coast and across the Red Sea to Yemen also explains why the travel provisions for eunuchs recorded in *Nūr al-maʿārif* were so high. The scribes' curious remark that the eunuch "eats meat and clarified butter and is sustained by it" makes sense if we consider that a castrated slave constituted a high investment who could only yield high returns if he reached the market looking healthy and well nourished.[55]

4.2   *The Question of Origins*

Evidence from *Nūr al-maʿārif* has enabled us to establish that at least a subgroup of eunuchs in Rasulid Yemen were of Ethiopian and *zanjī* origin and had undergone castration in Ethiopia. Can these findings be generalized for all eunuchs in medieval Yemen, and do narrative sources offer further insights?

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51   Meinardus, "The Upper Egyptian Practice of the Making of Eunuchs," 52; Pellat, Lambton, and Orhonlu, "Khāṣī".

52   Al-ʿUmarī, Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār, 37–38.

53   Fauvelle has pointed out that "this unusual division of labor was motivated less by economic rationality than by the common hypocrisy that allowed Christians and Muslims to collaborate in a practice whose operation they preferred not to see" ("The Production of Eunuchs in Abyssinia Ethiopia and Somaliland, around 1340," in *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*, trans. Troy Tice [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018], 213).

54   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.365. Cf. chapter 3.

55   Anonymous, I.362.

Given the frequent appearance of eunuchs in chronicles of the Najahid and Rasulid dynasties, we would expect to learn more about their provenance there. Yet, even prominent eunuchs whose careers can be traced through the sources usually seem to emerge out of nowhere, and their places of origin are rarely mentioned. The few exceptions all seem to point towards Ethiopia. Al-Ḥakamī's chronicle of the Najahid dynasty includes a description of nine slaves of Queen ʿAlam, four of whom were eunuchs.[56] A later passage reveals that ʿAlam had bought at least two of the nine slaves from Ethiopia.[57] In al-Khazrajī's *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, one eunuch is described as Ethiopian (*ḥabashī*).[58] An obvious place to look for information on the origins of eunuchs are biographical dictionaries. However, although these texts offer rich evidence on the activities of eunuchs at the Rasulid court, they remain silent about the times before these men reached Yemen: neither their origins nor their early lives are discussed. Granted, the biographies of free men also do not describe their childhood and youth; nevertheless, their geographical and family origins can usually be deduced either from their names or from additional information given.[59] In contrast, the names of eunuchs and of slaves in general offer no information of such kind; in fact, slave names actively conceal and erase an individual's origins and identity. In order to elaborate on this point, a short digression is in order.

5 Digression: Slave Names and the Loss of Origins

A reading of Yemeni sources quickly reveals that slaves were given distinct names that set them apart from free individuals. This process of renaming took different forms, as two passages from *Nūr al-maʿārif* illustrate. The first example is a list of salaries paid to palace cooks in 693/1294, with the names' English meanings added in brackets:

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56   The passage does not include any term for eunuch but presents two groups of slaves; the first are labelled as administrators (*azimma*), the second as "non-castrated" (*fuḥūl*). This juxtaposition, as well as their positions as administrators, reveals that they were eunuchs (al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 82).

57   Al-Ḥakamī, 86.

58   The eunuch's name is Fāʾiz b. ʿAbd Allāh, Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1298.

59   Similarly, El Cheikh has noted that Abbasid biographies usually reveal no information about the boyhood of influential and otherwise well-documented men, except for their education ("An Abbasid Caliphal Family," in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Shaun Tougher (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 341.

The cooks – 153.5:

Ṣawāb [proper] 20, ʿAnbar [ambergris] 15, Zaʿrūr [ill-tempered] 15, Jawhar [jewel] 15, ʿAnbar [ambergris] 10, Shafiʿ [mediator] 10, Rayḥān [sweet basil] 10, Rayḥān 7.5, Muḥsin [graceful] 7.5, Yāqūt [sapphire] 7.5, Muftāḥ [key] 7.5, Bayān [eloquence] 7.5, Mukhtār [chosen] 7.5, Dīnār 7.5, Saʿīd [happy] 3, Masʿūd [blissful] 3.[60]

The list is a representative example of names that were given to enslaved individuals – not just in Yemen but throughout the medieval Islamic world.[61] The Egyptian writer al-Qalqashandī remarked:

Predominant among the Arabs is to call their sons with odious names such as dog (*kalb*), colocynth (*ḥanẓala*), harmful (*ḍarār*), war (*ḥarb*) and with what is similar to that, and to call their slaves (*ʿabīd*) with desirable names such as prosperity (*falāḥ*), success (*najāḥ*) and similar [names].[62]

Slave names used in medieval Yemen fall into two broad categories. First, names designating precious objects such as ʿAnbar (ambergris), Jawhar (jewel) and Yāqūt (sapphire) were common. In fact, this practice extends far beyond the medieval Islamic realm. Susan Benson, who studied the phenomenon of renaming in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, aptly states that such names "parade the prosperity of the owner" and underline the ascribed identity of the slave as an object rather than a person.[63] The second common type of slave names denotes desirable qualities – frequent examples are *Muḥsin* (graceful) and *Saʿīd* (happy), although these names could also be given to free persons. One slave cook in *Nūr al-maʿārif* bears the surprising name *Zaʿrūr* (ill-tempered), which appears to be an inversion of the norm. Female slaves make rare appearances in the source material and are often only mentioned as a category ("an enslaved girl"). The few recorded female personal names largely fall under the two categories of precious objects or favourable qualities.[64] The

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60   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.561.
61   Ayalon, *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 275. Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 75.
62   Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Qalqashandī, *Nihāyat al-ʿarab fī maʿrifat ansāb al-ʿarab.* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiya, n.d.), 31–2. Translation Johann Heiss.
63   Susan Benson, "Injurious Names: Naming, Disawoval, and Recuperation in Contexts of Slavery and Emancipation," in *The Anthropology of Names and Naming*, ed. Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 184ff.
64   Examples of female slave names found in my sources are *Warda* (flower, al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 115ff.); *ʿAlam* (sign, see chapter 5); *ʿIlm* (knowledge, al-Ḥakamī, 71,

identities of enslaved girls and women are thus concealed both by their new, generic slave names, and by the historians' omission of any name altogether. Typical slave names given in Yemen seem to have been stable throughout the medieval period; many of the names listed above already appear in al-Ḥakamī's 5th/11th-century chronicle,[65] and the 10th/16th-century traveller Varthema discusses slave names that were already common in Najahid and Rasulid times.[66]

Another striking characteristic of the slave names listed above is the complete lack of both *nasab* (patronym) and *nisba* (a suffix usually linking the bearer to a tribal group, town, region etc. of origin). These two elements were added to the given name of a free man, forming his full name and expressing his family and geographical origin.

Ṣāliḥ	GIVEN NAME
b. ʿAlī	NASAB
b. Ismāʿīl	NASAB
al-Ḥaḍramī	NISBA

The name Ṣāliḥ b. ʿAlī b. Ismāʿīl al-Ḥaḍramī, for instance, adds to the bearer's given name (Ṣāliḥ) information about his father (ʿAlī) and grandfather (Ismāʿīl), and refers to his family's origins in the Ḥaḍramawt. None of this information is contained in the names mentioned above; we know nothing about the forefathers or provenience of Jawhar, Ṣawāb and ʿAnbar. Such names, chosen by slave traders or owners, are generic and underline the interchangeability of slaves. They redefine the individual through a name that labels them as unfree, thus stripping away any indication of their family and geographical background.

5.1 Mamluks' Names

Among the slaves recorded in our sources, only mamluks were consistently given names that do not follow the standard slave naming practice described. Consider this list of salaries given to cup-bearers at the Rasulid court:

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passim); *Ghazāl* (gazelle, al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 944); *Nukhba* (chosen, al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.385); *al-Wusṭāniya* (the middle/central one, anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.532); and *Rashīla* (meaning unknown, anonymous, I.532).

65   For example, the names Ṣawāb, Rayḥān and ʿAnbar are all mentioned in al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 82.

66   Varthema's "gazella" (*Itinerario di Ludovico de Varthema*, 143), for example, could only have been the Arabic *ghazāl*, a classical name for an enslaved girl that already appears in al-Ḥakamī and al-Khazrajī (e.g. al-Ḥakamī, 89; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 944).

The cup-bearers (*al-suqā*) – 686:

Moghulṭāy ʿAlawī 20.5, Iyās ʿAlawī 20.5, Andakīn Bakāshī 20.5, Aybak al-ʿAlawī 20.5, Kashtimur 20.5, Sunjur Bakāshī 20.5, Lājīn ʿAlawī 20.5, Sunqur Hilālī 20.5, Aybak 20.5, Sunjur Hilālī 20.5, Andakīn Baghawī 20.5, Yūsuf b. Lājīn 20.5, ʿAmr b. Aybak al-ʿAlawī 20.5, Abū Bakr b. ʿAlī al-Marwazī 20.5, Yūsuf b. ʿAlī Andām 20.5, Qaīmash 20.5, Aḥmad b. ʿAmr al-Ṣalāḥ 20.5, ʿAmr b. Abī Bakr al-Ṣalāḥ 20.5, Ibrāhīm b. Sunjur al-Shamsī 20.5, Aybak al-Bakāshī 20.5, Maḥmūd b. Sūdī 20.5, Aḥmad b. Sūdī 20.5, Andakīn al-Amīnī 20.5, Aybak al-Muẓaffarī 20.5, Ṭurnaṭay Badrī 22.5, Moghulṭāy Zakāwī 22.5, Azbaka (Uzbaka?) al-Mawṣilī 20.5, Lājīn Sulaymānī 20.5, Aḥmad b. Sūdī 25, ʿAmr b. Sūdī 20.5.[67]

Most of the identifiable names in this list stem from the Kipchak language,[68] offering proof that slaves in Rasulid Yemen associated with the military were neither given typical slave names nor standard Arabic names but instead carried names of Turkic origin. The same practice was common in Mamluk Egypt and studied extensively by Ayalon. He underlined the "importance of the mamluks' non-Arab names as a buffer separating them from the rest of the population and preserving their particular identity".[69] A Turkic name was a marker of status, bestowing on its bearer the prestige associated with the mamluk institution. Nevertheless, it was still a name imposed on the mamluk by his trader or owner and concealed his original identity.[70]

What is more, Ayalon remarks that mamluks were given Turkic names irrespective of their ethnic background. Similarly, it would be fallacious to conclude that the mamluks of medieval Yemen were necessarily of Turkic origin simply because they bore Turkic names. Similar to the typical slave names discussed above, these Turkic names served to identify the mamluks as a distinct societal group possessing a particular state of (un)freedom.

Unlike the names of slave cooks discussed earlier, the names of mamluks quoted above consist of several elements. Of the twenty-nine names mentioned, ten contain a *nasab* referring to the bearer's father: Yūsuf b. Lājīn, ʿAmr

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67   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.568–9.

68   E.g. Moghulṭāy, a composite of the proper name Moghul and ṭāy ("foal"); Ṭurnaṭay, a composite of Ṭurna ("crane") and ṭāy; Aybak, a composite of Ay ("moon") and Bak/Bek ("ruler"). Lājīn is probably Lajin ("white falcon"). I thank Gisela Prochazka-Eisl for this information.

69   Ayalon, "Names, Titles and Nisbas of the Mamluks," 193, 194.

70   Ayalon does however consider the possibility that Turkish and Mongol mamluks might have simply kept their birthname rather than being renamed by slave traders or owners ("Names, Titles and Nisbas of the Mamluks," 196).

b. Aybak al-ʿAlawī, Abū Bakr b. ʿAlī al-Marwazī, Yūsuf b. ʿAlī Andām, Aḥmad b. ʿAmr al-Ṣalāḥ, ʿAmr b. Abī Bakr al-Ṣalāḥ, Ibrāhīm b. Sunjur al-Shamsī, Maḥmūd b. Sūdī, Aḥmad b. Sūdī and ʿAmr b. Sūdī.[71] The last three mamluks were apparently brothers, raising the question of whether the Yemeni mamluk system was multi-generational. Furthermore, it is surprising to find the *nisba* al-ʿAlawī borne by a mamluk, since it usually designated a member of the Prophet Muḥammad's family (through his cousin ʿAlī, husband of his daughter Fāṭima).

Those mamluks mentioned without a *nasab* were recorded with a *nisba*: Moghulṭāy ʿAlawī, Iyās ʿAlawī, Andakīn Bakāshī, Aïbak al-ʿAlawī, Sunjur Bakāshī, Lājīn ʿAlawī, Sunqur Hilālī, Sunjur Hilālī, Andakīn Baghawī, Aïbak al-Bakāshī, Andakīn al-Amīnī, Aybak al-Muẓaffarī, Ṭurnaṭay Badrī, Moghulṭāy Zakawī, Azbaka (Uzbaka?) al-Mawṣilī and Lājīn Sulaymānī.[72] In both Rasulid Yemen and Mamluk Egypt, slaves took up the names of their former owners as *nisba* after having been manumitted.[73] As such, the Aybak al-Muẓaffarī mentioned above was probably manumitted by the second Rasulid sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf during whose reign the list was written.[74] Similarly, the names of high-ranking eunuchs almost always end on a *nisba* relating them to a Rasulid sultan.[75] In Egypt, manumitted mamluks could also bear a *nisba* referring to the slave trader who had brought them to the country;[76] it is unclear whether this was also the case in Rasulid Yemen. Two of the *nisbas* at a first glance appear to refer to geographical origins: Abū Bakr b. ʿAlī al-Marwazī and Azbaka al-Mawṣilī. However, as Ayalon has pointed out,[77] such nisbas can be misleading: the suffix al-Marwazī probably does not indicate that Abū Bakr's family originated in Merv, a city in today's Turkmenistan, but more likely describes the origins of the patron who had manumitted him.

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71 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 568–9.

72 Anonymous, 568–89.

73 Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 139. Marmon, Slavery in the Islamic Middle East, 16.

74 Al-Muẓaffar reigned from 647/1250 to 694/1295, and the list is from 693/1294.

75 Interestingly, while the *nisbas* of these eunuchs are always added to their names with an article (e.g. *al-Muẓaffarī*), some mamluks' *nisbas* listed above do not possess a connecting article (e.g. *Ṭurnaṭay Badrī*). This difference might simply be due to a scribe's inaccuracy but could also have served to distinguish the manumitted individuals from those still enslaved. Grammatically, *Badrī* can be read as a *nisba* adjective expressing a relation of belonging between Ṭurnaṭay and Badr, likely an enslaved person and his owner. In contrast, *al-Muẓaffarī* has the normal structure of a free man's *nisba* and might therefore signify its bearer's transition to the status of manumitted person. Unfortunately, the sources analysed thus far do not offer enough evidence to verify this hypothesis.

76 Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 58.

77 Ayalon, "Names, Titles and Nisbas of the Mamluks," 219ff.

The mention of mamluks' *nisbas* and *nasabs* and their complete absence among the slave cooks encountered earlier raises the question of whether these mamluks were already manumitted, whereas the cooks were still enslaved. Unfortunately, our source evidence does not suffice to determine whether the mamluks of Rasulid Yemen were manumitted upon completion of their military training, like their peers in Mamluk Egypt.[78] In any case, the literary evidence suggests they enjoyed an elevated social standing compared to common slaves. This is not only evident from their names, which were usually composed of several parts and therefore more complete and similar to the names of free individuals, but also because they obtained higher salaries.

5.2   *Eunuchs' Names*

The names of eunuchs in our sources display interesting features and lend themselves to comparison with the well-researched case of Mamluk Egypt. Mamluk eunuchs were given only a limited number of proper names, most of which were typical slave names designating precious objects or positive qualities.[79] Ayalon's list of most frequent names carried by Mamluk eunuchs shows a striking similarity to the names of Yemeni eunuchs in the medieval period.[80] *Nūr al-maʿārif* contains a great number of eunuchs' names, the most frequent of which are ʿAnbar,[81] Faṣīḥ,[82] Jawhar,[83] Kāfūr,[84] Murshid,[85] Raḍī al-Dīn,[86] Ṣawāb,[87] Shāfiʿ[88] and Yāqūt.[89] In most cases, these names do not include any *nisba* pointing to a country of origin or an owner, thereby also making it impossible to discern whether the same eunuch appears over and over again in the source. Sometimes, however, these names are complemented by qualifiers that enable us to distinguish between eunuchs: for example, six different Jawhars appear on just two pages – one "of the lady of the chief eunuch Fakhr", two bearing *nisbas* presumably relating them to their owners, one "little

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78   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 3.
79   Ayalon, Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate, 274–5.
80   E.g. Jawhar, ʿAnbar, Kāfūr and Marjān.
81   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.157, I.516, I.526, I.532, I.539, I. 543, I.544, I.545, I.546, I.547, I.548, I.549, I.550, II.119, II.120, II.132, II.134.
82   Anonymous, I.532, I.544, I.546, I.547, I.157, I.549.
83   Anonymous, I.516, I.526, I.546, I.547, I.157.
84   Anonymous, I.546, I.547, I.550, I.581, I.551, II.120, II.127, II.139, II.140, II.142, II.144, II.145, II.146.
85   Anonymous, I.526, II.132, I.532, I.547, I.550, I.551.
86   Anonymous, I.525, I.526, I.529, II.124, II.138, II.145.
87   Anonymous, I.532, I.546, I.547, I.550, I.551, I.557, II.119, II.132, II.134, II.147.
88   Anonymous, I.546, I.547, I.550, I.551, I.552, I.553, I.557, II.132.
89   Anonymous, I.526, I.546, I.547, II.124, II.130, II.138.

Jawhar" and two whose *nisbas* point to the two Rasulid castles al-Dumluwa and al-Taʿkar.[90] In general, however, eunuchs' names in *Nūr al-maʿārif* are generic and impersonal, offering no clues on the individual's former life.

By contrast, al-Khazrajī's biographical entries on chief eunuchs (sg. *ṭawāshī*) contain much more elaborate names. They usually consist of the following components: (1) a *kunya*, the Arabic name epithet referring to a person's first child or to positive qualities; (2) a *nasab*; (3) one or several *nisbas* relating to the eunuch's owners or manumitters, typically Rasulid sultans; and (4) a *laqab* (sobriquet). Consider the typical example of the eunuch Abū Naṣir Bāriʿ b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Mujāhidī al-Muʾayyadī, called Jamāl al-Dīn:[91]

Abū Naṣir	KUNYA
Bāriʿ	GIVEN NAME
b. ʿAbd Allāh	NASAB
al-Mujāhidī	NISBA
al-Muʾayyadī	NISBA
called Jamāl al-Dīn	LAQAB[92]

As eunuchs were childless, their *kunya* did not refer to the names of their first-born but served to underline their prestige. As such, their names followed a common pattern of the larger Islamicate world at the time, where the *Abū* was mostly used to signify "endowed with" rather than "father of".[93] In addition to Abū Naṣir (endowed with victory),[94] examples include Abū al-Misk (endowed with musk),[95] Abū al-Durr (endowed with pearls)[96] and Abū al-Bahāʾ (endowed with beauty).[97]

The *nasab* given to eunuchs was consistently and without exception *Ibn* (*b.*) *ʿAbd Allāh*, mirroring the practice in Mamluk Egypt and elsewhere.[98] This

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90 Jawhar bī-jihat al-ṭawāshī Fakhr, Jawhar ʿAlawī, Jawhar Badrī, Jawhar Dumluwī, Jawhar saghīr and Jawhar Taʿkarī. Anonymous, 1.546–7. Al-Dumluwa castle was located around fifty kilometres south-east of Taʿizz and housed part of the Rasulid treasure. Al-Taʿkar was built on a mountain overlooking Dhū Jibla, today's Jibla in central Yemen.

91 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 571.

92 Al-Khazrajī, 571.

93 Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, 357. Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 291.

94 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 571.

95 Al-Khazrajī, 1745.

96 Al-Khazrajī, 628.

97 Al-Khazrajī, 572–5.

98 Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 294; Linda Northrup, "The Bahrī Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250–1390," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 242–89.

pseudo-patronym was also bestowed upon converts to Islam whose fathers were not Muslims, thereby replacing the name of a heathen father with the emblematic Islamic name ʿAbd Allāh (servant of God).[99] Since eunuchs were also of non-Muslim origin and probably converted after their enslavement, it is logical that the same naming practice applied to them.

Apart from a few exceptions, the *nisbas* of the chief eunuchs who feature in al-Khazrajī's works relate them to Rasulid sultans. Most carry one or two *nisbas*, but the name of one eunuch (who will be portrayed extensively below) shows that he served a record number of four Rasulid sultans: Abū al-Hāzim Ahyaf b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ashrafī al-Afḍalī al-Mujāhidī al-Muʾayyadī.[100] The *nisbas* of these elite eunuchs underline their positions at the very heart of the Rasulid court and the immediate bond of patronage existing between them and their royal owners. While the *nisbas* given to eunuchs in medieval Yemen usually linked them to their owners, those borne by eunuchs in Mamluk Egypt frequently contained a reference to their area of origin.[101] Only a handful of the eunuchs encountered in medieval Yemeni sources carry *nisbas* with geographical connotations, but we should be reserved about taking these *nisbas* as proof of the eunuchs' origins.[102]

Finally, eunuchs were often known by a *laqab* that usually followed the same pattern and carried a religious connotation, such as Mujīr al-Dīn (defender of

99   H. Fleisch, "Ism," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012, 179b–80.

100   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 559–61.

101   Ayalon writes that "the mentioning of the 'race' (or area of origin) of a eunuch, attached to his proper name in the form of a 'nisba', is very frequent, certainly much more so than in the case of the mamluks". *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 274.

102   It is doubtful whether a certain Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣīnī was in fact Chinese (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.154, II.184, II.208). Al-Khazrajī relates that an Arab trader from China arrived in Aden with precious cargo that included a great number of mamluks and enslaved girls, but no eunuchs are mentioned, and the trader could have bought these slaves anywhere along his journey (I.350). As no other mention of Chinese slaves exists in our sources, it is more likely that this eunuch obtained his exotic *nisba* from his owner, likely a merchant active in the China trade. *Nūr al-maʿārif* features a eunuch called ʿAnbar the Indian (*Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.526). This man might plausibly have stemmed from India, as Indian slaves are well attested for this period, and Indian eunuchs were a common presence in contemporary Egypt. However, it is just as likely that he obtained his *nisba* from his owner. The *nisbas* of Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Ẓafārī (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.52), Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn Dīnār al-Ḥaḍramī (anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.128) and Yāqūt Mahjamī (anonymous, I.526) relate them to the Arabian peninsula – to Dhofar (Ẓafār) in today's Oman, the eastern Yemeni region of Ḥaḍramawt and al-Mahjam in the Tihāma. As there exists no evidence for the enslavement of South Arabians at the time, these *nisbas* were likely transferred to the eunuchs by their owner, who traced their own origins to these locations.

the faith),[103] Tāj al-Dīn (crown of the faith)[104] and Niẓām al-Dīn (order of the faith).[105] One prominent eunuch who appears frequently in *Nūr al-maʿārif* and was recorded by al-Khazrajī bears the charming *laqab* Shibl al-Dawla (cub of the state).[106] Among mamluk commanders in Rasulid Yemen, the same *laqab* pattern was common, albeit in different variations such as *Sayf al-Dīn* (sword of the faith) or *Bahāʾal-Dīn* (beauty of the faith).[107]

This digression has drawn attention to the practices of renaming slaves in medieval Yemen. It is no coincidence that the origins of most slaves mentioned in our sources – whether eunuchs, concubines or enslaved workers of low rank – are withheld. Rather, it can be argued that this practice is part of a systematic erasure of identity suffered during the process of enslavement. Orlando Patterson's seminal comparative study on the experience of slavery in different societies calls these effects of enslavement *social death*: the loss of former ties with one's family and social network, but also of one's social standing, prestige and role in society.[108] While Patterson's concept is persuasive, it pays insufficient attention to the dynamics unfolding once the slave has reached the slave-holding society. Rather than remaining socially dead, the slave would begin a new life with an identity largely imposed on them by their owner. This dynamic is exemplified by the practice of renaming slaves. Anthropologist Susan Benson has studied the re-naming practices surrounding the transatlantic slave trade and describes this practice as *onomastic violence*. She writes:

> [T]hrough naming – or, rather, through re-naming – not only is the previous social persona of the slave obliterated, but the slave marked off from other persons whose social identities are given privileged recognition.[109]

The evidence presented above illustrates the different shapes that onomastic violence imposed upon slaves in Rasulid Yemen could take. Slave names – whether those based on prestige objects or desirable qualities, Turkic names given to mamluks or elaborate compositions given to eunuchs – labelled their bearers as unfree, separating them from the rest of Yemeni society. They erased any indication of the person's ethnicity or descent, thereby perpetuating the

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103   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1745.
104   Al-Khazrajī, 572–5.
105   Al-Khazrajī, 810, 2100–1.
106   Al-Khazrajī, 1745. Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.560, I.581, I.120, II.120, II.127, II.145.
107   E.g. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 912, 1688, 589, 590, 591.
108   Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
109   Benson, "Injurious Names," 181.

deracination caused by the act of enslavement. They anonymized the individual as one among many and as potentially replaceable by another slave carrying the same name. In the case of the mamluks, their names set them apart from other slaves and probably strengthened their in-group identity as slave soldiers possessing a certain level of prestige. Eunuchs' names strongly express their link to the Rasulid court and to the honour and influence derived from this link.

For all the reasons given above, our evidence on eunuchs' origins in the historical narratives of medieval Yemen is thin. This situation is not unusual: in fact, most sources for eunuchs in the early Islamic period usually omit such information.[110] A notable exception are the eunuchs of Mamluk Egypt, whose full names and biographical entries frequently included a reference to their area of origin.[111] On the basis of this evidence, Ayalon was able to determine that Mamluk eunuchs were overwhelmingly of Byzantine (*rūmī*) and Ethiopian (*ḥabashī*) origin but also frequently Indian (*hindī*) and occasionally West African (*takrurī*).[112] In the Yemeni case, we can be certain that at least a portion of eunuchs mentioned in our sources were of Ethiopian and *zanjī* origin. The common practice was to castrate young slaves abroad and ship them to Yemen afterwards. This was consistent with Islamic legal restrictions, limited the mortality risk and made economic sense. While no evidence points to other origins, we cannot at this point exclude that some eunuchs came from elsewhere – for example from India. The sources for acquiring eunuchs might also have shifted over time: for instance, a 10th/16th-century chronicle from the Hadramawt features a eunuch described as *rūmī*.[113]

6   Beginnings in Yemen

Just as the origins of eunuchs are difficult to verify on the basis of written sources, their early years in Yemen are rarely discussed by medieval authors. Although eunuchs arrived in Yemen as young children, they only enter the historical narrative once their political or military careers have flourished. This is hardly surprising given the marked political character of our sources but leaves the reader to wonder how these individuals transitioned from being complete outsiders – trafficked foreign children with no knowledge of the Yemeni

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110   Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 108.
111   Ayalon, Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate, 274.
112   Ayalon, 273.
113   Serjeant, *Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast*, 42.

language or culture – to occupying key positions at the heart of the Najahid and Rasulid courts and militaries.

A handful of anecdotes break the silence surrounding the early days of influential eunuchs in medieval Yemen, allowing for some tentative conclusions. Evidence from the 5th/11th century confirms that young slaves were raised directly in the Najahid palace. Describing the Najahid king Fātik II (d. 531/1137) and his mother, Queen ʿAlam, al-Ḥakamī writes:

> Men of the slaves (ʿabīd) of the free lady, the queen, mother of Fātik b. Manṣūr, were raised in the palace of King Fātik b. Manṣūr. They were Ṣawāb, Rayḥān, Yumn, Ghuzz and Rayḥān the elder.[114]

The context of this quote unmistakably confirms that these five slaves were eunuchs. Similarly, another passage describes an uncastrated slave named Surūr, who was an influential political figure of the late Najahid era and a close ally of Queen ʿAlam:

> She [ʿAlam] purchased for her son two young enslaved boys (waṣfanān) from Ethiopia. This Surūr was one of them. She raised him in her care and protection, and he did not delay in growing up and excelling. She entrusted him with controlling (zamma) the mamluks and directed towards him the leadership of everyone who was in the castle.[115]

Such evidence attests to the practice of incorporating young, recently arrived slaves – castrated or not – into the royal Najahid household to be raised there. The same dynamic prevailed in Rasulid Yemen, where the role of senior eunuchs in the upbringing of underage eunuchs is explicitly highlighted. Al-Khazrajī's biography of the influential eunuch Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf mentions in passing that he had raised Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿ, the very eunuch he later sent to the gallows:

> He killed the judge (qāḍī) Muwaffaq al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Yaḥyāwī, vizier of the state of al-Mujāhid, and the eunuch (ṭawāshī) Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿ. He (Ahyaf) was his tutor (ustādh) who had raised him, according to what is believed and assumed.[116]

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114   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 82.

115   Al-Ḥakamī, 86.

116   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 560 The phrasing in Arabic (as its English translation) leaves open which of the men raised which, but a comparison of their biographical data reveals that Ahyaf was Bāriʿs senior and therefore must have been his tutor.

The relationship between Ahyaf and Bāriʿ suggests that young eunuchs, once they had arrived in Yemen, were introduced into the royal court and placed under the tutelage of senior eunuchs. This hypothesis is further corroborated by a passage from *Nūr al-maʿārif* describing the trafficking of slaves to Aden and their subsequent sale:

> The import of slaves (*al-raqīq*)[117] is displayed, and the good eunuchs (*khuddām*) are chosen from it, all of them heavyset.[118] [...] Concerning the eunuchs, from them is chosen what is suitable without hesitation, and they are bought for the civil service (*dīwān*), dressed, and handed over to the commanding eunuch. When a dispute is feared between the eunuch and his owner in Aden and a sale becomes agreeable, and he is suitable, he is bought for the *dīwān*. And when someone offers his eunuch for sale and he is suitable, he is also bought for the *dīwān*. Or if [the eunuch] desires the market and his lord brings him out, the *dīwān* is informed that he is suitable, and he is taken. Even if his lord is not interested in selling him, he does not return to him at all, but is bought for the *dīwān*, God-willing, the exalted.[119]

This passage is insightful in many respects. The Rasulid civil service (*dīwān*) retained the prerogative of choosing the most suitable eunuchs for itself before they were offered for sale to the wider public. Upon their acquisition, they were placed under the supervision of a senior eunuch who was likely responsible for their training. As will be discussed below, one key role performed by eunuchs was to raise and educate royal children.[120] Their supervision of underage eunuchs was a logical extension of these roles, especially if the boys lived at the royal court. *Nūr al-maʿārif* also mentions a "tutor of the eunuchs" among the state officials remunerated in late 7th/13th-century Taʿizz,[121] providing further evidence that many eunuchs who later became influential figures at the medieval courts of Yemen were educated within the palace walls.

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117   As mentioned in chapter 2, instead of "al-jalb al-raqīq", I chose to read the correct genitive construction "jalb al-raqīq", meaning "the import of slaves".

118   As noted in chapter 2, this is a tentative translation of "kull ghalīẓ al-qiṭʿa" (Lane, 2338.)

119   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.494 See also chapter 2.

120   Eunuchs in Mamluk Egypt were also charged with the training of young mamluks (Ayalon, *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*; Petry, "From Slaves to Benefactors," 59). Yemeni eunuchs probably performed similar roles, but the source evidence is too thin to confirm this hypothesis.

121   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.550. Toledano has described a similar process for Ottoman Turkey, where specialized schools prepared young African eunuchs for service at court ("Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul," 384).

At the same time, the above passage also hints at a different trajectory that could lead eunuchs into royal service. The Rasulid state not only reserved for itself the right to buy the most promising eunuchs right after they had arrived in Yemen but also kept a keen eye on the slave market, acquiring any eunuch deemed suitable for government service – sometimes even against his owner's will. In this way, eunuchs who had formerly worked for other owners eventually made their way to the Rasulid court. For example, the eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ (d. 666/1267) had been the freed slave (*mawlā*) of Ghāzī b. Jibrīl, a notorious amir who supposedly poisoned his owner, the Ayyubid ruler al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ayyūb (r. 608–10/ca. 1212–14).[122] After the amir's death in 610/1214,[123] Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ entered into the service of the first Rasulid sultan al-Manṣūr 'Umar (r. 626–47/1229–50).

7   Eunuchs in the Rasulid Military and Political Administration

This section examines the tasks assigned to eunuchs in the Rasulid military and political bureaucracy. The focus on the Rasulid era is due to the fact that sources from this period offer incomparably richer data on the subject. Overall, it can be observed that the role of eunuchs in the Najahid era pales in comparison to their strong position within the Rasulid state. Al-Ḥakamī's account of the Najahid dynasty mentions eunuchs chiefly in the orbit of royal women and children.[124] In contrast to Rasulid Yemen, they seem to have been hardly represented in the high ranks of the military, where uncastrated slaves dominated instead.[125]

Al-Khazrajī's works suggest that the importance of eunuchs fluctuated during the course of the Rasulid era. A case in point here is the reign of the fifth sultan al-Mujāhid 'Alī (r. 721–64/1321–63) in which eleven eunuchs occupied high positions in the military and political administration, compared to only four eunuchs of similar standing recorded during the rule of his father

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122   Robert B. Serjeant and Ronald B. Lewcock, "Early and Medieval History of Ṣanʿā, ca. 622–953/1515," in *Ṣanʿāʾ: An Arabian Islamic City* (London: World of Islamic Festival Trust, 1983), 63. See also Ghāzī b. Jibrīl's biography in al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1688.

123   The amir died at the hands of his own mamluks, who were incited by al-Nāṣir Ayyūb's mother.

124   E.g. al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 10, 72.

125   Interestingly, the founder of the Najahid dynasty was himself raised by a eunuch named Marjān who had occupied the position of *wazīr* in the late days of the Ziyadid reign (al-Ḥakamī, 10). This suggests that during the Ziyadid era, eunuchs not only performed roles with respect to elite women and children but were also appointed to the highest political positions.

and predecessor al-Muʾayyad Dawūd (r. 696–721/1296–1321). This shift can be explained by the fact that upon ascending to the throne, al-Mujāhid ʿAlī deposed the mamluk advisors who had wielded great influence during his father's reign, upon which they rebelled and prevented him from exercising full authority for a decade. When he finally secured his rule, al-Mujāhid ʿAlī must have filled the top positions in his government and army with eunuchs.

Thanks to the courtly character of our written sources, the later lives of eunuchs in Yemen are recorded in much greater detail than their beginnings. Al-Khazrajī's work in particular is rich in detail about the public lives of elite eunuchs. References to eunuchs are scattered throughout the author's chronicle *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, showing how closely the lives of these individuals were intertwined with the political and military events of their time. In addition, key data on eunuchs' lives are succinctly summarized in their biographies and obituaries.

7.1   *Biographical Texts as Windows into Eunuchs' Public Lives*

This section focuses on such biographical texts, a genre in which the political and military contributions of eunuchs in the Rasulid era are particularly visible. A close examination of key components of biographical texts reveals that a subset of high-ranking eunuchs were respected members of the Rasulid elite. The lives of sixteen eunuchs are documented in biographical texts, some both in obituaries and in biographies. While the obituaries are embedded in the historical narrative of al-Khazrajī's chronicle *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, appearing at the end of each year described, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir* consists of over four thousand biographies, arranged in alphabetical order.[126] Otherwise, the two text genres of obituary and biography are very similar in structure and content. They are usually between one paragraph and three pages long and contain rich information about the individual's careers.[127] This professional information is usually prefaced by a string of favourable attributes describing the person's character and qualities, as this example from the biography of the

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126   For a detailed analysis of the biographies contained in al-Khazrajī's *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾi-yya*, see Daniel Mahoney, "Obituaries in the Service of the Rasulid State: A Biographical Collection in an Early Fifteenth-Century Chronicle from South Arabia," in *Medieval Biographical Collections in Comparison: Perspectives from the Buddhist, Christian and Islamic Worlds* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

127   This chapter focuses on the biographies of eunuchs, examined in the broader context of male biographies in al-Khazrajī's work. It must be noted that the author also recorded a number of women's biographies which Noha Sadek has analysed with respect to Rasulid women's patronage practices ("Rasūlid Women: Power and Patronage," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 19 [1989]: 121–36).

eunuch Tāj al-Dīn Badr al-Muẓaffarī (d. 654/1256) illustrates: "He was an intelligent eunuch (*khādim*), of sound judgement, perfect, brave, fearless, possessing opinion and the skill of administration, management and leadership."[128] Later in the text, this characterization is further elaborated upon: "He was generous, highly determined, and of noble spirit. He loved knowledge and the learned."[129] Adjectives commonly used to describe the character of eunuchs match those of other high-ranking officials: generous, cultured, honourable, righteous, proud, intelligent and wise. Attributes expressing bravery, such as fearless, tough and determined, are also frequently used. Furthermore, as Badr's example has shown, political and administrative talent is often attributed to eunuchs. These descriptions are to a large extent formulaic; much attention is also given to poetic and rhetoric devices. Nevertheless, variations in the different biographical texts do reflect the individual characters of the eunuchs described. Consider for example the following quote from the obituary of the eunuch Iftikhār al-Dīn Yāqūt: "He was a tyrannical and belligerent man. In addition, he was very charitable, honouring the learned and the righteous."[130] Not only does the wording evoke a complex man; it also shows that not all attributes used in biographical texts were necessarily favourable. In fact, if we compare the adjectives commonly used to describe eunuchs with those found in the biographies of free men, no difference can be discerned. Despite their servile background and physical limitations, eunuchs were credited with the same qualities as free men, whose entries make up the bulk of the biographical texts recorded by al-Khazrajī. Based on this evidence, we can strongly rebuke Meillassoux's assertion (regarding slaves in general) that "through their mode of insertion into the receiving society and their univocal relationship with their owners they are *de-civilized* and even *de-personalized*".[131] While slavery may have left a lasting stigma even on the most cultured and high-ranking eunuch, his personal qualities were clearly acknowledged.

The greater portion of a biographical entry usually traces the steps in an individual's career over a lifetime. Tellingly, a eunuch's professional advancement is often directly attributed to the decisions of his owner, usually a sultan, who looms large in the text.[132] The biography of the eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar

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128   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 572.

129   Al-Khazrajī, 573.

130   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.249–I.250.

131   *Anthropology of Slavery*, 100, emphasis in the original.

132   The common phrasing is "he appointed him" (*jaʿlahu*), "he" usually being a sultan, and "him" the described eunuch (e.g. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2203; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.169).

al-Riḍwānī (d. 755/1355) is exemplary in this respect. The quote has been short-
ened to highlight the underlying thread of royal appointments:

> He served the noble lady […], the mother of our lord, the sultan al-Malik
> al-Mujāhid. She appointed him to be the administrator (*zimām*) of her
> household and assigned to him the command of her palace. His impor-
> tance increased, and his power grew, and a good conduct and favourable
> management manifested itself to him, until he obtained mercy from the
> sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid. He [the sultan] entrusted many of his com-
> mands to him and depended in many of his missions on him. […] Then
> he returned to Yemen, and the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid charged him to
> be envoy to the Egyptian lands […]. Then the sultan charged him another
> time in the year 755 [1355], and he boarded from the shore of al-Mukhā.[133]

This short quote elucidates how Jawhar's royal owners – the sultan al-Malik
al-Mujāhid and his mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ – were the driving force behind the
eunuch's career. In fact, eunuchs' biographies not only prove that eunuchs
could attain positions of high influence in Rasulid Yemen; they also illustrate
very clearly that their success depended entirely on their owners. Despite the
power, prestige and individual agency reverberating through these texts, career
decisions were usually imposed on the eunuch, reducing him to an executor
of his owner's commands. It must be pointed out, however, that direct con-
trol of the sultan over his subjects was a general feature of the Rasulid state;
as such, even free members of the military and administrative elite were usu-
ally expected to perform whatever assignment their sovereign entrusted them
with.

   A close reading of biographical texts from the Rasulid era provides rich
insights into the characters and careers of eunuchs during that time. It must be
noted, however, that the genre entails a strong selection mechanism, inasmuch
as it focuses exclusively on powerful and influential individuals. Biographical
entries offer a window into a very narrow subset of eunuchs in medieval Yemen
while ignoring eunuchs assigned to more modest tasks such as those por-
trayed in chapter 5. Among the eunuchs represented in the genre of biograph-
ical texts, a great majority had illustrious careers in the Rasulid military and
administration, and it is to their specific roles that we shall turn now. By com-
bining biographical entries with evidence from *al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*'s narrative,
it is possible to gain a fairly detailed picture of the public lives of high-ranking
Rasulid eunuchs. As we shall see, the occupations and tasks assigned to these

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133   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 628.

men resemble the better-known cases of the Abbasid and Mamluk dynasties. Eunuchs appear in Rasulid sources as top administrators, trusted advisors of rulers, military commanders and governors over castles and districts.

7.2   *Military and Political Positions Occupied by Eunuchs*

The first recorded example of a eunuch holding an important military office in Yemen stems from the late 4th/10th century, when a certain Marjān acted as vizier and de facto ruler over the crumbling Ziyadid reign.[134] During the Najahid dynasty which took over power from the Ziyadids, eunuchs do not appear to have been directly involved in politics and the military but rather occupied tasks related to royal women and children.[135] Conversely, by the time al-Khazrajī penned his works, eunuchs were frequently found within the army and administration, although their core responsibilities related to royal women and children remained intact (see below). Their heightened presence in the military in particular raises the question of whether Ayyubid or Mamluk influence might have extended the scope of eunuchs' employment in Yemen beyond the female quarters. Since the Rasulid state built upon and further elaborated the administrative system established by its predecessor and was in close contact and strongly influenced by its Egyptian contemporary, this seems very likely. Half of the thirty eunuchs recorded by name in al-Khazrajī's writings held high positions in the Rasulid military and/or political administration.[136] Analysing the roles of these men in the broader institutional context is difficult because modern scholarship on medieval Yemen still lacks a comprehensive analysis of the structure of the Rasulid army and government, as well as a detailed understanding of the terminology pertaining to its manifold ranks and positions. However, a number of publications have laid the groundwork in this respect,[137] and a close reading of the sources describing the lives of these

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134   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 10.

135   E.g. al-Ḥakamī, 10, 72.

136   In addition, al-Khazrajī mentions the eunuch Jawhar al-Muʿaẓẓamī, who served the Zurayʿid rulers Muḥammad b. Sabaʾ and his son Imran Muḥammad b. Sabaʾ in the 6th/12th century (*Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 632 ff.).

137   In his study on Rasulid commerce and trade, al-Shamrookh characterized the roles of sultan, deputy and vizier (*The Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids in the Yemen*, 75–98). Smith's article on the Rasulid administration mainly focuses on institutions and positions of political and economic administration, but a number of military offices and officials are also described ("Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen"). The dynasty's commercial administration is analysed in Vallet's work on the Rasulids as a trading power (*L'Arabie marchande*). Varisco's paper on bureaucracy in Rasulid Yemen (2013) offers fresh insights into its overall workings ("Why the Sultan Is Rich"). Daniel Mahoney's doctoral thesis examines the extent to which Rasulid state power permeated

eunuchs enables us to evaluate the nature of their professions through the narrative context. In addition, Ayalon's detailed studies on the role of eunuchs in the Mamluk army will serve as a useful comparative resource.[138]

Amirs

The highest military rank in Rasulid Yemen was that of amir. This title was awarded to members of the royal family, tribesmen and mamluks,[139] always upon the sultan's appointment. Only four Rasulid eunuchs are known to have borne the title of amir: Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf, who will be portrayed in detail below, Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ, Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣīnī, and Jamāl al-Dīn Marjān.

The sources furnish only little information about Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ (d. 666/1267). All that is known about his previous responsibilities is that in 628/1230–1, he was acting administrator (*zimām*) to the Rasulid queen Bint Hawza,[140] and in 659/1260, the sultan sent him to Sanaʿa to fill a power vacuum caused by the arrest of the city's governor.[141] His obituary and biographical entry speak of his capabilities and of the honours bestowed upon him by the sultan al-Malik al-Muẓaffar, whose governor he had been in childhood. It can be assumed that this closeness to al-Muẓaffar won him the position of amir once his protégé ascended to power.

The eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṣīnī (date of death unknown) appears three times in the narrative of the *ʿUqūd* but is remembered neither with an obituary nor with a biographical entry. In his first mention in 785/1383–4, he was captured by rebellious Maʿāziba tribesmen and later

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local power structures in the Dhamar plain ("The Political Landscape of the Dhamar Plain in the Central Highlands of Yemen in the Late Medieval and Early Ottoman Periods" [PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014]).

138   David Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 15, no. 2 (1953): 203–28; Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army II," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 15, no. 3 (1953): 448–76; Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army III," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 16, no. 1 (1954): 57–90.

139   For example, the amir Jamāl al-Dīn Aqwas al-Alfī is identified as mamluk (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.127). The Turkic names of many other amirs strongly suggest that these men were also mamluks.

140   Bint Hawza (also known as Bint Jawza) was the wife of the first Rasulid sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar (r. 626–47/1229–50) (al-Khazrajī, I.71).

141   The amir Shams al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Yaḥyā (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.132).

escaped.[142] Six years later, he reappears as governor (*wālī*) of Taʿizz, a highly influential position. Finally, in 794/1392, Jawhar is presented as amir of the castle of Taʿizz.

The last eunuch known to have held the position of amir is Jamāl al-Dīn Marjān (date of death unknown), who also lacks an obituary or biographical entry but is well documented in the narrative of *al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*. He was appointed as amir of Zabīd by the seventh Rasulid sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl in 787/1385.[143] Surprisingly, less than three months later al-Khazrajī mentions that another man was given the same position, only to be fired after a few years on account of his bad conduct.[144] Shortly afterwards, the eunuch Marjān was reinstated as amir.[145] Six years later, Marjān is mentioned as administrator of a woman who became the sultan's wife, attesting to his intimate association with his owner.[146]

In sum, the appointment of a eunuch to the position of amir was rare but not impossible. The four examples recorded by al-Khazrajī confirm that in exceptional cases, castrated slaves could attain the highest rank of the Rasulid military.

Governors and Representatives

Chief eunuchs were frequently appointed as governors (sg. *wālī*) of cities, castles and administrative regions.[147] Al-Khazrajī's standard phrasing for a sultan's appointment of a governor is *walāhu*.[148] Other expressions confer a similar meaning. For instance, the eunuch Iftikhār al-Dīn Yāqūt is both reported to have ruled (*malaka*) al-Dumluwa castle on behalf of Sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf[149] and to have been his owner's representative in it.[150] The Rasulid capital city of Zabīd itself was successively governed by the eunuchs Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿ

142　Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.176.

143　Al-Khazrajī, II.184.

144　The amir ʿIzz al-Dīn b. Muḥammad b. al-Fakhr (ʿAlī ibn Ḥasan Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-Fākhir*, II.186).

145　Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.196.

146　In 796/1394, al-Khazrajī, II.256.

147　In pre-Rasulid times, the celebrated eunuch Jawhar al-Muʿaẓẓamī had acted as governor (*wālī*) of al-Dumluwa castle during the late Zurayʿid period, al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-Fākhir*, I.632.

148　E.g. al-Khazrajī, 571.

149　Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.250.

150　Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-Fākhir*, 2243.

between 750/1349 and 751/1350,[151] and Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf between 771/1371 and 787/1385.[152] Kamāl al-Dīn Fātin (d. 794/1392) held the position of governor (*wālī*) of Thaʿbāt.[153]

Evidence for eunuchs acting as governors over castles during the reign of Sultan al-Mujāhid (721–64/1322–63) is more abundant. Before going on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 751/1350, the sultan installed Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿ as governor in the castle of Iryāb near Yarīm.[154] The biography of Shibl al-Dawla Kāfūr in *al-ʿIqd al-fākhir* mentions that he frequently acted as governor of the fortress of Taʿizz and of the nearby castle al-Dumluwa.[155] Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf was appointed as governor over Taʿizz castle and other unnamed fortifications.[156]

Owners of Revenue Estates

The Rasulids relied on the *iqtaʾ* system inherited from their Ayyubid predecessors in order to secure fiscal revenue, the loyalty of key actors and political control over their territories.[157] It consisted of the sultan bestowing the right to extract taxes from agricultural estates to members of the Rasulid family and high officials in return for their loyalty and service.[158] These revenue estates were not hereditary and could be taken away at any time. As such, the *iqtaʾ* system was an expression of the sultan's absolute control over his subjects and over Rasulid territory and figured as a powerful incentive for members of the elite to comply with the sultan's commands. Furthermore, it enabled the reigning sultan to appease and keep at bay potential rivals from within his family – chiefly his own brothers and sons.[159]

Four of the eunuchs portrayed by al-Khazrajī were awarded revenue estates by sultans, and not incidentally, these four are among the most prominent eunuchs in the author's works. Information on estate assignments is often presented in biographical entries, as the following example illustrates:

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151   Al-Khazrajī, 11.571.

152   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 11.148.

153   An area east of Taʿizz and location of a Rasulid summer residence. Al-Khazrajī, 11.239.

154   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-Fākhir*, 571.

155   Al-Khazrajī, 1745.

156   Al-Khazrajī, 560.

157   Sergeant and Lewcock, *Ṣanʿāʾ, an Arabian Islamic City*, 51. Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen."

158   *Iqtaʾ* is frequently translated as feudal system, which suggests misleading parallels to the medieval European context. To avoid such unwarranted associations, I follow Varisco's more neutral translation of the term as revenue estates, "Why the Sultan Is Rich," 14.

159   See, for example, al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 5.

The eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ al-Muẓaffarī also died in [666/1267]. He had been the freed slave[160] of al-Ghāzī b. Jibrīl.[161] Then he served with the sultan Nūr al-Dīn [al-Manṣūr ʿUmar], who made him educator (*lālā*)[162] of his son al-Muẓaffar, whom he educated in the best upbringing and utmost courtesy. And when the sovereign command passed on to the sultan al-Malik al-Muẓaffar, he conferred upon him a kettledrum[163] and made him owner of a yielding revenue estate. He was suitable for what he was appointed for, being brave, fearless, and very determined.[164]

It has been noted that appointees in the *iqtaʾ* system were usually relatives of the sultan and that such appointments were given as a reward for loyalty previously shown and expected in the future.[165] The above case can be considered a variation of this theme: having educated the young sultan al-Muẓaffar, Mukhtaṣṣ was part of the royal household and in some ways part of the extended Rasulid family network. Two other eunuchs were given revenue estates by sultan al-Muẓaffar after having supported the sultan's quest for the throne when it was severely challenged by multiple rivals.[166] Iftikhār al-Dīn Yāqūt, who won back al-Dumluwa which the sultan's brother al-Malik al-Mufaḍḍal had taken possession of,[167] was appointed estate owner of the city of al-Mahjam,[168] and Tāj al-Dīn Badr was recompensed with unnamed estates.[169] Finally, the sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl awarded the revenue estate of al-Qaḥma to the prominent

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160   *Mawlā*. The term has multiple meanings but most commonly denotes both the ex-slave and his former owner after manumission.

161   An infamous Ayyubid amir said to have poisoned the Ayyubid ruler al-Nāṣir Ayyūb b. Tughtakīn (609–11/1212–14). His biography is found in al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1688.

162   The term *lālā* is known from Mamluk sources, where it designated a guardian and educator of sultanic children (Ayalon, *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 272). Its use seems to have been rare in medieval Yemen; I have found no further occurrence in my sources. Perhaps the term came to Yemen with the Ayyubids and slowly fell out of use as the Rasulid era progressed.

163   Kettledrums (*ṭablkhāna*) were percussion instruments that originated in the Abbasid empire and later became widespread symbols of authority in the Islamic realm (Cf. H. G. Farmer, "Ṭabl-Khāna," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* [Brill, 2012]).

164   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 1.169–70.

165   Mahoney, "Political Landscape of the Dhamar Plain," 119.

166   The context was a conflict of succession that broke out after the death of Sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar in 647/1250, al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 1.88–121.

167   Al-Khazrajī, 1.249.

168   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2242.

169   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 1.120–1.

eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Marjān in 791/1389, after he had successfully quelled several tribal rebellions.[170]

Envoys

The Rasulid state regularly exchanged precious gifts with rulers in Egypt, Mecca, India, China and elsewhere as part of its diplomatic activities.[171] These lavish presents were usually accompanied by a group of high-ranking envoys (sg. *safīr*), among them a number of eunuchs. The role of Rasulid eunuchs as diplomatic envoys mirrors the situation in contemporary Egypt, where eunuchs were also favourite candidates for such tasks.[172] Al-Khazrajī records three eunuchs deployed to such expeditions. Two of them were assigned consecutively to a gift sent to Mamluk Cairo in 753/1352:

> In the month of Shaʿbān the honourable, the sultan sent a sublime present. Along with it went his son al-Nāṣir Aḥmad, and with him the judge Fatḥ al-Dīn ʿUmar b. Muḥammad b. al-Khatbāʾ, the amir Shams al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Hātim, and the chief eunuch (*ṭawāshī*) Niẓām al-Dīn Khuḍayr. They proceeded together to the Egyptian lands. The eunuch died in ʿAydhāb and was buried there. When the news of his death arrived, the sultan hastened to send the chief eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Riḍwānī. He proceeded in a hurry but reached them only when they had already entered Cairo.[173]

The profiles of the mentioned envoys – a son of the sultan, a judge, an amir and an influential chief eunuch – reflect the importance of political relations between Rasulid Yemen and Mamluk Egypt. Upon the sudden death of the chief eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Khuḍayr in the Egyptian port of ʿAydhāb, another eunuch was sent to replace him, suggesting that eunuchs performed specific functions that could not have been taken over by other members of this expedition. This second eunuch, Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Ridwānī, had occupied top positions in the Rasulid military and had served as administrator

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170   Al-Khazrajī, II.206.

171   E.g. anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.521–2. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.83–4. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 628, 810. There is no evidence for similar gift exchanges by Najahid rulers, attesting to their comparative isolation from the global political stage.

172   Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 334.

173   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.93.

(*zimām*)[174] to Jihat Ṣalāḥ, the mother of Sultan al-Mujāhid.[175] Three years after the above-described expedition, Jawhar was again tasked with bringing a present to Mamluk Cairo but fell victim to the Red Sea's notoriously treacherous waters:

> In this year [755/1354–5], the sultan sent a magnificent present to the lands of Egypt, and the chief eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Riḍwānī was in charge of it. But a reef encountered them near the mountain of Zaqr[176] [...] and he and those who were with him perished.[177]

The third eunuch figuring as envoy is Ṣārim al-Dīn Najīb, administrator (*zimām*) of the royal household during the reign of Sultan al-Mujāhid.[178] His biographical entry states:

> The sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid delegated him as envoy to Egypt in the truce of 762 [1360/1],[179] and he carried out the order fully. For this, he attained from the sultan a mighty position and weighty rank until the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid died.[180]

In the year 799/1396, the Mamluk historian Ibn Iyās reports that a gift from Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl arrived in Egypt, accompanied by a chief eunuch named Iftikhār al-Dīn Fākhir.[181]

These examples show that only those eunuchs most intimately connected to the Rasulid family were chosen to act as diplomatic envoys, and for a good reason. To send a subject of foreign slave descent who had no family in Yemen

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174 This term will be discussed in more detail below.

175 The eunuch's biography is also found in the biographical collection attributed to Sultan al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās, *Al-ʿAṭāyā al-Saniyya Waʾl-Mawāhib al-Ḥaniyya Fī al-Manāqib al-Yamaniyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid ʿAbd Allāh Aḥmad al-Khāmirī (Sanaʿa: Yemeni Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2004), 290–1.

176 Jabal Zuqar, the largest of the Ḥanīsh islands off the Yemeni coast.

177 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 11.101.

178 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2203.

179 Rasulid Yemen and Mamluk Egypt had a long waxing and waning rivalry concerning influence over Mecca. As will be discussed below, the sultan al-Mujāhid had been abducted from the holy sites in 735/1334 and held in Cairo for one year, out of the Mamluks' concern that he might take possession of the city.

180 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2203.

181 Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn Iyās al-Ḥanafī, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʿ al-duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo: Al-hayʾat al-maṣriya al-ʿāma lil-kitāb, 1974), 1: part 2, 487. This present included ten chief eunuchs (*khuddām ṭawāshiya*), four slaves (*ʿabīd*) and six female slaves (*jawārī*).

to a faraway land entailed the risk of escape: only eunuchs whose loyalty was tested and who had a standing to lose could be trusted to perform their duty abroad and return to their sovereign. As such, the practice of appointing eunuchs as envoys shows parallels to the deployment of slaves as their owners' business agents documented in Geniza sources.[182]

Treasurers and Paymasters

Ayalon has shown that eunuchs in Mamluk Egypt occupied important positions as financial administrators, chiefly as treasurers (sg. *khazindār*) and paymasters (sg. *shaddād*).[183] Our Rasulid evidence is limited in this respect but indicates that eunuchs in Yemen performed similar tasks. A case in point is the eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Thābit (d. 729/1328), whose obituary in *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* records him as treasurer (*khazindār*) of Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl.[184] Apart from this individual case, however, the documents contained in *Nūr al-maʿārif* suggest that the title of treasurer was usually assigned to mamluk amirs.[185] The treasury's general staff seems to also have been composed of mamluks, as demonstrated by a salary list containing overwhelmingly Turkic

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182   Geniza documents reveal that male slaves not only accompanied and supported merchants on business travels but were also sent abroad to conduct commerce on their behalf. The case study of the wealthy Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yijū and his Indian slave agent Bama in particular reveals a relationship of trust and affection (Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 66ff.). According to Goitein, merchants acquired slave agents while their own children were still young and relied on their help until they had adult sons who could join the trading enterprise. At this point, they would free their slave agents, who would henceforth be able to conduct business for their own profit. This dynamic explains why freedmen conducting business appear just as frequently in the Geniza sources as slave agents (Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, 13). Labīb has also noted that in late medieval Egypt, slaves supported merchants in their business dealings. His research into the *Kārimī*, a group of merchants active in the trade between Egypt and the Indian Ocean during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, reveals that merchants active in slave trading even sent their own slaves and freedmen to various slave markets to purchase on their behalf (Labīb, *Handelsgeschichte Ägyptens im Spätmittelalter*, 112, 287, 489). On the *Kārimī*'s involvement in slave trading, see Sato Tsugitaka, "Slave Traders and Karimi Merchants during the Mamluk Period," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (2006): 141–56.

183   Ayalon, *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 269–71; Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 92; Petry, "From Slaves to Benefactors," 60.

184   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.217.

185   Three amirs labelled as treasurers are mentioned in the *Nūr al-maʿārif*: Sayf al-Dīn Taghrīl, Fāris b. Aydamar and Sayf al-Dīn, anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.146, 1.576.

names.[186] The chief eunuch Ahyaf whose biography will be analysed below carried the title of paymaster (*shaddād*).[187] Another eunuch paymaster – Muftāḥ al-Shaddād – is mentioned in *Nūr al-maʿārif*.[188] All other individuals performing this function seem to have been slaves, although it is unclear whether they were eunuchs.[189]

Supervisors of Mamluks

A last domain where eunuchs would be expected to be strongly involved, namely the supervision and training of slave soldiers, remains somewhat of a mystery. While in Mamluk Egypt this constituted one of the primary fields of employment for eunuchs, Rasulid sources hardly offer any direct evidence for the same practice in Yemen.[190] An exception is the eunuch Ahyaf discussed below, who is described as having been appointed over soldiers several times. Additionally, a number of hints indicate that eunuchs were in some form involved in the supervision and training of slave soldiers. The best-documented example here concerns a group of slaves labelled as *jamdāriya*. Usually translated as "masters of the robe",[191] these slaves were charged with clothing sultans or high officials.[192] Ayalon has noted that the *jamdāriya* was one of the most common fields of employment for eunuchs during the Mamluk dynasty.[193]

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186   "Al-Khazindāriyya – 540: Moghulṭāy Hilālī 22.5, Yūsuf b. Lājīn Badrī 22.5, Lājīn Hilālī 22.5, al-ʿAsar 22.5, Bahādur Sulaymānī 22.5. Moghulṭāy Ḥasanī 22.5, Ṭawʿān 22.5, Sūdī Saghīr 22.5, Moghulṭāy ʿAlawī 22.5, Lājīn Sulaymānī 22.5, Moghulṭāy Harmūzī 22.5, Ṭaybaghā ʿAlawī 22.5, Balbāl Rūmī 22.5, Ṭarnaṭiyyā Maḥmūdī 22.5, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad ʿAzīz 22.5, Abū Bakr Qaysar 22.5, al-Muhannā al-Taymānī 22.5, Ali b. Lājīn ʿAdanī 22.5, ʿUthmān b. Aybak al-ʿAlawī 22.5, ʿAlī b. Andakīn al-Ḥāskar 22.5, Andakīn ʿAlawī 22.5, Aydamar al-Sharīfī 22.5, Sunjur al-Mawṣilī 22.5, Iyās al-Maṭgharī 22.5." Anonymous, I.568.

187   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.457.

188   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.566.

189   The *mihtār* (chief) Badr (mentioned twice, anonymous, II.128 (with the specification "slave (*ghulām*) of the honourable khazāna"), II.147. The *mihtār* Mufliḥ al-Shaddād and a certain Ṣabīḥ are mentioned by name (anonymous, II.128, I.566). Furthermore, the "paymaster slaves" (*al-ʿabīd al-shaddādūn*) are mentioned twice (anonymous, II.141, II.149).

190   Reuven Amitai, "The Mamlūk Institution, or One Thousand Years of Military Slavery in the Islamic World," in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Christopher L. Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

191   Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army I," 214. Linda Northrup, From Slave to Sultan: The Career of al-Mansur Qalawun and the Consolidation of Mamluk Rule in Egypt and Syria (678–689 AH/1279–1290 AD) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), 73.

192   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.560.

193   Ayalon, Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate, 271.

In Rasulid Yemen, the *jamdāriya* seems to have been composed chiefly of enslaved soldiers but headed by eunuchs. *Nūr al-maʿārif* contains convincing evidence to this effect. A list of salaries disbursed to masters of the robe during Ramadan in the year 693/1294 first mentions the chief eunuch Shibl al-Dawla Kāfūr, who received one hundred dinars. Then follow a number of individuals bearing Turkic names who were paid just over a fifth of Kāfūr's salary.[194] Such a setup suggests that Kāfūr acted as supervisor to a group of mamluk masters of the robe. This assumption is proven by al-Khazrajī, who introduces the same eunuch two years later as "commander (*muqaddam*) of the mamluks".[195]

Similar evidence can be gathered from a list of salaries disbursed to "the small mamluks, house slaves and entourage" in the month of Dhū al-Qāʿda of the same year.[196] The first group mentioned here are the "eunuch masters of the robe" (*al-khuddām al-jamdāriya*), comprising six individuals receiving higher salaries than the following categories. Furthermore, a list recording the distribution of sweets for the festival of mid-Shaʿban in 693/1294 includes a paragraph on "mamluks and their like".[197] It again opens with the eunuch Shibl al-Dawla Kāfūr, and then labels two unnamed individuals as "eunuch masters of the robe".[198] Eunuch masters of the robe also appear in a list of participants at the Ramadan banquets held in the fortress of Taʿizz in 692/1293.[199] Another list reveals that eunuchs were represented among the royal bodyguard (*jandāriya*), perhaps in the function of training or supervising the mamluks who formed its rank and file.[200]

Taken together, these scattered hints attest to the involvement of eunuchs in the supervision of mamluks during the Rasulid era. More generally, the narrative evidence discussed in this chapter documents in detail the pivotal roles played by high-ranking eunuchs in the Rasulid army. Their frequent deployment on military missions only made sense if they wielded effective authority over the sultan's mamluk troops. Ayalon has remarked that mamluks in contemporary Egypt accepted eunuchs as their military commanders, despite their servile state and loss of masculinity, because they had been raised and

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194   Another list entitled "al-jamdāriya", consisting of Turkic names and specifying salaries, further substantiates the theory that mamluks constituted the bulk of masters of the robe. Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.569, I.567–I.568.

195   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.289.

196   "[A]l-mamālīk al-ṣighār wa ʿabīd al-buyūtāt", anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.565.

197   "[A]l-mamālīk wa sawāhum", anonymous, II.146.

198   Here, the reverse term "al-jamdāriya al-khuddām" is used, anonymous, II.146.

199   Anonymous, II.142.

200   Anonymous, II.142.

trained by eunuchs from a young age.[201] Although hard evidence to this effect is difficult to come by, it is probable that a similar dynamic shaped the relationship between eunuchs and mamluks in Rasulid Yemen.

As a final, exemplary piece of evidence for the strong involvement of eunuchs in the highest ranks of the Rasulid military and political administration, let us now take a close look at the career of a remarkable individual.

7.3   Case Study: the Chief Eunuch Ahyaf

Among the eunuchs populating Rasulid sources is a man whose frequent appearance and full name bear testimony to his political weight: Abū al-Ḥāzim Ahyaf b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ashrafī al-Afḍalī al-Mujāhidī al-Muʿayyadī, also known as Amīn al-Dīn.[202] His life story is highly instructive for the position of eunuchs in the Rasulid military and government in general. Ahyaf's biographical entry in *al-ʿIqd al-fākhir* opens with the following remarkable characterization:

> He was a eunuch (*khādim*) of sound judgement, a horseman, energetic, brave, audacious, a shedder of blood, cultured and solemn. He was one of the senior amirs, highly determined, of great spirit, severe in attack and of honest resolve.[203]

Ahyaf's ambiguous personality is described even more bluntly in *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*:

> In this year [787/1385] died the chief eunuch Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf al-Mujāhidī. He was resolute, courageous, tough, wayward, bloodshedding, murderous, crude, uncouth, resolute, determined, canny, haughty, of great prestige and of severe spirit. He was brave, fearless in battle, and a good advisor to the sultan.[204]

Al-Khazrajī's description of Ahyaf evokes a complex character rather than a static ideal type. As the writer and the eunuch were contemporaries, it is quite probable that they knew each other; at the very least, al-Khazrajī's account is based on contemporary information. The author then traces in detail the steps of Ahyaf's remarkable career:

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201   Ayalon, Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans, 33.
202   In addition to the sources below, Ahyaf's biography is also included in al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿasjad al-masbūk fīman walā al-Yaman min al-mulūk*, MS 446, and in Bā Makhrama, *Qilāda al-naḥr fī wafayāt aʿyān al-dahr* (Bū Jumʿat Makarī/Khālid Zawārī, 2008), VI, 335.
203   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 559.
204   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.183.

He served four kings, the first of whom was al-Mūʾayyad, then his son al-Mujāḥid, then his son al-Afḍal, then his son al-Ashraf. He was the only one to advise the sultans, managing and controlling fully the matters he had been entrusted with. He did not know partiality in his words or deeds. He was the first whom the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid promoted. He entrusted him with the fortresses, charged him with the matters of the missions, and appointed him over the soldiers. He was hard-headed and did not turn away from his determined goal. He [al-Malik al-Mujāhid] also entrusted him with the Taʿizz fortress more than once, and the days of his rule were the best days because of the complete safety and justice in the laws with which he surrounded the people. The strong and the weak, the lowly and the honourable were on one level. He was severe in punishment, reckless with the sword. He did not know forgiveness for anyone. [...] He killed many of the people of Taʿizz and others. When Zabīd degenerated because of the multitude of corruptors present in the Afḍalī state, the sultan al-Malik al-Afḍal, God have mercy on him, entrusted him with a division of soldiers. And he went there and stationed with his soldiers outside the city and forbade the soldiers to enter it. His lodging was at the Labīq wall, east of the city. He continued to mislead its people until he made them come out with force, with the sword. He killed a great number of them, and then the sultan entrusted him with his famous assignment. He remained [Zabīd's] governor for fourteen years, ten months and fifteen days. In the period of his rule over it, the sultan al-Malik al-Afḍal, may God have mercy on him, ordered the construction of the wall and the trenches. He built the wall with a reinforced structure and repaired the trenches with good reinforcements. [...] His mentioned period as governor began on the 21st of Dhū al-Hijja in the year 772 [1371]. He died on Thursday, the 25th of Shawwāl in the year 787 [1385]. [...] God, who be exalted, have mercy on him.[205]

Ahyaf's biography conveys the image of a remarkable man. The first striking detail is that he served four Rasulid sultans consecutively: al-Mūʾayyad Dawūd,[206] al-Mujāḥid ʿAlī,[207] al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās[208] and al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl.[209] Although his date of birth is unknown, we can deduct from the information given that he

205   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 559.
206   Reigned 696–721/1297–1322.
207   Reigned 721–64/1322–63.
208   Reigned 764–78/1363–76.
209   Reigned 778–803/1376–1400.

must have served the Rasulid dynasty for an impressive minimum of sixty-six years. This not only proves that Ahyaf was held in high regard by his successive owners but also suggests an early start of his career, which would be consistent with the previously discussed practice of bringing eunuchs to Yemen at a young age. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that Ahyaf contributed to Rasulid rule in Yemen for a much longer timespan than his royal owners, albeit at a lower level. His career was built on a combination of unwavering loyalty to his owners and an impetus for decisive action. Information on his professional advancement contained in his biography is confirmed and complemented by frequent appearances in the narrative of *al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*. In 729/1328–9, Ahyaf took possession of the city of Manṣūra[210] which had been the scene of an insurgency.[211] For the following two decades, the eunuch is absent from the historical record. In 751/1350, he reappears when the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid appoints him as commander (*muqaddam*)[212] and paymaster (*shaddād*)[213] in the castle of Taʿizz before leaving on a fateful pilgrimage to Mecca during which he was deported to Egypt.[214] In the ensuing political crisis, Ahyaf acted with great assertiveness (see the section "Eunuchs and Rasulid women" below). He put to death two men he suspected of plotting against the sultan, a eunuch and a judge acting as vizier,[215] and subsequently appointed their successors, even though such high-level positions were usually only filled by the sultan himself. While both the sultan and his powerful mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ were absent from Yemen (the latter being on her return journey from Mecca), Ahyaf acted as the highest representative of Rasulid authority in Yemen and persecuted anyone who challenged the established political order. Ahyaf's unwavering loyalty to the sultan and his mother was rewarded upon their return to Yemen.

In 753/1352, the sultan placed Ahyaf and two judges at the head of a military campaign charged with crushing a revolt in Baʿdān,[216] an infamously

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210   A city at the south foot of the Dumluwa mountains. Cf. Redhouse's note in al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, III.178.

211   Al-Khazrajī, II.52.

212   My translation of *muqaddam* as commander follows Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army II," 206.

213   Redhouse translates this term as "paymaster". Vallet only mentions the function of *shadd* and translates it as "inspecteur" (Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 669).

214   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.84.

215   The eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿand the judge Muwaffaq al-Dīn, al-Khazrajī, II.85ff.

216   "[A] well-known range of difficult hills in about lat.14°N., long. 44°30′ E., north of ʾIbb and Ḥabb, and east of Saḥūl, mentioned in every one of the authorities, and marked on all maps as "Baadan'" (al-Khazrajī, II.178). The sultan's military commanders had unsuccessfully attempted to conquer this mountain region already in 727/1326–7 (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya,* II.36). In 752/1351–2, al-Khazrajī reports, the people of Baʿdān

independent mountain region north of Ibb. Rasulid troops had already failed to subjugate the people of Baʿdān in 727/1326–7,[217] and Ahyaf's attempt was equally fruitless. Nevertheless, his stellar career continued to advance.

After almost two decades of absence from the historical record, Ahyaf is mentioned again in 771/1369. Sultan al-Mujāhid ʿAlī had meanwhile been succeeded by his son Al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās, who charged the eunuch with taking control of Zabīd. The city had witnessed both a revolt by the ʿAwārīn,[218] a group of tribesmen in the Rasulid service, and an attempted conquest by troops of the Zaydi imam.[219] Ahyaf arrived in Zabīd shortly after a Rasulid amir[220] had persuaded the insurgents to reaffirm their loyalty to the sultan, and the Zaydi troops had retreated northwards. Although the amir had promised them a general amnesty, the ʿAwārīn were so alarmed at the eunuch's arrival that they locked the city gates. Through decisiveness and cunning, Ahyaf succeeded in storming the city and punished the insurgents brutally. After this success, he was nominated governor (*wālī*) over the city, a position he kept until his death.[221]

Ahyaf ruled Zabīd with an iron fist, as the following episode illustrates. In 777/1375, the Zaydi imam al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn[222] had advanced far into the Tihāma plain, prompting the governors of its smaller towns to flee to Zabīd. With no opposition standing in their way, the imam and his troops swiftly advanced to Zabīd and besieged it. Al-Khazrajī provides the following first-hand account of the events:

> The eunuch Ahyaf was in those days the amir in the city. He had requested the sheikhs of the villages and commanded them to gather their men and have them in readiness until they receive his news, and that none

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rebelled, and a year later, the sultan sent a force against them, placing at its head two judges and the eunuch Ahyaf. Their operation failed. In 754/1353, finally, the conquest of the Baʿdān mountains was again attempted, this time through an extraordinary show of force from the Rasulid military. Led by the eunuch al-Dīn Abū Malʿaq and other top military officials, 550 horsemen and twelve thousand foot soldiers surrounded the mountains (al-Khazrajī, 11.80). However, the leader of Baʿdān devised a stratagem so clever that it led to the sultan's troops falling apart and fleeing. Finally, in 775/1373–4, the leader of Baʿdān was murdered in a plot and his head sent to the sultan. Even after this incident, the Rasulids' relationship with the people of Baʿdān remained contentious.

217 Al-Khazrajī, 11.36.
218 Al-Khazrajī, 111.177.
219 Al-Khazrajī, 11.141ff.
220 Sayf al-Dīn al-Khurāsānī; al-Khazrajī, 1.144.
221 Al-Khazrajī, 11.548.
222 Reigned 773–93/1371–90.

of them should delay, lest they face the most severe punishment. He was
determined to attack the [imam's] camp in one of those nights, with the
soldiers who were in Zabīd and all of the villagers. The news reached [the
imam] from one of the villagers, and he hastened to turn back. He did not
stay longer than three days and set out to return on the fourth.[223]

As this anecdote shows, Ahyaf was able to command not only over the soldiers
stationed in Zabīd but also over the tribal sheikhs and their men who had fled
to the city from surrounding areas. Furthermore, the mere threat of an immi-
nent attack by Ahyaf and his followers sufficed to put the imam to rout. Stories
like this one portray Ahyaf as a skilled and widely feared military commander.
In other source passages, his capacities as decisive administrator come to
the fore:

> While he was in Zabīd, he had authority over who was in Aden, Taʿizz
> and Ḥarad. He had authority over who was beyond the sea, from the
> people of ʿAwān[224] and Zaylaʿ and other remote places. For if someone
> had complained to him about a debtor of his who was absent from the
> country and its territories, and was in any of the sultan's countries, he
> wrote a summons for him and sent with it a group of soldiers and guards.
> Either [the debtor] satisfied his adversary, or he returned and tended to
> his case. If he refused to come or to comply, the eunuch forced his family
> and his relatives, or his representative (*wakīl*) or slaves, to comply with
> what was charged against him. If he had no party (*ʿāqila*) in the country,
> he forced those arriving in Zabīd from among the people of his country of
> residence to comply with what was charged against him. The sultan had
> set free his hand in the country, and no command was superior to his.[225]

This passage is striking in several ways. First, it indicates that Rasulid influence
extended to territories beyond Yemen,[226] specifically mentioning two ports on

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223   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 11.154–5.

224   ʿAwān first appears in Yemeni sources in the 7th/13th century (Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Traveller
       in Thirteenth-Century Arabia*, 246). According to Vallet, this port city is last mentioned
       in *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya* (*L'Arabie marchande*, 403). The exact location of ʿAwān remains
       unknown, but it seems to have temporarily functioned as alternative to Zaylaʿ in the trade
       between Ethiopia and Yemen (Vallet, 402).

225   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 11.149.

226   Vallet has examined Rasulid influence in the Red Sea, Mecca and India more closely, con-
       ceding that a dearth of sources precludes a full understanding of its extent and nature
       (Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 419ff., 426ff., 562f.).

the Ethiopian coast. Second, the text reinforces the image of Ahyaf as a powerful political figure. Not only did he command obedience within the city he governed; he also forced his citizens living abroad to meet their financial duties. In a regionally mobile mercantile society like medieval Yemen, this form of extensive governance was of great importance. The last sentence of al-Khazrajī's description states it boldly: "The sultan had set free his hand in the country, and no command was superior to his." The author clearly considered his contemporary to be among the highest officials of the Rasulid state at the time and displayed admiration for him. However, al-Khazrajī also records anecdotes that cast a shadow on Ahyaf's reputation. In 783/1381, for example, the sultan deposed a judge who had been unjust to the people in the Sihām region and handed him over to Ahyaf, whose brutal treatment led to the judge's death.[227] Two years later, Ahyaf mistreated his own scribe (*kātib*) until he died and confiscated his property.[228] In the closing sentence of Ahyaf's obituary, al-Khazrajī masterfully encapsulates the whole spectrum of Ahyaf's complex personality:

> He honoured the learned and paid them respect. He possessed noble traits, morals, and honest principles. He continued to be governor in Zabīd for just a few days less than fifteen years. He had little greed for the people's money. He was religious in his soul. He always remained in complete purity. He knew nothing of hypocrisy but was reckless with the sword. He destroyed many people, rightfully and without reason. May God, who be exalted, forgive him.[229]

Combined evidence from narrative and biographical sources has enabled us to reconstruct a life spent at the very centre of the Rasulid state apparatus. While Ahyaf was certainly an exceptional man, his career vividly illustrates the leading role assigned to eunuchs in the Rasulid military and political administration more broadly.

8 Eunuchs and Rasulid Women

The demand for eunuchs at Islamic courts has commonly been linked to the practice of secluding royal women from the public. Eunuchs, the argument

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227   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.172.
228   In 785/1383, al-Khazrajī, II.176.
229   Al-Khazrajī, II.183.

went, were the only male subordinates who could safely police the separa-
tion of women from the outside world and from male-dominated spheres of
the palace, without themselves posing a threat to their modesty. In Western
perception, then, eunuchs in Islamic societies became intrinsically linked to
the harem. As such, their role was long interpreted against the backdrop of a
widely misunderstood institution. A stereotyped image of the harem, based
largely on distorted accounts of the Ottoman imperial palace in 17th-century
French travelogues, became a popular trope in Western literature and schol-
arship.[230] At the same time, widely held perceptions of the harem and the
seclusion of women in Islamic societies have been critically re-examined by
scholars of women's history.[231] Since the early 2000s, detailed studies such as
El Cheikh's analysis of the court of the eighteenth Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir
(r. 295–320/908–32) uncovered both the diversity of harems in different tem-
poral and spatial settings and the constant changes which these institutions
underwent over time.[232] Such nuanced research, based on primary sources,
has confirmed that separate female and male spheres were indeed a consti-
tutive element of medieval Islamic courtly societies while at the same time
spurring a thorough reappraisal of the nature of the female domain. These
case studies rebuke the assumption that harems were merely the locus of sex
and family matters while political decision-making took place exclusively in
the male sphere. For instance, El Cheikh portrays al-Muqtadir's harem as "first
and foremost a political arena in which high-positioned women participated
in major caliphal politics".[233] This assessment resonates strongly with anthro-
pological findings that gender segregation does not automatically reduce
the agency of women.[234] Rather, as Yossef Rapoport has emphasized for the

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230   Cf. Reina Lewis, Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem
      (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 4, 183.

231   An early example is Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn
      al-Rashīd* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); more recent studies include Leslie
      P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, Studies in
      Middle Eastern History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Nadia Maria El Cheikh,
      "Revisiting the Abbasid Harems," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1, no. 3 (2005):
      1–19; Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society"; Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*;
      Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam*
      (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

232   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate."

233   El Cheikh, 11–12.

234   E.g. Carla Makhlouf, *Changing Veils: Women and Modernisation in North Yemen* (London:
      Croom Helm, 1979); Lila Abu-Lughod, "A Community of Secrets: The Separate World of
      Bedouin Women," *Signs* 10, no. 4 (1985): 637–57.

Mamluk era, "the gendered spheres of women were complementary, rather than subordinate, to those of men".[235]

Despite such thorough re-evaluations of the female sphere in Islamic courtly societies, the roles of eunuchs in these settings have largely evaded critical scrutiny. Scholarly portrayals of Islamic eunuchs are still too often fitted to an antiquated understanding of the harem and its female inhabitants. El Cheikh, who contributed a highly illuminating analysis of the various roles performed by eunuchs at the court of Caliph al-Muqtadir, nevertheless contends that their large numbers are explained by "the need to keep an eye on women for twenty-four hours a day",[236] evoking an old-fashioned idea of harem dwellers as idle prisoners in a golden cage. She also contends that "[a]ccess to women gave eunuchs opportunities to influence men in high positions by means of their feminine connections within the harem",[237] without contemplating the reverse possibility of royal women exercising influence through their eunuchs. Conversely, Toledano notes in his seminal study of African eunuchs at the Ottoman court that "the more powerful the ladies of the Court were, the more influential the eunuchs became".[238] His observation suggests that royal women may have used eunuchs to increase their political clout. Manuela Marín, examining the roles of women in Al-Andalus, remarks that eunuchs and elite women joined forces to turn the inner spheres of the castle into a locus of power.[239] De la Puente, also working on medieval Islamic Spain, raises the important question of whether eunuchs might have served as representatives of women outside the harem walls.[240] Such nuanced assessments and questions lead the way to a more differentiated appraisal of eunuchs' roles vis-à-vis elite women at medieval Islamic courts.

The remainder of this section aims to undertake such an appraisal through a critical examination of Yemeni source material. Unfortunately, this undertaking is rendered difficult by the lack of foundational research concerning women in the Rasulid era. While the theory and practice of gender segregation in modern Yemen has been thoroughly analysed for various regions and social

235   Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 45.
236   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 237.
237   El Cheikh, 237.
238   Toledano, "Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul," 382.
239   Manuela Marín, *Mujeres en Al-Ándalus* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000), 569.
240   Cristina de la Puente, *Sin linaje, sin alcurnia, sin hogar: eunucos en al Andalus en la época omeya*, vol. Identidades marginales, EOBA, 13 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2003), 172.

groups,[241] the lived realities of women in the medieval period are still grossly understudied. A notable exception is Noha Sadek's work. Her articles of 1988 and 1993 in particular shed light on women of the Rasulid family, showcasing their roles as founders of religious endowments and patrons of architecture.[242] Otherwise, the scattered evidence on women's life-worlds in medieval Yemeni sources still awaits systematic study.[243] As examining the extent and exact nature of female seclusion in the Rasulid era goes beyond the scope of this study, we must content ourselves with a brief sketch based on the sources analysed for this book.

While the term *ḥarīm* is occasionally found in medieval Yemeni texts,[244] it does not bear the spatial connotation of a "women's quarter" but rather refers to wives or female family members. Nor are other words used to denote parts of a palace or household specifically allocated to women. Yet, as we shall see below, *Nūr al-maʿārif* documents the households of Rasulid women and the roles played by eunuchs therein in some detail. The exact spatial arrangements remain unclear, but it seems that parts of royal residences were occupied by female members of the sultan's family together with their servants and slaves. Rasulid women were not entirely confined to the royal residences but are described as travelling both to perform the *ḥajj* and to move between different palaces, castles and fortresses, usually accompanied by a eunuch and their entourage.

Common portrayals of eunuchs as supervisors of princesses and queens contain a central tension: How could they control the movements and actions of their royal mistresses, who were their superiors in rank and often their owners? This portrayal of the eunuch – women relationship not only presupposes a lack of female agency but also presumes a high degree of agency on the

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241   E.g. Susan Dorsky, *Women of ʿAmran: A Middle Eastern Ethnographic Study* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986); Makhlouf, *Changing Veils*; Mundy, *Domestic Government*; Anne Meneley, "Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin-de-Siècle Yemen: Chador Barbie and Islamic Socks," *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (2012): 214–43; Anna Würth, *As-Sariʿa fi Bab al-Yaman: Recht, Richter und Rechtspraxis in der familienrechtlichen Kammer des Gerichts Süd-Sanaa (Republik Jemen), 1983–1995* (Berlin: Dincker & Humboldt, 2000); Gingrich, "Ehre, Raum und Körper"; vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen*; Marie-Christine Heinze, *Weiblichkeit und öffentlicher Raum im Jemen*, ed. Stephan Conermann, Bonner Islamwissenschaftliche Hefte (Bonn: EB-Verlag, 2006).

242   Sadek, "Rasūlid Women"; Noha Sadek, "In the Queen of Sheba's Footsteps: Women Patrons in Rasulid Yemen," *Asian Art* 6, no. 2 (1993): 14–27.

243   ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥibshī has published a collection of women's biographical evidence gleaned from various Yemeni sources (*Muʿjam al-nisāʾ al-yamaniyāt* [Sanaʿa: Dār al-fikr al-maʿāṣir, 1988]).

244   E.g. anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.139; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.194.

part of eunuchs, despite their enslaved status. A more thorough examination of this complex relationship can only be gained by examining the textual evidence in detail, which will now be done for the Rasulid case.

8.1   *The Naming of Rasulid Women after Their Eunuchs*

The relationship between royal women and their eunuchs in Rasulid Yemen is epitomized by a naming convention of the time. Despite being comparatively well documented in al-Khazrajī's works, the wives, sisters and daughters of the Rasulid elite are usually not known by their own given names. Instead, they were referred to by the name of a eunuch, male family member or husband. This was achieved with the help of the Arabic noun "jiha", a term generally denoting a place or direction. The related verb w-j-h signifies "to face" (verb form III), in the double sense of "to confront" and "to turn towards" familiar from the English language, as well as "to surpass in dignity and rank" (verb form I).[245] This latter meaning explains why *jiha* was first used at the Seljuk and then at the Mamluk court as a honorific title for royal women, and then acquired a similar meaning in Yemen.[246] However, while in the Mamluk context the title *jiha* was paired with the woman's own name, in Yemen the title usually preceded the name of the eunuch who was in charge of a woman's household.[247] A eunuch performing such a role usually carried the title of *zimām*. Smith translates the term as "head of the court",[248] giving justice to the frequent use of the composite "zimām al-bāb" or "zimām al-bāb al-sharīf" in Rasulid sources, which designated the *zimām* in charge of the sultanic household.[249] Other eunuchs bearing the title *zimām* were assigned over smaller Rasulid residences such as castles and fortresses.[250] Most frequently, however, the term was used to describe a particular relationship between eunuchs and royal women. In this context, scholars of Mamluk Egypt have

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245   Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, supplement 3049. Steingass, *Arabic–English Dictionary*, 1200.

246   Ḥassān Ḥallāq and ʿAbbās Ṣabbāgh, *Al-Muʿjam al-jāmiʿ fīl-muṣṭalaḥāt al-ʿuthmāniyya dhāt al-uṣūl al-ʿarabiyya wa al-fārisiya wa al-turkiya* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿilm lil-malāʾīn, 1999), 69. Sadek, "Rasūlid Women," 121. Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 525.

247   See also Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 525ff. As there is no agreed-upon translation for *jiha*, the Arabic word will be retained or simply translated as "lady" throughout this book.

248   Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen," 230.

249   E.g. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.150. Similarly, in the Mamluk context, Petry translates the title as "chief eunuch and fiscal officer of the sultan's household" ("From Slaves to Benefactors," 600). Varisco translates the term as "head" (Daniel M. Varisco, "Heirs of the Ayyubids: The Formation of the Rasulid State in Yemen" [Annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, New Orleans: unpublished, n.d.], 10).

250   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.94.

translated *zimām* as guardian or supervisor,[251] terms which in my opinion do not accurately represent such relationships in the Rasulid context. For reasons that will become increasingly clear, I suggest translating the title as "administrator" instead.

Rasulid royal women, then, were usually referred to by the name of their eunuch administrator. The wife of Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl, for example, was known by the name of Jihat Muʿtab, after her *zimām* Jamāl al-Dīn Muʿtab al-Ashrafī.[252] It appears that many eunuchs were both entrusted with the administration of royal residences – including the households of royal women – and pursued military careers. For example, the eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ is first mentioned as administrator of Bint Hawza, wife of Sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar[253] and thirty years later features as the leader of several military expeditions.[254] Similarly, al-Khazrajī's chronicle mentions the chief eunuch Marjān as engaged in military and political missions for Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl between 786/1384 and 791/1389.[255] A few years later, the sultan entrusted the eunuch with the administration of his young bride, who became known as Jihat Marjān.[256]

The practice of naming Rasulid women after their eunuch administrator is conspicuous in the lists of allowances, provisions and gifts contained in *Nūr al-maʿārif*. Similar evidence can also be found in *Al-ʿiqd al-fākhir*, which contains a chapter devoted entirely to women. It consists of the biographies of twelve women, five of whom carry the names of their eunuch administrators.[257]

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251   Marmon, Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society, 8.

252   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.180, II.227–8.

253   This mention is from the year in 628/1230–1 (al-Khazrajī, I.47).

254   In 658/1259–60 (al-Khazrajī, I.132), Mukhtaṣṣ's obituary also reveals that Sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar appointed him educator of his son and successor al-Muẓaffar (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, I.169, see the following section).

255   In 786/1384 (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.180), 787/1385 (al-Khazrajī, II.184), 790/1388 (al-Khazrajī, II.196) and 791/1389 (al-Khazrajī, II.206).

256   This occurred in the year 796/1394 (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.256).

257   Al-Dār al-Ṣalāḥī or Jihat Ṣalāḥ, named after the chief eunuch (*ṭawāshī*) Shihāb al Din Ṣalāḥ (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2499). Jihat Ṭughā, named after the chief eunuch Jamāl al-Din Ṭughā b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Afḍalī (al-Khazrajī, 2502). Al-Dār al-Fāʾiz, named after Kamāl al-Dīn Fāʾiz b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Muʾayyadī (2503). Al-Ḥurra Luʾluʾ, whose eunuch is not mentioned, but because the name Luʾluʾ (pearl) was only given to slaves, we can be confident that she was called after a eunuch bearing this name (2504). Jihat al-Muʿtabiya, named after Jamāl al-Dīn Muʿtab b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ashrafī (2504). Of the other women, two were named after their brothers (al-Dār al-Wāthiqī: 2507, al-Dār al-Shamsī: 2497), one after her husband (al-Dār al-Najmī: 2508) and one after her father (al-Ḥurra al-Malika Sayyida Bint Aḥmad al-Ṣulayḥī: 2488). The names of two women are not explained (al-Ḥurra Ḥilāl: 2487, al-Dār al-Dumluwī: 2488), but it is likely that the former

This peculiar naming practice figures as powerful metaphor for the nature of the relationship between eunuchs and elite women: just as the names of eunuchs substituted the women's own names in public utterances and writing, eunuchs represented their mistresses in male-dominated spheres.

8.2   *Evidence from Nūr al-maʿārif*

Nūr al-maʿārif offers rich evidence on the relationships between royal women and their eunuchs, particularly in extensive lists of sweets and meat handed out as gifts during religious celebrations,[258] and in lists of supplies allocated to members of the royal family.[259] In the former type of list, mentions of royal women referred to by their eunuchs' names abound but are difficult to contextualize. The supply lists are often muddled and incomplete, and ambiguous vocabulary further hampers the analysis. Nevertheless, they can offer a number of insights into the position of eunuchs in the households of Rasulid women. Five such supply lists concern royal women referred to by their eunuchs' name: the lady of the chief eunuch Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr (later spelled Fākhir) residing in Zabīd,[260] the lady of the chief eunuch ʿAzīz al-Dawla Rayḥān al-Luqmānī in the castle of al-Dumluwa,[261] the lady of the chief eunuch ʿAnbar in the fortress of al-Taʿkar,[262] and the lady of the chief eunuch Shāfiʿ al-Dumluwī, presumably also residing in al-Dumluwa castle.[263] The lists specify in detail the food and monetary allocations given to these women and

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was also named after a eunuch, and the latter after her residence, al-Dumluwa castle. The only woman listed with her own name is the famed Sulayhid queen and regent Asmāʾ bint Shihāb (2485).

258   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.119–41, II.143–9.

259   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.525–33: presents and pensions given by the sultan; I.534–9: supply of the palace during times excluding Ramadan; I.533–47: supply to royal women; I.554–9: pensions given to the sultan's nephews; I.580–1: presents and pensions given by the sultan; II.88–90: supplies during Ramaḍān; II.119–30: distribution of sweets during the mid-Shaʿbān festival; II.132–3: gifts given to royal women during ʿīd; II.145–50: sweets distributed during ʿīd. For an analysis of the network furnishing supplies to Rasulid households, see Vallet, "Pouvoir, commerce et marchands," 309–14. Tamon Baba, "Yemen under the Rasūlids during the 13th Century," *Chroniques du Manuscrit au Yémen* 17 (2014), consulted online on 11.10.2024 (https://doi.org/10.4000/cmy.2041).

260   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.525–9.

261   Anonymous, I.529.

262   Anonymous, I.548.

263   Anonymous, I.550. Additionally, shorter lists or mentions in supply and gift lists also feature royal women known by their eunuchs' names: watermelon rations distributed to different eunuchs and royal women in Zabid (I.408); supplies given to the lady of the chief eunuch Mubashar during Ramadan (II.90); drinks allocated to the lady of Shukr and the lady of al-Ṭaḥawī (II.9).

their entourage, mentioning the share of each person or category of persons separately. In this way, they provide the reader with insights into the composition of Rasulid households and various occupations at the royal court as well as the different types of servants and slaves working for elite women. However fragmentary, the supply lists included in *Nūr al-maʿārif* augment our knowledge of the eunuch institution in important ways.

To begin with, these documents prove that eunuch administrators were the highest-ranking officials in the households of Rasulid women. Not only was the royal woman and her household known by her chief eunuch's name; he also obtained a much larger salary than all other employees and slaves mentioned. It also becomes clear that the household of a Rasulid woman comprised a number of other eunuchs of lower rank. For example, lists of supplies given to the lady of the chief eunuch Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr specify clothing allowances for "senior" and "junior eunuchs" (*al-khuddām al-kibār/al-ṣighār*).[264] The difference in rank between various eunuchs is underlined by the unequal amounts of salaries and allowances allocated to them. The chief eunuch Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr obtained a monthly salary of twenty dinars, while the other eunuchs in his household were given between five and two dinars.[265] The following quote from a list of supplies given to the lady of ʿAzīz al-Dawla Rayḥān al-Luqmānī exemplifies the hierarchies that existed between eunuchs:

> Clothing of the eunuchs and chief eunuchs: [for] a full year six hundred.
> For the chief eunuch especially: one hundred per year.
> The eunuchs under his supervision: fifteen persons, five hundred.
> The owners of forty [those receiving forty dinars]: five persons, two hundred.
> The owners of thirty [those receiving thirty dinars]: ten persons, three hundred.
> Amount for heating[266] for the eunuchs: 150.[267]

Based on this and similar information, it becomes evident that the eunuch by whose name a Rasulid woman was known stood at the head of her household. He managed the other eunuchs living under the roof of his mistress who occupied a variety of different ranks. What remains unclear is whether the

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264   Anonymous, I.525–6.

265   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*.

266   Jāzim suggests that this amount was spent on blankets and firewood to protect the eunuchs from the cold in al-Dumluwa castle (Anonymous, I.530).

267   Anonymous, II.529–30.

differences in rank between lower-level eunuchs were due to diverging occupations, age or other factors.

Finally, it is remarkable just how many eunuchs worked in the households of Rasulid women. The smallest recorded female household, administered by the chief eunuch Shāfiʿ al-Dumluwī, comprised nine other, lower-ranking eunuchs.[268] Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr had between seventeen and twenty-one eunuchs under his supervision, and Rayḥān Luqmānī fifteen or sixteen.[269] The household of Jihat ʿAnbar included sixty-three eunuchs whose names consistently appear in several documents.[270] Among the women recorded in the sources analysed, Jihat ʿAnbar is also the only one who had more than one chief eunuch at her service; in addition to ʿAnbar, her household also comprised the chief eunuchs Muḥsin and Hilāl, who however received less than half of ʿAnbar's salary[271] and clothing allowance.[272]

What might justify the presence of so many eunuchs in the homes of Rasulid women? Both Ayalon and El Cheikh explain the high numbers of eunuchs in the Abbasid harem by the fact that women needed to be constantly monitored, which required the eunuchs to take several shifts.[273] Toledano reports that in late 13th/19th-century Istanbul, 194 African eunuchs supervised four hundred to five hundred female slaves by taking shifts guarding the doors of the Ottoman harem.[274] However, large numbers of eunuchs cannot simply be explained by large numbers of women in a given harem or similar living arrangement. The household of Jihat ʿAnbar is a case in point and, being exceptionally well documented in the *Nūr al-maʿārif*, deserves a closer look.

This lady and her chief eunuch are mentioned fourteen times in various supply lists spanning from al-Muẓaffar's late years to the short reign of his successor al-Ashraf ʿUmar.[275] Her household was located in the fortress of al-Taʿkar,

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268   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*.

269   Anonymous, I.525–6, I.529 The lists for salaries and those for clothes allocations are not fully congruent. In the household of the lady of Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr, twenty-one eunuchs (*khuddām*) received salaries but only seventeen clothing allowances, while in the home of the lady of Rayḥān al-Luqmānī, sixteen eunuchs are listed as salary receivers and fifteen as obtaining clothing allowances.

270   Anonymous, I.546–7.

271   The chief eunuch Muḥsin received thirty dinars per month, and the chief eunuch Ḥilāl ten (Anonymous, I.546).

272   Anonymous, I.547.

273   Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*; El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate."

274   "Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul," 383.

275   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*. The eunuch and his lady are mentioned in the following document segments: a section on the provisions of the palace during times excluding Ramaḍān (I.534–9); a section on the private needs of the lady of the chief eunuch Shujāʿ

a Rasulid stronghold overlooking the port city of Aden.[276] Various lists provide a fascinating amount of detail on Jihat ʿAnbar's household, from salaries for different categories of workers to food ratios and allowances for the acquisition of candles and bread.[277] One section is entirely dedicated to the supplies received in the year 691/1291–2.[278] This document mentions seven other women named after eunuchs living in Jihat ʿAnbar's household.[279] Interestingly, while Jihat ʿAnbar received a monthly provision of one hundred dinars, the other women were given only ten to thirty dinars per month. This stark difference prompts the conclusion that the lady of ʿAnbar was at the time the highest-ranking woman in her household.[280] In a similar vein, her administrator ʿAnbar occupied a significantly higher position than the sixty-three other eunuchs in the household, as is reflected in his generous salary and clothing allowance.[281]

In sum, evidence for Jihat ʿAnbar's household confirms that it comprised several other Rasulid noblewomen. Nevertheless, the fact that a total of sixty-four eunuchs served in this household cannot simply be explained by the presence of other female residents in it. Rather, the large number of eunuchs seems to indicate the range of tasks and roles performed by eunuchs in elite households, which comprised the protection of the women's quarters, personal

al-Dīn ʿAnbar (I.543–50); a list of supplies for the private kitchens (II.132–3); as well as a list of gifts distributed during the festival of mid-Shaʿbān (II.119–24).

276   A list of monthly waterskin allowances reveals that the lady and her eunuch must have travelled to al-Mahjam regularly (anonymous, I.535).

277   Anonymous, I.548, I.549. We also read that she possessed her own kitchen, which consisted of different parts such as a bakery (anonymous, I.539, I.547).

278   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.543ff.

279   Jihat Rashīq, Jihat ʿAnbar (likely another lady whose eunuch was also called ʿAnbar), Jihat Rashīd, Jihat Bayān, Jihat Fatīh (later spelled Faṣīḥ), Jihat Rayḥān and Jihat Nāfiʿ (anonymous, I.544). Another list provides four names of women that only partially match the former: Jihat Rashīd, Jihat Nadaʾ (or Badaʾ), Jihat Fasīḥ and Jihat Rayḥān (anonymous, I.549).

280   It is also conceivable that the lady of ʿAnbar was given higher allowances because she had more dependents – children, slaves, employees. However, as previously discussed, the salaries given to different categories of male slaves and servants were meticulously recorded in the *Nūr*. It is therefore unlikely that Jihat ʿAnbar's provisions included those for her male staff. However, salaries or provisions of female slaves and staff are not mentioned anywhere. Furthermore, lists of allowances for royal women usually include the category "al-ʿiyāl", a term that can denote a family, household or "persons whom a man feeds" (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2201). Today, it is commonly used in Yemen for small boys and girls (Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.550). It is likely that female slaves were subsumed under this category, together with their children and the children of their mistresses. Interestingly, these *ʿiyāl* are frequently mentioned together with eunuchs, which could be a result of them living under one roof.

281   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.544, I.547.

service, the supervision of sultanic kitchens and storehouses (see chapter 5), the education of royal children (see below), the representation of their mistresses in public domains and most likely also the training and supervision of female slaves.

A final point regarding Jihat ʿAnbar and her chief eunuch is worth contemplating. In the year 648/1250, al-Khazrajī describes a eunuch named ʿAnbar as administrator in the fortress of Taʿizz, which at the time was under the control of al-Mufaḍḍal, the rebellious brother of Sultan al-Muẓaffar.[282] Through a crafty ruse, the sultan led the eunuch to join his side and surrender the fortress to him.[283] As reward for his loyalty, the sultan then made him administrator of a certain "daughter of Asad al-Dīn".[284] Only later in the narrative do we discover that this elusive woman was in fact a wife of the sultan.[285] Could this queen be the same Jihat ʿAnbar who surfaces forty years later in *Nūr al-maʿārif* together with her eunuch administrator? While the evidence is insufficient to provide a definite answer, it is easy to imagine that a young wife of Sultan al-Muẓaffar was placed under the guardianship of the eunuch ʿAnbar in 648/1250 and about forty years later had become one of the most influential women of the Rasulid family, residing in the fortress of al-Taʿkar, commanding a large number of servants and slaves, and obtaining generous allowances, provisions and gifts from her husband and later from his successor al-Ashraf ʿUmar (who might have been her son).[286] Likewise, the eunuch ʿAnbar would have served his lady for decades, his prestige and authority augmenting as he managed a growing household and commanded over increasing numbers of eunuchs.

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282   During the reign of the first Rasulid sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar, a rivalry had developed between al-Muẓaffar, the sultan's first-born son, and his younger half-brother al-Mufaḍḍal, whose mother Bint Hawza actively promoted his career. When the sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar died in 647/1250, neither al-Muẓaffar nor his half-brother al-Mufaḍḍal were able to secure the throne right away. Instead, the royal mamluks swore allegiance to a paternal cousin. Al-Muẓaffar eventually emerged victorious, but al-Mufaḍḍal retained authority over parts of the country for a while longer (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.88, II.120; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 575).

283   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.94.

284   Al-Khazrajī, 94.

285   Al-Khazrajī, II.23. She bore the sultan a daughter known by the poetic name Māʾ al-Samāʾ (water of the sky), which had also been given to a prominent Yemeni pre-Islamic leader (al-Khazrajī, I.36). Her father was the sultan's paternal cousin Asad al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Rasūl, a notorious troublemaker during the early Rasulid era. He betrayed both his uncle, the first sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar, and his cousin, the second sultan al-Muẓaffar, on numerous occasions; what is more, he brought about al-Manṣūr ʿUmar's death by instigating the royal mamluks to kill their owner (al-Khazrajī, I.83).

286   Reigned 694–6/1295–6.

The tedious task of analysing *Nūr al-maʿārif*'s lengthy lists of provisions, salaries and gifts side by side has enabled a basic understanding of the setup of Rasulid women's households. Eunuchs were employed in these households on different levels, organized in a strict hierarchy managed by a eunuch administrator. However, due to the particular source character of *Nūr al-maʿārif*, its explanatory power ends here. To obtain a better understanding of the quality of relations between eunuchs and Rasulid women, we shall now turn to al-Khazrajī's chronicle and biographical collection.

8.3   *Evidence from al-Khazrajī's Works*

Ten of the twenty-nine eunuchs found in al-Khazrajī's works are described as having some form of responsibility towards, or relationship with, courtly women. The evidence could simply be contained in a woman's name, as is the case with the mother of Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl, who was identified with the eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Ṭughā al-Afḍalī (the epithet indicating that he had formally served this sultan's father and predecessor al-Afḍal).[287] In other instances, the relationship between a royal woman and her eunuch is explicitly described by a job title, usually that of *zimām*. Finally, a number of affiliations between Rasulid women and their eunuchs can be traced throughout al-Khazrajī's chronicle and biographies, offering rare glimpses into the nature of their long-standing connection. One woman in particular is exceptionally well documented. Her contributions to the political and social developments of her time were remarkable and involved complex interactions with several influential eunuchs. She was known as Jihat Ṣalāḥ.[288]

Jihat Ṣalāḥ was born as Amīna, daughter of Ismāīl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥalabī, a shaikh from Mecca.[289] She was the wife of the fourth Rasulid sultan al-Muʾayyad Dawūd (r. 696–721/1297–1322) and mother of his successor al-Mujāhid ʿAlī (r. 721–64/1322–63). Jihat Ṣalāḥ was known by the name of the eunuch Shihāb al-Dīn Ṣalāḥ (d. 723/1323), about whom al-Khazrajī merely offers the following information: "He was the administrator (*zimām*) of al-Malik al-Muʿayyad and then was made administrator of the mother of his son, al-Malik-al-Mujāhid."[290] This woman, of course, was Jihat Ṣalāḥ. We have no further information about the relationship between the queen and Shihāb al-Dīn Ṣalāḥ, but it is interesting to note that despite having other eunuch administrators later in life, she continued to be referred to by his name. Luckily,

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287   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.174.

288   Occasionally, she is called *al-Dār al-Ṣalāḥī*, cf. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2501.

289   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, III.188. Sadek, "Rasūlid Women," 123.

290   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.17.

her interactions with two other eunuchs are recorded in more detail, especially in the context of a political crisis that unfolded in 735/1334. In this year, the Rasulid sultan al-Mujāhid set out on a pilgrimage to Mecca, followed by his mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ. Al-Khazrajī writes:

> The honourable lady Jihat Ṣalāḥ travelled to Mecca, and with her trav-elled the chief eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Ridwānī, and the rest of the *ghilmān* of the sultan.[291]

This pilgrimage proved fateful for the sultan: the Mamluk caravan, fearing that al-Mujāhid might seize power in Mecca, abducted him to Egypt where he was detained for a full year. Before we follow al-Khazrajī's narration further, let us take a closer look at Jihat Ṣalāḥ's travel companion, the eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Ridwānī.

Jawhar first appears in al-Khazrajī's chronicle in the year 729/1328, when he was tasked with reconquering the castle of al-Dumluwa which had been sold by its defiant garrison.[292] Interestingly, the order was not given by the sultan but came from his mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ, testifying to her active involvement in political and military affairs during her son's reign. In the same year, Jawhar is mentioned as holding the position of administrator of the sultan's household (*zimām al-bāb al-sharīf*).[293] If we assume that the sultan's widowed mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ was the female head of the sultanic household, then Jawhar would have acted as her administrator as well. And in fact, evidence for this can be found in his obituary:

> He served the noble lady, the lady of the eunuch Shihāb al-Dīn Ṣalāḥ, mother of our lord, the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid. She appointed him as administrator of her household and assigned to him all her affairs.[294]

The passage reveals that Jihat Ṣalāḥ herself had appointed Jawhar as her guardian, not the sultan or another male relative as was common practice. In 735/1334, we find Jawhar again at the queen mother's side during her pil-grimage to Mecca. Surprisingly, the narrative suggests that after the sultan's abduction, Jawhar did not return to Yemen with the queen mother but stayed in Mecca instead. Perhaps the critical circumstances forced him to take

291   Al-Khazrajī, II.85.
292   Al-Khazrajī, II.47.
293   Al-Khazrajī, II.150.
294   Al-Khazrajī, II.101.

up more pressing responsibilities. In any case, Jiha Ṣalāḥ's ability to make the homeward journey without him can be read as a sign of her autonomy. Jawhar's illustrious career ended tragically in 755/1355, when he died in shipwreck while on a diplomatic mission to Egypt. He had undoubtedly been one of the most high-ranking officials of his time. In addition to governing the sultanic household, he was charged with critical political and military missions and held the position of governor (*wālī*) in the castle of Yumayn.[295] His service to Jihat Ṣalāḥ spanned decades and earned him the following mention in her biography: "Her administrator, the chief eunuch Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Riḍwānī, built two mosques, one of them in the city of Zabīd [...] and the other one in the city of Taʿizz."[296]

Returning to the narrative of 735/1334, al-Khazrajī describes how after her son's abduction to Egypt, Jihat Ṣalāḥ gathered what was left of the sultan's caravan in Mecca and set out for Yemen:

> When they arrived in Ḥaraḍ [...], our lady, the honourable lady Jihat Ṣalāḥ, ordered the Qāḍī Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Hassān to stay there, when they had learned about his sobriety and good administration. Then she travelled among the rest of the troops until she arrived in the city of Zabīd.[297]

The first measure taken by Jihat Ṣalāḥ upon arrival in Yemen was to entrust Ḥaraḍ, the northernmost city of the Rasulid state, to a well-respected judge. This city lay on a major pilgrimage route from Yemen to Mecca, the so-called *jādda al-sulṭānīya*.[298] The wording also suggests that she left parts of the sultan's troops there. Having thereby ensured that the state's northern borders were well protected, Jihat Ṣalāḥ proceeded to Zabīd, one of the two capitals of the Rasulid state. The narration continues:

> She stayed there some days and then proceeded to Taʿizz among those troops that were with her. She arrived there in the night of Wednesday, the 16th of the month of Ṣafar, and remained in the Majalliya.[299] Their

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295 Al-Khazrajī, II.423.

296 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2501.

297 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.87–8.

298 Johann Heiss, "Caravans from South Arabia: Roads and Organization," in *Camels in Asia and North Africa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Their Past and Present Significance*, ed. Eva-Maria Knoll and Pamela Burger, Veröffentlichungen der Sozialanthropologie 18 (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2012), 131–9.

299 The Majalliya, sometimes rendered as Maḥalliya, was a well-known quarter of Taʿizz.

high command was issued that the kettledrum be played, the military music of Jalīl,[300] and it had not been played before.[301]

Upon Jihat Ṣalāḥ's arrival in Taʿizz, the Rasulid dynasty's second capital, the kettledrums (ṭablkhāna) were played. In Rasulid Yemen, these percussion instruments were used when a sultan entered a city after a longer absence, or when he appointed or honoured high officials and dignitaries. In this situation, we cannot be sure who gave the command for the playing of the drums; in any case, Jihat Ṣalāḥ was clearly considered to possess sufficient royal authority – or at least to be a worthy representative of her son's authority – to deserve this high honour.

The next passage describes Jihat Ṣalāḥ giving orders to the eunuch Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf, whose remarkable career has previously been discussed. The sultan had appointed him as commander and paymaster of the castle of Taʿizz before leaving for Mecca. In the political crisis following the sultan's deportation to Egypt, Ahyaf executed a eunuch and a vizier who had rebelled upon the news of the sultan's capture and then appointed a new vizier and a judge of judges.[302] These were bold moves, as it was usually the sultan's prerogative to decide such high-level appointments. Jihat Ṣalāḥ must have been well aware of the challenge that Ahyaf's autonomous behaviour posed to her authority. As soon as she had set foot in Taʿizz, she undertook the following manoeuvre:

> She wrote to the eunuch Ahyaf to send her [the sultan's sons] al-Malik al-Muẓaffar and al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ to be handed over to her. They came down, were handed over to her, and remained with her in al-Majalliyya. When they had arrived at her place, she went up to the castle, sent for the eunuch Ahyaf, made him swear an oath and proceeded with confidence in him. She commanded him to demand the boys from al-Majalliyya. He asked for them, and they came up on Thursday, the 17th of Ṣafar.[303]

Behind Jihat Ṣalāḥ's seemingly overcomplicated procedure lies a smart strategy. The fact that the sultan's underage sons were in Ahyaf's hands posed a great

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300   *Nawbat Jalīl.* The *nawba* was the type of military music played by the kettledrums (*ṭablkhāna*). Jalīl might have been the chief of the military band (*mihtār al-ṭablkhāna*), a position mentioned in *Nūr al-maʿārif* (e.g. anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.124.) Cf. H. G. Farmer, "Ṭabl-Khāna," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill, 2012).

301   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.88.

302   The eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿ and the judge Muwaffaq al-Dīn, Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.85ff.

303   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.87–8.

risk, as the eunuch could have used them as leverage in order to impose his will on Jihat Ṣalāḥ. Worse, he could have gained direct access to supreme authority by installing one of Jihat Ṣalāḥ's grandsons on the throne and ruling as his proxy, a dynamic that had had its precedents in Yemeni history.[304] Jihat Ṣalāḥ neutralized these risks by requesting the princes to be handed over to her. Only after Ahyaf had complied with her order, she proceeded to the castle and faced him directly. To further validate that her authority was unchallenged, she requested that Ahyaf swear an oath of fidelity to her. Having thus assured herself of the eunuch's loyalty, she allowed her grandsons to return to the castle.

Two leading figures emerged in the power vacuum left by the sultan's abduction to Egypt: Jihat Ṣalāḥ and the eunuch Ahyaf. However, when Jihat Ṣalāḥ returned to Yemen, she immediately asserted her authority over Ahyaf. The eunuch complied with her orders right away, either because he recognized the queen mother as the highest representative of Rasulid power in the country or for tactical reasons. Jihat Ṣalāḥ henceforth held supreme command until her son returned from Egypt a year later and retook the reins of power. The Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī who describes the capture and abduction of Sultan al-Mujāhid from an Egyptian perspective also identifies Jihat Ṣalāḥ as the person securing this fragile transition period.[305] Ahyaf's loyalty to the Rasulid family paid off and ultimately won him the post of governor over Zabīd, a role he retained until his death in 787/1385.[306]

Now, what do these narratives tell us about relationships between eunuchs and royal women in medieval Yemen? Remarkably, in all recorded interactions between Jihat Ṣalāḥ and the chief eunuchs Jawhar and Ahyaf, she is described as having the upper hand. In fact, there is not a single mention of a eunuch giving orders to Jihat Ṣalāḥ, or of restricting the queen's autonomy. Granted, Jihat Ṣalāḥ was an exceptionally influential woman. Yet, a careful perusal of al-Khazrajī's works produced no evidence for a eunuch giving orders to a Rasulid woman; rather, several other instances of royal women commanding over eunuchs are recorded.[307] Even though a woman's *zimām* was often chosen

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304 In 371/981, the Ziyadid king Abū al-Jaysh, who had ruled over Yemen's Tihāma plain, passed away. The royal title devolved upon his son, a child at the time. He was placed under the guardianship of a Nubian slave called Ḥusayn b. Salāma, who thereupon acted as de facto ruler of the Ziyadid polity.

305 Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-QādirʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1997), 130–1, 134–6, 146.

306 Details of Ahyaf's career are discussed in the previous subsection.

307 For example, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir* mentions in passing that during the Zurayʿid period, a eunuch named Jawhar al-Muʾaẓẓamī "was governor (*wali*) in al-Dumluwa castle on the

by a male relative, no instance of a eunuch controlling a Rasulid woman on behalf of her father, brother or any other male figure could be found. This textual evidence, while certainly not representative of interactions between eunuchs and elite women in the whole medieval Islamic world, does challenge commonly held assumptions about these relationships. Such assumptions are often perpetuated by standard translations of Arabic terms, such as the conventional rendition of *zimām* as "guardian" or "supervisor" which assigns the woman a subordinate role. In the relationships examined above, the power inequality clearly ran the other way. As we have seen, the wives, mothers and sisters of sultans described by al-Khazrajī used their eunuchs to expand their political reach. Through her *zimām*, a Rasulid noblewoman could exert influence in domains that were not directly accessible to her, such as the army and administration. As this case study has illustrated, loyalty and obedience were exacted from eunuchs not only by their male owners but also by the women of the Rasulid elite whose political projects they helped advance.

9   Eunuchs as Educators of Royal Children

Another responsibility that eunuchs tended to in the female quarters of royal residences was the education of children. The earliest Yemeni example of such a role stems from al-Ḥakamī's account of the death of Abū al-Jaysh, the last Ziyadid[308] king of southern Yemen:

> This Abū al-Jaysh died in the year 371 [981–2], leaving behind a child called ʿAbd Allāh, or, as was said, Ziyād. Guardianship over him was assumed by his sister Hind, daughter of Abū al-Jaysh, and a slave of Abū al-Jaysh, an Ethiopian eunuch called Rushd.[309]

When Rushd passed away, guardianship over the child king devolved upon another eunuch, the Nubian Ḥusayn b. Salāma.[310] Remarkably, he did not merely act as an interim ruler until his protégé had reached maturity but held

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part of the lady of Muḥammad b. Sabā." Muḥammad b. Sabāʾ b. Abū al-Saʿūd b. Zurayʿ b. Al-ʿAbbās b. Al-Mukarram al-Hamdānī was the sixth Zurayʿid ruler of Aden. Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 633.

308   The Ziyadid dynasty had ruled Yemen's Tihāma region from its capital Zabīd since 203/818. After the death of its last king Ḥusayn b. Salāma, the slave guardians of two successive underage heirs acted as de facto rulers, until the Najahid dynasty superseded the Ziyadids in 412/1022.

309   Al-Ḥakamī, Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd, 6.

310   Al-Ḥakamī, 10.

the reins of power for thirty years. Al-Ḥakamī's lengthy description of his era is full of praise for his capabilities.[311] Shortly after this episode, a eunuch called Marjān was appointed guardian over another young Ziyadid prince. Several similar instances are reported by al-Ḥakamī: in the mid-6th/12th century, for example, the Najahid queen ʿAlam placed her son into the care of his father's eunuchs before fleeing the royal palace.[312]

Having gained the trust of future leaders when they were young, eunuchs could easily exert influence over them once they had become sovereigns. What is more, al-Ḥakamī's accounts also highlight one far-reaching side effect of the close relationship between eunuchs and royal sons, which would remain a recurring theme up until the Rasulid era: eunuch-guardians were at times entrusted with – or claimed for themselves – interim rule on behalf of under-age sovereigns. The same political dynamic is well attested for other Islamic polities such as the Abbasid caliphate and the Mamluk sultanate.[313]

A vivid example of the weighty responsibility which eunuchs carried with respect to royal offspring comes from the Zurayʿid period (473–569/1080–1173). Before passing away, the dynasty's last ruler ʿImrān b. Aḥmad (r. 561–9/1166–73) appointed the eunuch Jawhar al-Muʾaẓẓamī as legal guardian (waṣī) over his underage children.[314] During the subsequent Ayyubid invasion of Yemen in 569/1173, Jawhar smuggled his late owner's children out of the country, disguised as a woman. The party likely sought exile in Ethiopia, for it is here that Jawhar died around twenty years later.[315]

Rasulid obituaries and biographical entries document the roles of eunuchs in the education of royal offspring during that era. Al-Khazrajī's obituary of the eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ provides a vivid example here:

> He possessed sound judgement, was great, a donor and an amir, highly determined. He was the freed slave (mawlā) of Ghazī b. Jibrʾīl who has been mentioned. Then he served the sultan Nūr al-Din who made him educator (atābak) of his son al-Muẓaffar. He improved [al-Muẓaffar's] education and courtesy, and he became an example of courtesy in Yemen. And it is said: the courtesy of Mukhtaṣṣ.[316]

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311 Al-Ḥakamī, 6–19.

312 Al-Ḥakamī, 72.

313 E.g. El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 235ff.; Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 41; Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History*.

314 After the death of Imran b. Aḥmad, slave ministers carried on the dynasty until it was obliterated by the Ayyubids (Smith, "Political History of the Islamic Yemen," 133).

315 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 632–40.

316 Al-Khazrajī, 2100.

This passage is a rare mention of manumission in medieval Yemeni sources. Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ had already been liberated by his previous owner when he joined the service of the Rasulid sultan al-Manṣūr ʿUmar (also known as Nūr al-Din). Later, he was appointed educator of the sultan's son al-Muẓaffar. The eunuch clearly left an imprint on the young heir apparent, as he was the one credited with teaching him courtesy. The title *atābak*, a Turkish composite, was first given to high-ranking military men assigned as educators and tutors over Turkish princes during the Saljūq period (5th–6th/11th–12th century).[317] The designation probably travelled to Yemen with the Ayyubids and survived into the Rasulid period. While in Mamluk Egypt the meaning of *atābak* shifted from educator of royal sons to army commander, in Yemen it clearly retained its traditional significance of guardian or educator of royal offspring.[318] In *al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, al-Khazrajī uses the title *lālā* to describe Mukhtaṣṣ's role in the upbringing of the young al-Muẓaffar.[319] This title is of Turkmen origin and was popularized by the Safavids to designate tutors of princes.[320] Finally, the role of tutor and guardian taken up by eunuchs is also often described in Rasulid sources with the previously discussed title of *zimām*. Naturally, the roles of administering the households of royal women and educating their children were often combined.

Once married, Rasulid sultans often appointed their own educators and tutors as administrators of their wives' households. For example, the eunuch Shihāb al-Dīn Ṣalāḥ (d. 723/1323) "was the administrator of al-Malik al-Muʾayyad, and then was made administrator of the mother of his son, al-Malik-al-Mujāhid".[321] This woman was Jihat Ṣalāḥ, whose biography has been discussed above. The eunuch thus accompanied his owner through childhood and, once al-Malik al-Muʾayyad had married and ascended to the throne, oversaw his wife's household, likely acting as tutor of the couple's children as well. This life trajectory bears testimony to the trust placed in high-ranking eunuchs and to the depth of their involvement in their owners' lives.

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317   Amalia Levanoni, "Atābak (Atabeg)," in Fleet et al., *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition.*

318   In Mamluk sources, the title was increasingly used in the phrase "atābak al-asākir", commonly translated as "commander-in-chief of the army" (Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army I," 463).

319   Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army I," 463.

320   Cf. C. E. Bosworth, "Lālā," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012. The title is also known from Mamluk sources, where it was given to guardians and educators of sultanic children (Ayalon, *Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate*, 272; Petry, "From Slaves to Benefactors," 60). The term appears to have been unusual in medieval Yemen; I have found no further occurrence in my sources.

321   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.17.

10   Scholarly and Religious Activities

In addition to the far-reaching responsibilities and tasks they performed for the ruling family, some eunuchs also pursued scholarly, social and religious interests. Similarly, it has been noted that a number of eunuchs in Mamluk Egypt achieved scholarly fame.[322] An early example from Yemen is Jawhar b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Muʿaẓẓamī (d. 59?/119?), who served two consecutive Zurayʿid rulers:[323]

> He was a pious, sensible, intelligent, knowledgeable, active, memorizing eunuch. The jurists of his time agreed to calling him by the appellation "the one who knows the Qurʾān by heart", because he never forgot something he memorized. He was a jurist and a Qurʾān reciter. He had written many works on Qurʾān recitations, hadith and homilies. He used to love, honour and respect the Sunni jurists, and hate the *madhhab* of his lords.[324]

This passage not only attests to Jawhar's deep religious interest and knowledge but also to his independent opinion when it came to Islamic legal thought: unlike his Zurayʿid owners, who followed the Ismāʿīlī doctrine, Jawhar adhered to Sunnism. Al-Janadī, who features Jawhar's biography in his *Sulūk*, further mentions that he was Ethiopian and had been freed by his owners.[325] While being governor in the castle of al-Dumluwa, Jawhar became an expert in religious knowledge and composed several books. He was well respected among jurists. His literary talent is exemplified by the rich poetic imagery and rhymed prose (*sajʿ*) exhibited in the following quote from one of his sermons:

> When I learned that death was my destination and the grave my prospect, I took it as a warning for myself against negligence, and as a reminder to myself before the arrival of the travel day. Perhaps God will shelter me with his forgiveness from the repulsiveness of what I did and excuse my odious actions.[326]

In his chronicle of Aden, Bā Makhrama relates several miracles that occurred after Jawhar's death and were attributed to his blessing (*baraka*).[327]

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322   Petry, "From Slaves to Benefactors," 62; Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History*, 190.

323   Muḥammad b. Sabaʾ (r. 534/1139–548/1153 and his son ʿImrān Muḥammad b. Sabaʾ (r. 548/1153–561/1166).

324   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 632.

325   Al-Janadī, Al-Sulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa al-mulūk, 1.383.

326   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 633.

327   Bā Makhrama, "Tārīkh taghr ʿAdan," 73.

Another eunuch with scholarly ambitions was Abū al-Misk Kāfūr (date of death unknown), who served the second Ayyubid ruler Ṭughtakīn b. Ayyūb[328] and bore the fitting epithet Mujīr al-Dīn (defender of the faith):

> He was a pious, kind, religious tutor (*ustādh*). He was one of the eunuchs (*khuddām*) of the precious king Sayf al-Islām Ṭughtakīn b. Ayyūb. He used to be preoccupied with Qurʾān recitation, friendship with its people [the learned], and the company of the scholars. His opinion of them improved. He was a sheikh in the hadith, which a group of scholars learned from him. He had a school built in the Maghraba[329] of Taʿizz, which is known as al-Mujīriyya, in the city of Taʿizz. He died in Taʿizz and his grave is there, close to al-Maḥārīb.[330] It is known and visited, and one receives blessing (*baraka*) there. […] God have mercy on him.[331]

Not only was Kāfūr a teacher of religious learning; his grave also became a pilgrimage site where blessing could be obtained. Other references to eunuchs' interest in learning and religion are scattered throughout various biographies. Of the influential eunuch Tāj al-Dīn Badr b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Muẓaffarī,[332] al-Khazrajī writes that "he loved knowledge and the learned".[333] Similarly, Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Muẓaffarī,[334] governor of the castle of al-Dumluwa, "was very generous honouring the learned and the religious".[335] Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Ridwānī,[336] a top military official and administrator of Queen Jihat Ṣalāḥ, moved to Mecca later in life, most likely to pursue religious learning.[337] Najīb b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Mujāhidī,[338] administrator of Sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid's household, was said to have been a highly gifted calligrapher who helped the sultan improve his handwriting.[339]

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328   Reigned 571–9/1175–83.
329   A well-known neighbourhood in the western part of Taʿizz.
330   A village near Taʿizz.
331   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1745. Al-Khazrajī's biography relies heavily on al-Janadī, *Al-Ṣulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa al-mulūk*, 11.98.
332   Died 654/1256.
333   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 572–3.
334   Died 687/1288.
335   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2242.
336   Died 755/1355.
337   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 628.
338   Died 772/1371.
339   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2203.

11   Patronage of Pious Endowments

Many eunuchs who reached high positions in the Rasulid government and
army also contributed to Yemen's architectural heritage. The common Islamic
practice of religious endowments (sg. *waqf*) was widespread during the Rasulid
era.[340] Through this system, a patron financed the construction of a religious
or public monument and endowed it with an agricultural land or business, the
revenues of which served to maintain the monument in the future, pay the
salaries of its employees and, in the case of religious schools (sg. *madrasa*),
maintain its students. Among the patrons were members of the Rasulid family
including royal women, high officials, scholars and religious notables.[341] The
Rasulids often bestowed *waqf* status on territories whose inhabitants had
rebelled and were subsequently subdued; in this way, the endowment system
could be put at the service of state control.[342] Every *waqf* was supervised by
government officials who managed its funds and ensured that the foundation's
stipulations were met.[343] Sadek has analysed the patronage practices of Rasulid
women, which attest to their financial independence and active contribution
to public life.[344] Similarly, the fact that most of the prominent Rasulid eunuchs
appear to have sponsored religious endowments shows that these men must
have accumulated significant wealth. Nine of the sixteen eunuchs whose biog-
raphies and obituaries figure in al-Khazrajī's works are known to have spon-
sored religious endowments.[345] Collectively, they financed the construction
of twelve schools, nine mosques, one guesthouse (sg. *dār maḍīf*) and one
public fountain (sg. *sabīl*).[346] Our sources clearly state that agricultural lands

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340   Sadek, "Rasūlid Women."
341   Sadek, 121.
342   Varisco, "Why the Sultan Is Rich," 33.
343   Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen," 234–5.
344   Sadek, "Rasūlid Women."
345   Tāj al-Dīn Badr (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 572–75; Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾi-
      yya*, I, 120–121); Mujīr al-Dīn Kāfūr (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1745); Shibl al-Dawla
      Kāfūr (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1745); Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd
      al-fākhir*, 2100–2101); Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II, 169–170; Jawhar al-Muʿaẓẓamī
      (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 632–5); Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Riḍwānī (Al-Khazrajī,
      Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir, 628–30; Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.476); Yāqūt al-Muẓaffarī
      (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2242); Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I, 249–250); Fāʾīz b.
      ʿAbd Allāh (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1697). Kamāl al-Dīn Fātin (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd
      al-luʾluʾiyya*, II, 239). Furthermore, al-Khazrajī mentions that in 792/1390, renovations of
      "the mosque of the eunuch Fākhir" were undertaken (Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*,
      II.188).
346   In comparison, Sadek has ascertained that nineteen Rasulid women sponsored forty-one
      religious monuments, of which thirty-two were schools, six mosques, two public foun-
      tains and one a sufi hostel (Sadek, "Rasūlid Women," 124).

provided these monuments with the necessary income to secure their future maintenance and remunerate their employees. This was in line with common Islamic practice but poses a riddle in connection with eunuch sponsors: How did these men gain full ownership over agricultural lands? As previously discussed, a number of high-ranking Rasulid eunuchs were given revenue estates (sg. *iqtaʾ*) as reward for their service, but these estates remained the sultan's property and could not be bequeathed. Furthermore, slaves did not have full ownership rights over their possessions. Therefore, it seems likely that these eunuchs were manumitted and subsequently acquired enough wealth (including land) to become sponsors of religious endowments.

Eunuchs appear to have commissioned the construction of monuments at different stages in their lives; some left endowments despite having passed away suddenly and prematurely, while others bequeathed none even though they reached old age. For example, Jawhar al-Riḍwānī died unexpectedly in shipwreck but left a school, a mosque and a public fountain, all secured through religious endowments.[347] Conversely, the eunuch Ahyaf portrayed earlier must have accumulated a fortune during his illustrious life but seems to have sponsored no endowments at all. A detailed example of eunuchs' generous patronage practices comes from the biography of Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Riḍwānī:

> His are some religious monuments: a school in the city of Taʿizz, in the region of al-Asīnfāt, in which there is a fountain and lavatories and at its gate a bathhouse. He installed there an imam, a muezzin, a custodian, a teacher and orphans who study the Qurʾān, and a tutor and his class. His is a mosque in Zabīd, east of al-Jāmiʿ,[348] entrusted with its own building, and he also bestowed land as endowment on it, and installed there an imam, a muezzin, a custodian, a teacher, and orphans studying the Qurʾān. In it are also a fountain and lavatories. He had built during his lifetime a drinking fountain on the al-Qartab road from Zabīd, in the junction of the two roads from the al-Qartab and the al-Shubariq gates of Zabīd, a big pool and two domes. He bestowed upon all of it a good endowment, sufficient for all of them, according to the requirement. God, who be exalted, have mercy on him.[349]

The editors of *al-ʿIqd al-fākhir* note that Jawhar's mosque is known by this name today, proving that financing religious endowments could indeed preserve

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347   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 621.
348   A neighbourhood of Zabīd.
349   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 628.

one's memory over centuries.[350] Other patrons were not as lucky. Al-Khazrajī records a number of cases in which eunuchs' endowments were seized by unauthorized persons.[351] Jawhar's school in Taʿizz is also mentioned in a surviving Rasulid endowment deed (*waqfiya*), parts of which were published by Ismāʿīl al-Akwaʿ.[352] Of the six other schools described in this manuscript, three were sponsored by sultans[353] and three by royal women.[354] The inclusion of a eunuch's monument in a *waqf* donated by members of the Rasulid family speaks volumes about the central role of court eunuchs in their royal owners' households.[355]

Hathaway has argued that Ottoman chief eunuchs were not only key to dynastic reproduction through their roles in the harem. By sponsoring religious schools and monuments, they also "achieved intellectual and religious reproduction by shaping a new generation of Sunni Muslims".[356] For eunuchs, who had no heirs to bequest their wealth to, patronage constituted a rare opportunity to immortalize their name and memory.[357] Biographical evidence on the patronage of eunuchs is a remarkable testimony of these men's contributions to the public good.

12   Conclusion

A thorough analysis of all relevant evidence found in our sources has revealed a number of key facts about the eunuch institution in medieval Yemen. The trading practices that brought castrated boys from Eastern Africa to Yemen could be partially reconstructed, although many questions concerning the

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350 Al-Khazrajī, 628. Sadek has noted that among the seven schools listed above, the Madrasat al-ashrafiya and the Madrasat al-Muʿtabiya survived in Taʿizz ("Rasūlid Women," 125).

351 E.g. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 1697.

352 Ismāʿīl b. ʿAlī al-Akwaʿ, *Al-Madāris al-islāmīya fī al-Yaman* (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 1980). Jawhar's school is described on pp. 180–2.

353 Al-Afḍal ʿAbbās, al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl and al-Ẓāhir Yahya (al-Akwaʿ, 186–8, 197–203, 219–25).

354 All three of these women are recorded by their eunuchs' names (see chapter 4): Jihat Murshid Salāma, daughter of Sultan al-MujāhidʿAlī; Jihat Muʿtab, wife of Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl; and Jihat Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Yāqūt, wife of Sultan al-Ẓāhir Yahya (al-Akwaʿ, 190–3, 208–11, 228–9).

355 While Sadek has suggested that the school bearing Jawhar's name was built by his owner, the Rasulid queen Jihat Ṣalāḥ, the eunuch's obituary in the ʿIqd clearly states that he sponsored the school's construction himself (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 628).

356 Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem, 277.

357 Petry made this point in reference to the Mamluk eunuchs of Egypt (Petry, "From Slaves to Benefactors," 63ff.).

origins and early lives of these individuals still remain unanswerable. It has become clear that after arriving in Yemen, many eunuchs were incorporated into the households of the ruling elites, where they were trained for a life of service, often by senior eunuchs.

Eunuchs at the Najahid court usually performed tasks related to royal women and children. Evidence for the Rasulid period is richer and more differentiated, showing eunuchs working in sultanic kitchens and storage facilities (see chapter 5) but also rising to the highest echelons of the army and government. Having been raised in the palace from a young age, they often gained the intimate trust of their royal owners, who charged them with political missions and military campaigns. A number of high-ranking eunuchs served several sultans successively, thereby shaping Rasulid history for longer timespans than their royal owners themselves could. Eunuchs also contributed to the public good by sponsoring public monuments, which would stand as symbols of their generosity and wealth for generations to come.

The sources also provide rich evidence on the important roles performed by eunuchs at the service of Rasulid women. Unlike previous scholarship has suggested, eunuchs did not simply ensure the seclusion of these women in female-only spheres; rather, they were crucial to their mistresses' ability to pursue their political projects, since they represented them in male-dominated spheres. Eunuchs also educated new generations of leaders, thereby leaving a lasting imprint on Rasulid rule. Elite women also relied on the services of lower-ranking eunuchs for the smooth running of their households. In sum, eunuchs in Rasulid Yemen figured prominently both in the highest ranks of the political, administrative and military hierarchy and in the most intimate realms of royal households. As such, they had access to all central spheres of Rasulid authority.

The rich evidence on Rasulid eunuchs lends itself to a reappraisal of Meillassoux's distinction between the unchangeable *state* of slaves as unfree aliens, and their *condition*, which was determined by the roles and positions assigned to them. This differentiation is useful in that it dissolves the apparent paradox between the unfreedom of eunuchs which rendered them powerless and dependent and the positions of influence and strength they commanded in the Rasulid state. Meillassoux argues that the slaves' utter powerlessness was not an obstacle to their political careers but in fact a requirement for it: "It was because of the permanent nature of their state that their condition could be changed and they could even be placed close to power at minimal risk to its holder."[358] This observation certainly rings true in light of Rasulid

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358   *Anthropology of Slavery*, 139.

evidence. However, Meillassoux's model favours analytical elegance over the recognition of complexities. For one, a eunuch's state as slave could change drastically through manumission. Although evidence on the freeing of slaves is very scarce in the Rasulid context, it certainly did occur, as the example of the manumitted eunuch cited above shows. Even if they were never manumitted, the eunuchs presented in this chapter could not be characterized as "unfree aliens". Alienness was indeed a precondition for the enslavement of these men as young boys. However, they could only be of use to their owners if they became fully versed in the cultural context of the Rasulid court. The textual evidence in fact shows that Rasulid sultans encouraged this process by bringing young eunuchs up in the palace, thereby enabling them to navigate elite circles and pursue elite habits such as patronage as adults. Rasulid eunuchs were therefore required to engender elements of two contradicting identities: as unfree aliens who were entirely dependent on their owners and barred from ever acquiring full membership in local lineages and elites, and as cultural insiders able to occupy the highest positions of the Rasulid state. Biographical evidence shows the struggles and successes of these men to navigate the highly complex social identity imposed on them as court eunuchs.

Scholarship on eunuchs has often pointed out their role as mediators of boundaries. According to El Cheikh, eunuchs were essential to the functioning of the Abbasid court because the caliph became increasingly secluded behind an elaborate court ceremonial.[359] In this setting, a person's authority was not measured by their rank but by their ability to gain direct access to the caliph. Eunuchs acted as gatekeepers, both literally and metaphorically:

> The eunuchs served as go-betweens in transactions between men and women of the court and between the court and the outside world. Eunuchs were involved in mediating, brokering, and transmitting messages between persons who were constrained by etiquette from meeting the caliph directly.[360]

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359   Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "The 'Court' of al-Muqtadir: Its Space and Its Occupants," in *'Abbasid Studies II: Occasional Papers of the School of 'Abbasid Studies Leuven* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2010), 332.

360   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 248. Toledano describes a similar dynamic for the 13th/19th-century Ottoman court: "[T]he eunuchs were advantageously positioned at the crossroads of sensitive information, privy to the innermost secrets of many court figures. Serving as conduit for such information was one of their main tasks at the palace. They were trusted, suspected and manipulated at the same time, but if deft, often benefitted in the process" ("Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul," 388).

Are these observations applicable to the Yemeni context? On the one hand, the Rasulid sultans did not shield themselves from the public through a court ceremonial to the extent of the Abbasid and Ottoman rulers. Rather, they participated in military expeditions and travelled their territory extensively. They displayed their authority by holding grand processions in capital cities after longer absences[361] and generous public festivities to mark religious festivals or the circumcisions of their sons.[362] Despite the frequent appearances of Rasulid sultans in the public domain, the royal court was the dynasty's centre of power. High-ranking eunuchs were the only subordinates who had full access to all spheres of the court and entertained relations with all of its inhabitants – from the royal family all the way down to the lowliest servants and slaves. As such, they were certainly perfectly positioned to act as mediators of boundaries, not just on behalf of their Rasulid owners but also in order to advance their own interests.

Another claim frequently made is that the status of eunuchs as outsiders ensured their full loyalty to their owners.[363] The deracination suffered by eunuchs was in fact extreme: they lost their families of origin when they were trafficked to Yemen, and through castration were also robbed of the ability to establish their own families as adults. Textual evidence does confirm that the loss of family and country of origin and subsequent upbringing at court led many eunuchs to develop close attachments to their royal owners. Unable to procreate, eunuchs could only become part of the larger social fabric in Yemen through association with their owners. Loyalty was thus primarily a matter of survival. Nevertheless, the loyalty of eunuchs towards their owners could not always be taken for granted, as Jamāl al-Dīn Bāriʿ proves. He was a chief eunuch of Sultan al-Mujāhid who was executed for treachery.[364] Besides this extreme example, it is quite likely that eunuchs made strategic use of their reputation of absolute loyalty to subtly influence their owners' decisions in order to secure their own careers and leave a mark on the political developments of their time.

The role of eunuchs as mediators and as mostly loyal servants can be affirmed for the Yemeni context. However, some scholars have taken this observation a step further, arguing that their physical condition made eunuchs liminal figures considered to be intrinsically different from other humans.

361 E.g. al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 232–8.

362 E.g. al-Khazrajī, II.232–8.

363 Lewis A. Coser was an early proponent of this theory ("The Political Functions of Eunuchism," *American Sociological Review* 29, no. 6 [1964]: 881).

364 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.86.

As Marmon put it, "[t]he category of eunuch – as indeterminate as his physical body – could be endowed with a positive just as easily as with a negative value".[365] On the one hand, their physical impairment could turn eunuchs into targets of ridicule and disdain. The Greek statesman and philosopher Xenophon called them "objects of contempt to other men",[366] and al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868) described at length the repulsive effects of castration on the eunuch's physique, such as strong body odour and a distorted voice.[367] On the other hand, the eunuchs who guarded the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina from the 6th/12th century onwards were considered holy figures.[368] The source of this perceived liminality, scholars argue, lay in the eunuchs' unclear gender identity. El Cheikh labels them as "genderless",[369] while Ringrose argues that eunuchs in Byzantium constituted a "third gender".[370] In contrast, Tolino has shown that medieval Islamic jurists considered eunuchs to be men, albeit imperfect men,[371] while medieval Islamic authors gendered eunuchs in different ways, and often not at all.[372]

In view of this scholarly debate, it is worth examining the gender identity of eunuchs in medieval Yemen. Two ways of approaching the sources can be insightful in this respect. First, descriptions of individual eunuchs' character traits and actions found in biographical texts and chronicles reveal how contemporary authors perceived their gender identity. Second, by examining the roles and contexts in which eunuchs appear in chronicles and administrative documents, the lived practice of gender identity can be assessed. The first set of evidence yields a clear-cut result: eunuchs are described as decidedly masculine in all sources studied, with no ambiguity expressed by any of the authors. In obituaries and biographical entries, eunuchs are portrayed with the same adjectives used to characterize free men and receive an equal amount of praise and respect. What is more, neither al-Ḥakamī's nor al-Khazrajī's chronicle features any instances of eunuchs being denigrated, ridiculed or treated disrespectfully. If we revise the roles given to eunuchs and the situations in which they appear, however, a more complex picture emerges. For one thing,

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365   Marmon, Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society, 64.
366   Xenophon (quoted in Coser, "Political Functions of Eunuchism," 881).
367   Tolino, "Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire," 248–9.
368   Marmon, Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society.
369   El Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 250.
370   Ringrose, Perfect Servant.
371   According to Tolino, premodern Islamic discourse did not conceptualize male and female as binary opposites but as a gradual spectrum in which the masculine pole represented human perfection. Eunuchs were considered to be closer to the masculine side and therefore "closer to perfection than women were" ("Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire," 252).
372   Tolino, "Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire."

eunuchs worked directly for elite women and had access to the women's quarters, all things strictly prohibited to other men. Although Islamic law did not prohibit eunuchs from getting married, no evidence to this effect was found in the Yemeni sources.[373] It is thus likely that eunuchs did not experience marriage and fatherhood, two central milestones in the life of a man in this era. At the same time, the bulk of eunuchs' recorded activities were typical for elite men in medieval Yemen: cultivating relationships with the sultan and executing his commands, engaging in politics and battle, competing with potential rivals, and pursuing scholarly and religious interests.

Medieval Yemeni society therefore considered eunuchs to be men, and judged them by the prevailing standards of masculinity, while at the same time acknowledging their difference. Their physical limitation constituted a key aspect of eunuchs' social identity that opened up career opportunities unavailable to other slaves or free men but simultaneously barred them from leading a conventional family life. Their unfree state might have changed over the course of their lifetime, but their physical condition would set them apart from other men forever.

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373 Evidence on eunuchs getting married has survived from the Mamluk era, see Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History*, 186.

Enslaved Women and Girls

Scholars have long struggled to reconstruct the histories of women on the basis of sources written largely by, for and about men.[1] This challenge is even greater when studying female slaves and other marginalized women whose voices are silenced by the double bias of male and elite narratives. Enslaved girls and women who performed menial tasks for their owners are largely invisible in medieval Arabic sources. At the same time, precisely the world of male elites documented in the sources provided the stage for a select group of female slaves to enter the limelight of history. Concubines and female entertainers of slave origin are important characters in the Arabic literary tradition depicting courtly life, as famously exemplified by the collection of folk stories known as *Alf layla wa layla* (A thousand and one nights)[2] and the Abbasid *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Book of songs) by Abū al-Faraj al-Isfahānī.[3] These works feature female slaves and ex-slaves both in supporting roles meant to illustrate the prestige of influential men and as central figures with varying degrees of agency.

Medieval Yemeni sources also shed some light on the lives of enslaved women and girls, albeit broken through several prisms. All sources were written by men who belonged to the local intellectual and political elite. Female characters in general are starkly underrepresented and mostly play minor parts, with the notable exception of a number of influential Yemeni queens whose praise has been sung throughout the centuries.[4] Unfortunately, enslaved girls and women who performed menial tasks are hardly recorded in the sources at all. A few scattered hints confirm the existence of this category of enslaved workers but do not allow us to reconstruct their lives in any detail. Conversely, a number

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1 E.g. Cortese and Calderini, Women and the Fatimids.

2 Dwight Reynolds, "A Thousand and One Nights: A History of the Text and Its Reception," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3 Also known as al-Isbahānī. Pernilla Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in ʿAbbāsid Literature on Women* (Gothenburg: Orientalia et Africana Gothoburgensia, 2010); Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society"; Matthew S. Gordon, "The Place of Competition: The Careers of ʿArīb al-Maʾmūniya and ʿUlayya Bint al-Mahdī, Sisters in Song," in *Occasional Papers of the School of ʿAbbāsid Studies*, vol. 135 (Cambridge: Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 2004), 62–81.

4 First and foremost among these is Bilqīs, the legendary queen of Sheba. Other influential Yemeni queens were Arwā bint Aḥmad (d. 532/1137) of the Sulayhid dynasty and the Rasulid queen mother known as Jihat Ṣalāḥ who has been discussed in chapter 3.

of concubines of elite men figure prominently in al-Ḥakamī's chronicle, and al-Khazrajī's writings on the Rasulid era mention concubines in passing. The prominence of female slaves and ex-slaves in al-Ḥakamī's work in comparison with their rare appearances in other medieval Yemeni sources might be due to the author's intimate familiarity with the Najahid dynasty and the inner workings of its court. More importantly, it reflects the stronger presence of concubines in the public sphere during the Najahid as opposed to the Rasulid period. One critical difference between these two dynasties concerned their marriage policies. The Rasulids both married within their own extended family and took daughters of high-ranking Yemeni families as wives. This strategy of combining isogamy with hypergamy enabled them to forge alliances with local elites and strengthen their links to a country which they claimed to be their ancestral land.[5] In contrast, all Najahid wives mentioned by al-Ḥakamī had originally been concubines. This prompts the question of whether local families refused to give their daughters in marriage to the Najahids, possibly out of disdain for their African slave origins. Unfortunately, the evidence is too scant to give a definitive answer. This difference in marriage policy is exemplified by the titles given to the wives of the Najahid and Rasulid rulers. Najahid queens bore the honorific "al-ḥurra", which literally means "the free one"; given their formerly enslaved state, their current freedom needed to be emphasized. This naming convention is reminiscent of the Abbasid period, when the caliphs' wives – who were usually former concubines – carried the same title.[6] Meanwhile, Rasulid queens were generally known by the names of their eunuch administrators in combination with the Arabic noun "jiha" (see chapter 3). This naming convention can be interpreted as one aspect of the practice of female seclusion: just as elite women were generally kept from the public's view in order to mark their high status and honour, their names were concealed behind those of their eunuch administrators.

Despite these important differences, enslaved women – both domestic workers and concubines – were a common presence at the Najahid and Rasulid courts. Al-Ḥakamī's account also proves that the institution of concubinage was practised by the Sulayhid dynasty (439–532/1047–1138). This is confirmed

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5   Research into the genealogies of Rasulid wives is complicated by the fact that they are often not mentioned by their names in the sources but identified through the names of their chief eunuchs (see chapter 3). While the Rasulid royals may not have married their concubines, some of their high officials did. Al-Khazrajī mentions a manumitted woman who had belonged to Sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar and then married a judge (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.304). The Rasulids' claim of Yemeni origins is analysed in Daniel Mahoney, "Writing the Ethnic Origins of the Rasulids in Late Medieval South Arabia," *Medieval History Journal* 21, no. 2 (2018): 380–99.

6   El Cheikh, "An Abbasid Caliphal Family," 331.

by subtle hints such as the remark that the third Sulayhid ruler Saba' b. Aḥmad never had sexual intercourse with an enslaved girl (*ama*), a fact considered so unusual that his wife al-Jumāna described herself as the luckiest of all daughters of Eve.[7] In another anecdote, it is said that his successor al-Mufaḍḍal died of jealousy and sorrow when an opponent, who had seized his castle al-Taʿkar, ordered his concubines to dress up and dance on the castle roofs while he watched from below.[8] This narrative not only attests to the presence of concubines in al-Mufaḍḍal's household but also to the value placed on them, either emotionally or in the sense of prized possessions.

Given a source bias towards a historiography of the elites, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent enslaved women and girls also formed part of more modest households in medieval South Arabia. This is a question which scholars of other medieval Islamic societies have also grappled with. In his monumental work *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein suggests that in 4th/10th- to 6th/12th-century Egypt, only a small minority could have been wealthy enough to afford a concubine.[9] Although Judaism did not endorse the institution of concubinage, some Jewish men in medieval Egypt also entertained sexual relations with their female slaves.[10] Among them were wealthy merchants active in the Indian Ocean trade, such as a certain Abraham Ben Yijū, who acquired the enslaved Indian girl Ashū in Mangalore and later probably married her.[11] In wealthier Egyptian households, certain domestic duties such as baking bread and washing clothes were assigned to enslaved women and girls.[12] Based on her study of Maliki texts from al-Andalus, de la Puente concludes that concubines were an integral part of the urban upper-class family, while sources on lower-class and rural households are difficult to come by.[13]

In the case of medieval Yemen, the possession of female slaves was certainly not restricted to ruling families. During the Najahid and Rasulid eras, enslaved women and girls were not only present in royal households but also in those of the local elites. For instance, al-Khazrajī reports that when an influential judge fell from grace in 735/1335, the sultan ordered the confiscation of all his

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7   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 36.

8   Both Saba' and al-Mufaḍḍal ruled as proxies to the Sulayhid queen Arwā, who in the mid-5th/11th century took power and ruled via henchmen until her death in 532/1138 (Smith, "Political History of the Islamic Yemen," 132).

9   Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, 321.

10   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves."

11   Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 55–8. The anthropologist and author Amitav Ghosh turned Bama into a main character of his remarkable book *In an Antique Land* (n.p.: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1992).

12   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 89.

13   De la Puente, "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children."

goods, including his enslaved girls (*jawārī*).[14] In 744/1343, a boy with remarkable physical features was born to a *jāriya* called Ghannāʾ[15] living in the household of an amir.[16] Had it not been for the unusual appearance of this child, we would never have heard of this enslaved girl. The author's chronicle of the year 799/1397 mentions a fire in the city of Fashāl that killed a judge's children and his concubine.[17] Scattered evidence suggests that less privileged households also possessed female slaves. A telling example here is the following warning which the Sulayhid ruler al-Mukarram Aḥmad allegedly gave to his troops before invading the Tihāma, which was occupied by Najahid forces: "Be advised that the Arabs of this desert render the Black enslaved girls (*al-jawār al-sawd*) pregnant, and that black skin is common to the slave and the free."[18] In other words, the Sulayhid troops would find it difficult to distinguish between their enemies, the Ethiopian Najahids, and common Yemenis with African slave ancestry. This anecdote encapsulates the pervasiveness of African concubinage in the Tihāma region at the time.

In short, despite the scant evidence, there is no doubt that enslaved girls and women were a permanent fixture of elite households in medieval Yemen and may have been part of lower-class households as well. In what follows, the types of tasks performed by female slaves and the related terminology are examined more closely. Four case studies will offer more nuanced insights into the matter.

1   Types of Female Slave Labour in Medieval Yemen

While source limitations preclude us from gaining a full understanding of the variety of tasks assigned to enslaved girls and women in medieval Yemen, two categories of female slaves appear with some regularity: concubines and entertainers on the one hand, and personal servants forming the entourage of elite women on the other. It must be emphasized that these were certainly not the only fields of female slave labour in medieval Yemen, and probably not even the most prominent ones. Rather, available sources recorded only those female slaves who were most closely associated with high-ranking men and women

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14   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.64.

15   Ghannā means to sing and song but also wealth and abundance. It is thus a typical slave name.

16   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.76. The story is also reported in al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī fī akhbār al-quṭr al-yamānī*, 514.

17   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.290.

18   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 26.

in some detail. Conclusive statements can thus be made only about a small subsection of female slaves, while the great majority remain hidden from view.

Concubines were female slaves who had sexual relations with their male owners. The institutionalization of concubinage in Islamic societies came to have far-reaching effects on Islamic households and families, calling for an elaborate set of legal rules and regulations. On the one hand, the religious sanctioning and institutionalization of concubinage probably led to its proliferation in medieval Islamic societies. On the other hand, the detailed legal framework around the practice provided concubines and their children with a level of protection and legitimacy that was unavailable to their counterparts in other contexts.[19] Evidence suggests that concubines were present at the Najahid court in large numbers. For example, al-Ḥakamī relates that "Manṣūr b. Fātik, his father Fātik b. Jayyāsh and others of the family of Jayyāsh left at their death more than a thousand concubines (*suriyya*)."[20] Describing a siege of the royal palace in Zabīd during the Najahid period, the author casually notes that it housed one hundred concubines (*jāriya*).[21] Even more astonishing is al-Khazrajī's claim that the Rasulid sultan al-Ashraf ʿUmar (r. 694–6/1295–6) used to go on holidays to the date-gardens surrounding Zabīd[22] accompanied by three hundred camel-litters, each of which transported one concubine (*surriya*). Otherwise, female slaves are not as omnipresent in the historical record of the Rasulid reign as they had been in the Najahid era. Again, these numbers should not be considered to be exact, and the term *jāriya* comprised both concubines and female household slaves (see the discussion below). Compounded evidence does confirm, however, that they formed a constitutive element of the royal Rasulid household. A marginal note also reveals that the concubines of the Rasulid sultans were buried in the family grave, attesting to their position as part of the sultans' extended families.[23] An anecdote analysed below features both a *jāriya* in the service of the Rasulid queen Jihat Ṣalāḥ and a concubine of her husband sultan al-Mujāhid.[24]

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19   For example, the fact that concubinage was prohibited by Jewish law meant that female sexual slaves belonging to Jewish men in medieval Cairo found themselves in highly precarious circumstances. Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 106–52.

20   Al-Ḥakamī, 72.

21   Al-Ḥakamī, 88.

22   These excursions to the date-gardens (*al-nakhl*) of Zabīd became a regular custom during the Rasulid era and usually occurred on Saturdays during the date-harvesting season (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, annotation 919).

23   Al-Khazrajī, I.180: "[N]obody had previously been buried in [the grave] except those closely connected with the *Banū Rasūl* from the female relations, concubines (*al-sarārī*) and small children."

24   Al-Khazrajī, II.385–7.

Most of the enslaved women featured in al-Ḥakamī's description of the Najahid court were identified as singers (*mughanniya*, pl. *mughanniyāt*).[25] The source also reveals that enslaved girls were trained to become singers by traders who then sold them to the elites.[26] As such, the role of the Najahid slave singers is reminiscent of female singers and performers at the Abbasid court. These women were usually slaves or ex-slaves and enjoyed high living standards and a certain level of autonomy – although they also suffered violence and could quickly lose their standing.[27] They performed at social gatherings of high-class men and provided them with sexual services. Female singers owned by the Najahid elite were also expected to entertain guests at nightly banquets.[28] As concubines, they entertained sexual relations with their owners. It is unclear whether, like their Abbasid and Mamluk counterparts, they also engaged in sexual activities outside their relations of concubinage.[29] Najahid slave singers were also given as presents and seem to have changed owners frequently during their lifetime. However, there is no evidence suggesting that they engaged in the highly refined cultural production which the Abbasid entertainers were famed for, such as poetry and music composition. The role of female slave singers during the Rasulid period is less documented. In the year 794/1392, a large celebration took place in Zabīd on the occasion of the circumcision of Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl's sons. In addition to a large procession and lavish banquets, two different stages were set up, "and on each of it were singers and dancing women who confounded the onlookers".[30] While the dancers in this passage are clearly identified as female and were in all likelihood enslaved, the masculine plural of the "singers" might also include the presence of female singers among them. Al-Khazrajī mentions enslaved female singers (*al-jawār al-maghānī*) specifically only once, in a biography that forms part of *Al-ʿiqd al-fākhir*.[31] Female singers are absent from *Nūr al-maʿārif*, which does mention a handful of individual male singers bearing names strongly

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25   E.g. al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 38, 72.

26   Al-Ḥakamī, 78.

27   Gordon, "Abbasid Courtesans and the Question of Social Mobility," 28; Gordon, "Place of Competition," 62; Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in ʿAbbāsid Literature on Women*, 60; Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society."

28   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 80.

29   Gordon, "Place of Competition," 74. For the Mamluk era, Barker remarks that "[t]he sale of female slave singers was not accompanied by a period of refusal at all because of their strong association with sexual exploitation" ("Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 349).

30   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.240.

31   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2492.

suggesting an enslaved state.[32] A 9th/15th-century Yemeni administrative trea-
tise documents the arrival of enslaved female singers and dancers from India
(*jawār hunūd maghānī, jawār raqasāt hunūd*).[33]

In his widely read legal compendium, the 7th/13th-century Shafiʿi jurist
al-Nawawī expressly noted the right of a Muslim wife to have servants or slaves
at her disposal. Any husband, whether solvent or not, free or enslaved, had the
duty of providing his wife with a servant.[34] Female slaves serving elite women
are mentioned frequently in sources from both the Najahid and Rasulid eras.
For example, al-Khazrajī relates that upon her death, the mother of Sultan
al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl manumitted "many enslaved girls (*jawārī*), eunuchs (*khud-
dām*) and male slaves (*ʿabīd*)".[35] Together with eunuchs, these female domestic
slaves likely formed the core workforce in the households of Rasulid women.
Elite women were usually surrounded by an entourage of female slave servants,
but the exact nature and extent of these women's tasks and responsibilities
remain unknown. It is important to note that the two main categories of female
slaves – concubines and personal servants – cannot be neatly separated, a fact
that is reflected in the terminology. *Jāriya* (pl. *jawārī*) principally means young
girl but is also a euphemism for a female slave.[36] It is the most commonly used
term for enslaved women and girls in al-Ḥakamī's *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*.
Here, *jawārī* frequently appear in the possession of both high-ranking men and
women. Their relationship to male owners is evidently one of sexual slavery,
while their role in the entourage of courtly women seems to have been that

32   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.566, 1.570. Three singers – *muṭribūn* – are mentioned by
      name: Mujāhid, Sunjur and Muflīḥ, whose epithet "the dancer" (*al-raqqāṣ*) reveals his
      additional role of dancer.

33   Smith, *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiṭan*, 40.

34   Al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-Ṭālibīn*, 459.

35   (*Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2502). She was known as "lady of the eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Tughā
      al-Afḍalī al-Ashrafī" (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.175).

36   Nashwān b. Saʿīd Al-Ḥimyarī, *Shams al-ʿulūm wa dawāʾ kalām al-ʿarab min al-kulūm*, ed.
      Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd Allāh Al-ʿAmrī, Muṭahar b. ʿAlī Al-Iryānī and Yūsuf Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh
      (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 1999), 1048. The word shares a root with the Arabic word for neigh-
      bour (*jār/jīrān*) which in the Yemeni context also designates a person not belonging to
      but living under the protection of a tribe. Yosef Tobi considers this system of relations to
      be pre-Islamic (Yosef Tobi, *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in Their History and Culture*, Études
      Sur Le Judaïsme Médiéval 21 [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 151). Moshe Piamenta, *Dictionary of
      Post-classical Yemeni Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 77–8. Among the Munebbih tribe of
      Ṣaʿda and neighbouring tribes, *juwāra* denotes the enclave within tribal territory inhab-
      ited by non-tribal protégés. The head sheikh of the Munebbih referred to the *juwāra*'s
      inhabitants as his followers (*anṣār*) and slaves (*ʿabīd*) (Andre Gingrich, personal corre-
      spondence, 14 June 2019. See also Andre Gingrich, "Der Agrarkalender der Munebbih.
      Eine ethnologische Studie zu sozialem Kontext und regionalem Vergleich eines tribalen
      Sternenkalenders in Südwestarabien" (PhD diss., Habilitationsschrift an der grund- und
      integrativwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Universität Wien, 1989).

of personal servants. The term is thus imprecise in that it denotes both concu-
bines and female slaves attending to elite women.[37] It also appears that female
slave attendants could become concubines, and perhaps vice-versa. For exam-
ple, the Sulayhid queen Sayyida is said to have sent one of her *jawārī* to her
husband, in order to avoid having to consummate her marriage.[38] Similarly,
the daughter of a Najahid prince tried to evade the sexual advances of a pow-
erful vizier by handing over to him "forty virgins from among her *jawārī*" (see
the section "ʿAlam" below).[39] Although conclusive evidence is lacking, it is con-
ceivable that some female slaves worked as household attendants when they
were underage, were reassigned to sexual duties upon attaining puberty and
resumed domestic work as older women.

The terms *surriya* and *waṣīfa* are more precise in meaning. *Surriya* appears
occasionally in *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*[40] but only once in *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*.[41]
In all instances, it is strictly applied to concubines and never to female slaves
performing other functions. The word stems from the Arabic root s-r-r whose
cluster of meanings includes secret and concealment, sexual intercourse and
joy (*surūr*).[42] *Waṣīfa* (pl. *waṣāʾif*) and its male counterpart *waṣīf* (pl. *wuṣafāʾ*)
are basic appellations for slaves that do not specify any age or occupation.[43]
However, the compounded evidence from our sources suggests that in medi-
eval Yemen, the terms usually referred to household slaves. The difference
between concubine and *waṣīfa* becomes obvious when al-Ḥakamī describes
the relocation of the Najahid sultan Jayyāsh to a new residency. He writes
that "the Indian concubine" (*al-jāriya al-hindiya*) who was pregnant with his
child was relocated, as were "the female and male household slaves" (*waṣāʾif
wa al-waṣaf*).[44] Two other terms, *ḥarīm* and *ama*, are inconclusive but barely
relevant in the sources examined.[45]

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37   Unlike in medieval sources from al-Andalus, where *jāriya* denoted both slave and free
      female servant (Cristina de la Puente, "Mano de obra esclava en Al-Andalus," *Espacio
      Tiempo y Forma. Serie III, Historia Medieval* 23 [2010]: 139), in the medieval Yemeni con-
      text the term seems to have been used exclusively for slaves.

38   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 36.

39   Al-Ḥakamī, 73.

40   E.g. al-Ḥakamī, 40, 72, 78.

41   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.41.

42   The term has strong sexual overtones. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, 1989 (root s-r-r). Lane,
      Arabic–English Lexicon, 1339.

43   For example, in his description of the Ziyadid dynasty (203–409/819–1018), al-Ḥakamī
      mentions that the tribute imposed by Ibn Ziyād on the ruler of Dahlak included five hun-
      dred "Ethiopian and Nubian female slaves" (*waṣīfat ḥabashiya wa nūbiya*; *Al-Mufīd fī akh-
      bār Zabīd*, 6).

44   Al-Ḥakamī, 67.

45   The plural term *ḥarīm* can mean either wives or female slaves but appears rarely in
      our sources (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 1339). Curiously, it is used twice in *Al-ʿUqūd*

Very little is known about lower-ranking tasks carried out by female slaves. Salary lists from the Rasulid court survive in *Nūr al-maʿārif* and offer valuable insights into the composition of its workforce at the lower levels (see chapter 5); however, female slaves are starkly underrepresented. It appears that at least some tasks carried out by enslaved women and girls were compensated monetarily, while most others were performed unpaid. Minimal evidence proves that female slaves worked in the sultanic kitchens. A list of provisions allocated to the sultan's nephew Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 690/1291 contains the salary for a female cook and a female bread-maker, both unnamed.[46] Their enslaved state cannot be confirmed; however, a section in *Nūr al-maʿārif* describing the composition of the sultan's meals includes "the bread of the enslaved girls" (*khubz al-jawārī*).[47] It is thus quite plausible that female slaves were engaged in bread baking.[48] Furthermore, the female name Ṭayyiba appears in a salary list for eunuch cooks (see chapter 5). Despite scant evidence, it is entirely possible that female slaves and servants constituted a sizeable part of the workforce in sultanic kitchens but have simply not left their mark in the sources because they did not receive salaries.

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al-luʾluʾiyya in connection with political prisoners. The first incident occurred around 674/1275, when Sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf captured the Zaydi imam al-Mahdī Ibrāhīm (d. 683/1284) during a battle in Sanaʿa and imprisoned him in Taʿizz. There, he was treated with respect, provided with a daily allowance, food and "clothes for him and for those with him, women (*ḥarīm*) and eunuchs (*khuddām*)" (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.194). Around fifty years later, in 721/1322, the newly installed sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid was deposed by his paternal uncle al-Manṣūr Ayyūb and imprisoned with all comforts and necessities, including *ḥarīm* (al-Khazrajī, II.5). It seems unlikely that the wives of these two high-ranking men joined them in prison. Rather, they probably either travelled with their own concubines who were subsequently captured with them, or their capturers provided them with enslaved female companions. Such confinements could last for a long time – in fact, the imam remained in prison until he died, explaining why high-ranking prisoners were provided with servants and possibly sexual partners. *Ama*, the standard Qurʾanic term for a female slave, only appears once in al-Ḥakamī's work to describe a concubine (Brunschvig, "ʿAbd"; Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*: [*Arabic–English*], 4th ed. [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979], 31; al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 36). Finally, *umm walad* – the legal term for a female slave who had born her owner a child is at times used as a title for a particular woman or mentioned in connection with her child's name – Umm Faraj, Umm Fātik, etc. (85, 86). This introduces the woman in question, clarifies her social standing and relates her directly to her owner through the name of their child. However, the sources are not consistent in this practice: even female slaves who had born their owner a child were occasionally referred to as *jāriya* or *suriyya* (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.724, I.174).

46 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.557.

47 Anonymous, II.92.

48 Alternatively, this mention could also refer to bread allocated specifically to the sultan's concubines, but I find this interpretation less plausible.

Nūr al-maʿārif also offers minimal evidence for the deployment of female slaves in artisanal work. A section enumerating the wages for different handicrafts reveals that enslaved girls (*jawārī*) produced buttons made of silk thread.[49] A female slave received 7.25 dinar for one *mann*[50] of buttons. This wage compensated her for the following steps in the production process: spinning the silk thread, twisting it together to form buttons and sewing the buttons on to shirts. This type of female slave labour is reminiscent of Mamluk Egypt, where many free women and some concubines worked for wages in exclusively female sectors of the economy.[51] Women there were not only remunerated as hairdressers, midwives and bath attendants but also dominated the textile sector. On the basis of a collection of legal documents from Mamluk Jerusalem known as the Ḥaram al-Sharīf collection, Huda Lutfi was able to prove that a large proportion of women recorded, if not the majority, worked for wages in the textile industry. Nevertheless, their profession was rarely noted by the scribes.[52] Rapoport also notes that "[f]ree women who provided non-skilled services, such as wet-nurses, had to compete with the unsalaried services of slave-girls".[53] Hence, enslaved women and girls in Mamluk Egypt worked for free in certain domains of female wage labour but received salaries in the highly skilled textile industry. Unfortunately, the financial situation of free women in the Rasulid era is even more scarcely attested than that of unfree women. Rasulid noblewomen possessed substantial wealth, as their patronage activities attest. Upon marriage, women obtained bridal trousseaux (*jihāz*),[54] which according to Islamic jurisprudence could not be claimed by their husbands, thereby allowing for a certain level of financial independence.[55] However, the sources are silent on the issue of female wage labour. It is therefore impossible to compare the unpaid work of female slaves in the Rasulid palace and their paid work in textile production to the working practices of free Yemeni women at the time.

In addition to these documented fields of female slave labour, it is likely that the majority of enslaved girls and women performed numerous other tasks in households, such as childcare, agriculture and craftsmanship which have

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49   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.104. In Rasulid times, silk was imported from China and India (al-Shamrookh, *Commerce and Trade of the Rasulids in the Yemen*, 139–40).

50   The *mann* was a unit of weight (Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande*, 207).

51   Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 16ff.

52   Huda Lutfi, Al-Quds al-Mamlūkiyya: A History of Mamlūk Jerusalem Based on the Ḥaram Documents, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 113 (Berlin: Schwarz, 1985), 64–7.

53   Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 23.

54   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.580.

55   Jack Goody and Stanley J. Tambiah, *Bridewealth and Dowry*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

simply not been recorded in the sources analysed. The centrality of domestic slavery in medieval Islamic societies is proven by the frequent discussions of the subject in legal texts,[56] but household slaves rarely figure in other types of sources and have thus frequently been overlooked by historians. Barker's study of slavery in Egypt and Italy between the mid-7th/13th and the 9th/15th century has revealed that most female slaves were engaged in domestic work, which included "cooking; cleaning; washing and maintaining clothes and linens; carrying water; buying food; collecting firewood and tending the fire; spinning, sewing, weaving, running errands, caring for children, and personal service".[57] Furthermore, some female slaves assisted their mistress in artisanal work and trades such as hairdressing.[58] Perry has noted that in Jewish households in 4th/10th- to 7th/13th-century Egypt, "female domestic slavery generally served the interests of free women, performing valuable labor for the household and alleviating their burdens, much more than those of their male spouses and relatives".[59] The mastery over female slavery enabled free women to maintain a largely secluded lifestyle that marked dignity, honour and high status. It is hoped that additional Yemeni sources will become accessible in the future, shedding more light on the extent of enslaved women's work in the medieval Islamic context.

After this overview on the extent and nature of female slave labour in medieval Yemen, selected case studies will provide rare insights into the lived realities of enslaved women during the Najahid and the Rasulid era.

2 Concubines' Biographies in al-Ḥakamī's Chronicle

Our knowledge of the Najahid period rests on one source alone, namely al-Ḥakamī's history of Yemen (see chapter 1). The following case studies relate to a period of Najahid rule which the author witnessed at close quarters and described in great detail. His position as court poet and confidant of both Queen ʿAlam and her advisor Surūr permitted him to gain deep insights into their lives but may also have led him to embellish his accounts. Furthermore, al-Ḥakamī wrote his history for an Egyptian audience at the Fatimid court,

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56   Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn*, ed. Muḥammad Ṭāhir Shaʿbān, Dār al-Minhāj (Beirut, 2005). Jonathan E. Brockopp, *Early Mālikī Law: Ibn ʿAbd al-ḥakam and His Major Compendium of Jurisprudence* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). De la Puente, "Slaves in Al-Andalus through Maliki Wathaʾiq Works."

57   Most of the evidence, however, stems from Italian sources.

58   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 92; Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 172.

59   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 68.

decades after he had left Yemen. Eager to present his homeland in a positive
light and to live up to his reputation a poet, he favoured entertaining anecdotes
over hard facts. The strong presence of female slaves in his account, compared
to other medieval sources, can thus be credited both to his intimate knowledge
of dynamics at the Najahid court and to his literary choices. In order to illus-
trate the lived realities of female slaves in the Najahid period, the tumultuous
lives of two women will be presented in detail.

2.1   ʿAlam: from Concubine to Queen

In the early 6th/12th century, the Najahid dynasty experienced a period of
instability and internal strife, with different factions of high-ranking slaves
competing for the reins of power. Among the most powerful slave viziers was a
certain Anīs al-Fātikī from the Ethiopian tribe of Jizlī.[60] He had been the owner
of ʿAlam, at the time an enslaved singer. Anīs fell victim to his own hubris and
was beheaded by the Najahid sultan Manṣūr, who then acquired part of Anīs's
possessions.[61] As an eyewitness to the time, al-Ḥakamī provides the following
description of ʿAlam's stunning social advancement:

> What became [Manṣūr's] through acquisition from Anīs's inheritance
> included an enslaved singing girl (*jāriya mughanniya*) named ʿAlam.
> Manṣūr rendered her pregnant with a son named Fātik. She is the free
> and pious lady, who used to perform the pilgrimage by land and sea, with
> the people of Yemen under her protection from perils and tolls, and from
> the troop of the viziers.[62]

Al-Ḥakamī's wording neatly encapsulates the two stages of ʿAlam's existence:
in her early life as enslaved performer, she is acted upon – first bought, then
rendered pregnant. As soon as she gains the state of free woman, al-Ḥakamī's
description changes: she appears assertive and powerful. From her humble
beginnings as enslaved singing girl, ʿAlam rose to prominence as the concu-
bine of the fifth Najahid sultan Manṣūr, whom she bore a son. She thereby
acquired the status of *umm walad* (pl. *umām awlād*, literally: "mother of the
child").[63] A female slave who bore her owner a child gained her freedom upon

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60   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.362; al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 70.
61   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 71.
62   Al-Ḥakamī, 71.
63   Al-Nawawī, 601. For a detailed study of the *umm walad* in Mālikī law, see Jonathan
      E. Brockopp, *Early Maliki Law: Ibn ʾAbd al-Hakam and His Major Compendium of
      Jurisprudence*. Leiden: Brill, 2000, 162–205.

her owner's death and received a part of his legacy to cover her subsistence.[64] The child born of such a union was free and considered its father's legitimate offspring. Although she enjoyed an improved status, the *umm walad* remained enslaved during her owner's lifetime. While her sale was forbidden, she could still be employed in her owner's service and hired out to serve others.[65] An owner retained the right to have sexual intercourse with his *umm walad*.[66] According to these legal guidelines, 'Alam would have gained her freedom in 524/1130, when Manṣūr died. A cursory reference attests, however, that Manṣūr freed and married her already during his lifetime.[67] Consequently, she bore the title "al-ḥurra" ("the free one"), which as discussed above was a common epithet for Najahid wives.

Her relationship of concubinage and later her marriage to the Najahid ruler Manṣūr enabled 'Alam to gain her freedom and to climb the social ladder. Remarkably, she was able to continue exerting political influence throughout the fierce power struggles at the early 6th/12th-century Najahid court. In 517/1123, the powerful vizier Man Allāh poisoned Manṣūr and usurped power from her underage son Fātik II. Next, he sought to gain possession of the women who had belonged to Manṣūr. Al-Ḥakamī's narrative of his predatory behaviour is revealing in many ways and calls for a short digression from 'Alam's life story:

> Manṣūr b. Fātik, his father Fātik b. Jayyāsh and others from the family of Najāḥ left at their death more than a thousand concubines (*suriyya*). Not one of them was safe from the vizier Man Allāh, except for ten women from among the favourites of Manṣūr b. Fātik. Among these was the free lady, the queen (*al-ḥurra al malika*), mother of Fātik son of Manṣūr.[68]

The sheer number of concubines mentioned immediately attracts attention. The statement should probably not be read literally but as indicative of the scale of concubinage during the Najahid period. Second, and more importantly, al-Ḥakamī documents the death of the concubines' owner, a precarious moment in their lives. According to medieval Islamic law, the slaves of a deceased person formed part of their estate and would therefore

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64 De la Puente, "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children," 37.

65 Marmon, *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, 4.

66 De la Puente, "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children," 35.

67 Mentioning a concubine called Tamanna, al-Ḥakamī remarks: "The mother of Fātik had no second wife (*ḍarra*) except her (Tamanna)" (al-Ḥakamī, 73). The mother of Fātik is, of course, 'Alam.

68 Al-Ḥakamī, 72.

fall under a complex system of provisions regulating inheritance. As such, Manṣūr's concubines should have been bequeathed to his son, al-Fātik, and to other close relatives. The fact that Man Allāh could gain access to these women attests to the disproportionate power held by individual enslaved ministers during these turbulent times. Al-Ḥakamī mentions ten women who Man Allāh was unable to gain possession of, most notably ʿAlam herself. And indeed, ʿAlam, who at the time was a free woman and mother of the incumbent king, should have been far beyond anyone's claim of possession. Three of the other nine women bore the title *umm walad*, and a fourth one is described as Manṣūr's only other wife (*ḍarra*) next to ʿAlam.[69] Man Allāh spared only Manṣūr's wives and his concubines with *umm walad* status, which can be read as a proof that Islamic legal principles pertaining to slavery were known and relevant at the time. Nevertheless, Man Allāh was not one to always obey the law. His pressure on ʿAlam was such that she took the following precautionary measures:

> She withdrew from the palace, left the city and built a house for herself where the vizier could not reach her, neither with an excuse nor with a reason. Despite her son being king, she settled the matter by distancing herself from his palace. She confided the custody of her son to his father's slaves, two eunuchs (*ustādhayn*).[70]

Faced with a critical situation, ʿAlam is described as taking forceful action in order to ensure her own safety and independence. While physically removing herself from the royal court, ʿAlam maintained her influence there through a group of trusted slaves acting upon her command, who were also charged with the care of her son. In this manner, ʿAlam successfully evaded Man Allāh's grip. The passage also casually reveals that ʿAlam had until then resided in the royal palace with her son, who was heir to the throne, and shows that she possessed sufficient funds and influence to be able to build a house for herself.

The vizier's transgressions did not merely extend to female slaves or former slaves. Al-Khazrajī, who features the vizier in his biographical collection, writes: "He was not satisfied with the concubines (*sarārī*); he even meddled with the virgin daughters of his masters (*mawālihī*)."[71] Al-Ḥakamī tells the story in greater detail:

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69   It is interesting that two of Manṣūr's concubines were freed and became his wives, but other concubines who also bore him children did not obtain the status of wives and only acquired their freedom upon his death.

70   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 72.

71   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2189.

> When God wished the destruction of Man Allāh al-Fātikī, he [Mann Allāh] sought to gain the daughter of Muʾārik b. Jayyāsh. He tried to seduce her, and she was described as being beautiful. She ransomed herself to him with forty virgins from among her enslaved girls (*jawārī*).[72]

The forty women mentioned here were likely domestic slaves or attendants of the Najahid princess who had caught Man Allāh's attention. Wishing to save herself from the vizier, the princess handed her own enslaved women over to him, thereby transforming them into concubines. Their fate perfectly illustrates the utter powerlessness that even more privileged female slaves could suffer. Yet, in just the next passage, al-Ḥakamī furnishes evidence of a former slave's remarkable agency.

Having failed to buy her way out of Man Allāh's coercion by delivering her female slaves to him, the Najahid princess sought the help of powerful officials in the Najahid administration, but they were too frightened of the vizier to oppose him. Help finally came from a certain Umm Abū al-Jaysh, an *umm walad* of Manṣūr's. She offered the girl shelter in her home and spun an intricate plot around her persecutor, seducing and then poisoning him. Such was the general disdain for this man that he was buried in a stable.[73]

In a period of political turmoil and diffuse state authority, Man Allāh's insatiable desire provoked a moral crisis that the Najahid elite felt unable to resolve. It is clear from al-Ḥakamī's and al-Khazrajī's narratives that the public strongly disapproved of the vizier's covetous behaviour towards ʿAlam and the other free widows and *ummahāt awlād* of Manṣūr, and that his pursuit of an unmarried Najahid princess provoked an outcry. Yet, the only person willing and able to stop him was a former slave. Umm Abū al-Jaysh was a celebrated beauty and accomplished singer who had born Manṣūr a daughter.[74] Her career thus mirrors the advancement of ʿAlam from slave concubine to *umm walad*, although falling short of a marriage with the king. While in the past, Umm Abū al-Jaysh had possessed just as little standing and influence as the numerous unnamed concubines who fell prey to Man Allāh, her current position as freed mother of her owner's child afforded her sufficient agency to ward off and ultimately kill the vizier. Her involvement can also be interpreted as an act of female solidarity in the face of male exploitation and thus stands in stark contrast to the

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72   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 73.

73   Al-Ḥakamī, 73.

74   Al-Ḥakamī, 72. Umm Abū al Jaysh is described as Muwallada and was thus likely of both African and Arab descent. See a longer discussion of the term below.

decision of the unnamed Najahid princess who, in an attempt to save herself, delivered her own enslaved girls to the predatory vizier.

After this brief digression, we return to ʿAlam's life story. Mann Allāh's death did not mark the end of lethal power games at the Najahid court. ʿAlam's son, the underage Najahid sultan Fātik II, was killed by an enslaved vizier in 531/1136. He was succeeded by a paternal nephew who also bore the name Fātik (III). Real authority, however, was held by different factions of powerful slaves. ʿAlam's political ambitions could have ended here. After the death of both her husband and her son, she was no longer directly linked to the throne. Nevertheless, she took advantage of the volatile political context and sought to increase her influence by placing her own slaves in important positions. Al-Ḥakamī writes:

> Men from among the slaves (ʿabīd) of the free lady, Queen Umm Fātik b. Manṣūr were raised in the palace of king Fātik b. Manṣūr. They were Ṣawāb, Rayḥān, Yumn,[75] ʿAzz, and Rayḥān the Elder. These governors (azimma) were dignitaries, important personalities. Among the non-castrated ones [were] Iqbāl, Masrūr, Bārih[76] and Surūr. [Surūr] was the amir of the two parties, given his capabilities and affluence. This group were those who spoke with the sultan's tongue.[77]

This short passage introduces nine of ʿAlam's slaves who attained important political roles, and some of them thereafter appear frequently in the chronicle. Ṣawāb, for example, held the position of principal zimām (al-zimām al-nāẓir)[78] in ʿAlam's household. Similar to the relationship between Jihat Ṣalāḥ and her azimma (sg. zimām) analysed in chapter 3, the role performed by Ṣawāb is best described as administrator of ʿAlam's household. Al-Ḥakamī's remark that the nine slaves "spoke with the sultan's tongue" is interesting since sultanic power had become practically irrelevant at the Najahid court since the beginning of the 6th/12th century.[79] Al-Ḥakamī's comment must therefore be understood

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75   Vocalization unclear.

76   Vocalization unclear.

77   Al-Ḥakamī, Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd, 82.

78   As outlined in chapter 4, a zimām was a eunuch administrator of an elite woman's household.

79   The author himself made this point eloquently, writing that "[t]he sons of Fātik (I) b. Jayyāsh did not possess the rule except for outward reputation […]. The absolute authority and management, the adherence to prescribed rules (ḥudūd), and the appointment of delegations lay with their slaves, the viziers" (al-Ḥakamī, Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd, 70). Ḥudūd Allāh are "[p]rescribed rules guiding behavior, which one should not transgress" (Kimber, "Boundaries and Precepts.")

not as ʿAlam's slaves speaking as representatives of the ruling Najahid sovereign at the time, Fātik III, but as appropriating the authority of sultanic speech for themselves. As will become clear in the following example, however, the power of these enslaved men was closely monitored and controlled by their owner, Queen ʿAlam.

The passage above singles out a certain Surūr as the leader of ʿAlam's slaves. And indeed, his relationship with the queen can be traced throughout al-Ḥakamī's description of the Najahid dynasty, beginning when Surūr is still a child. Al-Ḥakamī writes that the queen

> bought for her son two young enslaved boys (*waṣfānan*) from Ethiopia. This Surūr was one of them. She raised him in her care and protection, and he quickly grew up and excelled. She entrusted him with controlling (*zamma*) the enslaved soldiers (*mamālīk*) and directed towards him the leadership of everyone who was in the castle.[80]

Surūr's full name, Abū Muḥammad Surūr Amḥara al-Fātikī, reveals that he was an uncastrated slave of Amharic Ethiopian origin.[81] ʿAlam orchestrated his rise to power by installing him as head of both the enslaved army and the royal household. His obituary mentions that he acted as go-between between the sultan, Fātik III, and the principal viziers, whose power surpassed that of their lord.[82] The evidence shows that ʿAlam made use of Surūr to gain direct political influence in the army and in communications between the sultan and his powerful enslaved viziers, two spheres otherwise inaccessible to women. ʿAlam's enslaved administrator Sawāb purportedly stated that "the *qāʾid* [commander] Abū Muhammad Surūr is entrusted with absolute authority over me and over our mistress,[83] and nobody should contradict his command".[84] This statement implies that Surūr was given the authority to make decisions on behalf of queen ʿAlam. Surūr's obituary provides further details on interactions between the two. As he entered the city of Zabīd after an absence during Ramadan, large crowds awaited him in the streets. Among them, he first greeted the jurists, then the merchants and finally the soldiers. Al-Ḥakamī writes:

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80   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 86.

81   Surūr is described as uncastrated slave (*faḥl*) on page 82. The *nisba* Abū Muḥammad suggests that he had a son named Muḥammad; we later learn that he married Warda, a concubine who had belonged to his nemesis Mufliḥ al-Fātikī (85).

82   Al-Ḥakamī, 86.

83   *Mawlāt*. The plural is often used in medieval Yemeni sources when referring to a single high-status woman; it could thus either refer to one or to several royal women.

84   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 87.

When he had entered the city and paid honours to the sultan, he proceeded to the palace of his mistress, the free lady (*mawlāthu al-ḥurra*). And when he entered into her presence, the people scattered away from her, the young and the old. Only Ghazāl remained with her, her enslaved girl (*jāriya*), who was his wife's sister,[85] and two enslaved girls (*jawārī*) of her lord Manṣūr b. Fātik. These women walk in the right path, in her manner, and imitate her deeds in righteousness. When he had reached her, she descended from her throne, honouring him with her benevolence, and out of reverence for his rank. She said to him: "You, Father of Muhammad[86] are our vizier, nay, our master (*mawlā*), nay, our man who does not enjoy that we depart from obedience to you in anything." He overflowed with weeping in her presence and covered his cheeks with earth, until she took upon lifting him from the ground with her hands. Then the women retreated to the side of the sitting room, not far away, so that [Surūr] could inform her about what he considered good to do in the management this year – successions, dismissals and favours. [Blank in manuscript] He continued sitting in her presence and the three women stood by his head until he stood up for his midday prayer and returned to his mosque.[87]

The reader is witness here to an intimate meeting between ʿAlam and Surūr. After all other visitors had left, the two shower each other with words and gestures of reverence. Al-Ḥakamī's mention of ʿAlam's three enslaved female attendants guarantees the decorum of this closed-door meeting; as will be discussed below, despite ʿAlam's high rank, she was not spared the questioning of her morality. It was therefore important to underline the ethical qualities of the three women, which, given their enslaved state, could not be presupposed. After the exchange of elaborate expressions of respect, Surūr outlines his political and administrative plans for the next year. ʿAlam is informed about and possibly also involved in the decision-making on practical matters

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85   Ghazāl's sister was most likely Warda, who will be amply discussed below. Surūr's marriage to Ghazāl's sister is also mentioned in al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 944.

86   In Akwaʿ's edition of al-Ḥakamī's work, ʿAlam addresses Surūr with "Yā Bā Muḥammad." Bā is a short form of Abū common to this day in the Ḥaḍramawt; the translation would thus be "Oh Father of Muḥammad" which is more convincing than Kay's "Yāyā Muḥammad" (*Tarīkh al-Yaman: Al-musamma al-mufīd fī akhbār Ṣanʿaʾ wa Zabīd wa-shuʿarāʾ mulūkihā wa-aʿyānihā wa-udabāʾihā*, ed. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Al-Akwaʿ [Ṣanʿāʾ: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿilm, 1989], 227). Surūr's *kunya* referring to a son by the name of Muḥammad is also mentioned in al-Ḥakamī, 86.

87   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 89–90.

of government. It should be pointed out that Surūr's prior meeting with the sultan was not considered worth a description by al-Ḥakamī. Surūr's daily routine is described elsewhere and includes a note that after his evening prayer, he "met with the noble lady, the queen, for counsel".[88] In sum, the author eloquently casts the relationship between ʿAlam and Surūr as one marked by mutual respect and trust, one between confidants consulting each other on state affairs. Furthermore, al-Ḥakamī claims that Surūr's scribes documented in their notes that he conferred one-fourth of the revenue gained from his provinces to ʿAlam and her entourage in the form of gifts.[89]

The queen's quest for influence at court soon claimed its first victim. Mufliḥ al-Fātiki was a vizier of Ethiopian descent with an impeccable reputation of virtue and sophistication. Al-Ḥakamī writes: "The people used to say: if he were of Quraysh descent, he would fulfil all conditions for succession [to the caliphate]."[90] Mufliḥ stood in the way of the political ambitions harboured by the queen's slaves and soon fell out with Surūr in particular.[91] The earlier quote describing ʿAlam's nine slaves continues as follows:

> Men from among the slaves (ʿabīd) of the free lady, queen Umm Fātik b. Manṣūr, were raised in the palace of King Fātik b. Manṣūr. [...] This group were those who spoke with the sultan's tongue.
>
> The vizier [Mufliḥ] became a stranger with them in the sultan's affairs. Through them, the side of the free lady became powerful, and many of the horsemen and men became rich.[92]

The political vacuum caused by the absence of a powerful sultan saw ʿAlam's slaves and Mufliḥ directly competing for influence at the Najahid court. Soon enough, Surūr devised a plot aimed at discrediting Mufliḥ and instigating his downfall. His ruse reveals interesting gender dynamics and is thus reproduced in full:

> Then they devised a plot with which to expel Mufliḥ from Zabīd. Surūr said to them: "What better plot do you have than a conversation about the pilgrimage (ḥajj) of our mistress (mawlānā) to Mecca, and her equipment for thirty thousand dinars?" When they wrote to him about this, he

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refused and said: "The money would first be directed to the enemies of the state than to these fables. For our mistress, there is the spindle, and the requirement that she be busily occupied in the corner of the house."

They continued to reiterate this until he said: "Our lady needs something different than that. Support her in it, this will make her forget." They said: "And what is that?" He said: "A thing in this length", grasped his palm and stretched out the arm.[93] This word caused injury in the souls, and Mufliḥ could not correct it except by permitting her [to undertake] the pilgrimage. He supplied her with thirty thousand dinars and sent his son Manṣūr with her on the journey to Mecca.[94]

Although this passage primarily concerns the bitter rivalry between Surūr and Mufliḥ, it also throws into sharp relief the gendered power relations between Mufliḥ and ʿAlam. It is plainly evident that the vizier disdains the queen and disapproves of her involvement in political affairs. What is more, he discounts her intention to perform the ḥajj as "fables" and considers the related expenses to be a waste of government funds.[95] Such an opinion is curious coming from a man described as very pious, since performing the ḥajj at least once in a lifetime is a religious duty for every Muslim who is able to afford it. It might however have been unusual for women in 6th/12th-century Yemen to meet this religious requirement.[96] In ʿAlam's case, the pilgrimage was a central part of her public engagement, which she "used to perform [...] by land and sea, with the people of Yemen under her protection from perils and tolls, and from the troop of the viziers".[97] ʿAlam acted as patroness of the yearly ḥajj caravan travelling from Yemen to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.[98] Given her rank, she was certainly accompanied by guards and soldiers, which increased

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93   While the exact meaning of the gesture is lost, it was obviously offensive and likely bore a sexual connotation.

94   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 82–3.

95   Thirty thousand dinars was a sizeable sum. In comparison, a later passage praises Surūr for giving gifts amounting to forty-seven thousand dinars annually to the scholarly and religious elite, various court officials and members of the royal family including "his mistress, the free lady (*mawlāthu al-ḥurra*)" ʿAlam and her entourage. In addition, he paid sixty thousand dinars of tributes obtained from his provinces into the royal treasury (al-Ḥakamī, 90).

96   I have found no other evidence of a woman performing the ḥajj in the Najahid era. Al-Khazrajī relates that during the Rasulid period, both the mother of Sultan al-Malikal-Ashraf Ismāʿīl (known as *jiha* of the chief eunuch Jamāl ad-Dīn Ṭughā al-Afḍalī al-Ashrafī) and queen Jihat Ṣalāḥ performed the pilgrimage to Mecca (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿIqd al-fākhir*, 2502; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.85).

97   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 71.

98   Around 538/1143, al-Ḥakamī himself joined ʿAlam's entourage as she undertook her yearly pilgrimage (Derenbourg, *ʿOumāra du Yémen*, 66ff.).

the safety of the whole caravan. Yet, Mufliḥ is clearly unimpressed by ‘Alam's support of Yemeni pilgrims. The misogynistic undertone is strong when the vizier declares spindle and household to be ‘Alam's only legitimate concerns. His comment is clearly intended to put this exceptionally influential woman in her place and must be read as a direct criticism of her active political and social engagement. The passage also reveals that despite her powerful position, ‘Alam still required Mufliḥ's permission to obtain a travel budget. The vizier's authority over the treasury was probably another reason why Surūr sought to usurp his power. After Surūr's allies provocatively pressed him on the matter of ‘Alam's expenses, Mufliḥ gave a sexually suggestive retort that questioned the queen's morality. This drastic break of decorum caused such offence that Mufliḥ was forced to cede to ‘Alam's demands and even to appoint his own son as her travel companion.

This incident irreparably damaged the vizier's reputation. Shortly afterwards, he was sent on a fabricated military mission and thenceforth prevented from returning to Zabīd. He died in 529/1135 in the castle of al-Karish.[99] Mufliḥ's unhappy end is evidence of the power yielded by ‘Alam and her slaves in early 6th/12th-century Zabīd, but his bitter remarks also show that her assertive behaviour did not please everyone. Surūr, meanwhile, had finally gained the position of vizier, the highest-ranking official at the Najahid court, thereby further increasing the political standing of his mistress ‘Alam, as the following story illustrates. In 541/1146, the religious zealot ‘Alī ibn Mahdī wrote to her, asking for protection. Al-Ḥakamī writes:

> He then wrote to Zabīd and asked her to protect him and those who seek shelter with him, and [let him] return to his home. This the free lady (al-ḥurra) did, despite the reluctance of the people of her government (ahl dawlatiha) and the jurists of her era, so that God might accomplish a matter already ordained.[100]

It is remarkable that ‘Alī ibn Mahdī addressed his request to ‘Alam and not to the ruling Najahid sovereign Fātik III. She clearly had the authority to grant protection to a highly controversial figure, thereby directly opposing the will of government officials and jurists. Her decision to support ‘Alī ibn Mahdī, however, proved to be a grave mistake. Soon after her death in 545/1150,[101] the religious fanatic and his troops began invading Najahid territories. In 551/1156, a follower of ‘Alī ibn Mahdī stabbed Surūr while he was performing his prayers

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99   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 85.
100   The last phrase is a quote from the Qurʾān (8:42). Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 93.
101   Al-Ḥakamī, 93.

in the mosque of Zabīd.[102] Soon thereafter, the ruling Najahid sultan Fātik III fell victim to an internal plot, and in 554/1159 ʿAlī ibn Mahdī conquered the city, dealing the Najahid dynasty its final blow.

ʿAlam's remarkable rise to power was made possible both by the institution of concubinage which elevated her to the position of queen and by the politically volatile situation at the Najahid court which she exploited ingeniously. Remarkably, she made use of the institution of slavery to advance her political agenda, raising enslaved boys in her palace and later elevating them into top administrative positions. As such, her strategy resembles that of the Rasulid queen Jihat Ṣalāḥ discussed in chapter 3, who exercised political control through her eunuch administrators.

Another well-documented woman of the Najahid era is Warda, whose biography illustrates both the inability of female slaves to control crucial transitions in their lives and the opportunities for social advancement open to a privileged few.

2.2   *Warda: Object of Desire and Assertive Actor*

Warda's story is woven into a broader narrative describing the reign of Fātik II, ʿAlam's son who became the sixth Najahid sultan. As previously mentioned, he had inherited the throne as a child, resulting in power falling into the hands of rivalling factions of slaves competing for influence at the court. Warda appears in a series of anecdotes concerning two of these viziers, Mufliḥ and Surūr, whose rivalry has already been discussed. She mainly serves as a narrative device illustrating the personalities of these two men. Nevertheless, the compounded evidence offers rich insights into her situation in different life stages, and her interactions with various men is highly instructive of complex power relations shaped by gender and the institution of slavery.

The anecdotes involving Warda, Mufliḥ and Surūr were reported to al-Ḥakamī by a certain Ḥimyar b. Asʿad, a colourful character whom the author counts among his closest friends. He worked as a scribe for Mufliḥ and other local potentates and sheikhs and was a popular storyteller as well as a sought-after interlocutor who "repaired disorders and eased calamities".[103] In addition, he was active in a very different line of work:

> None of the people of the Tihāma were in the habit of hiding[104] from Ḥimyar either a singer (*mughanniya*) or an *umm walad*, because most

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102   Al-Ḥakamī, 91.

103   Al-Ḥakamī, 79.

104   The verb used could also mean "to cover with a *ḥijāb* (headscarf)".

of their concubines (*sarāʾīr*) and singers (*maghānīhim*) were trained and brought up in his house.[105]

Ḥimyar was thus a slave trader. It appears that he acquired young girls who showed potential to become musical performers and concubines and taught them the necessary skills before selling them.[106] This practice is reminiscent of the training given to enslaved female singers (*qiyān*) during the Abbasid period. *Qiyān* were enslaved women and girls who performed music, dance and poetry at elite gatherings and who were famed for their artistic accomplishments and witty banter. Many famous Abbasid slave traders were themselves musicians and thus able to teach enslaved girls to sing and play instruments. An Abbasid slave broker from the 5th/11th century recommends buying enslaved girls aged nine and training them for six years before reselling them.[107] The enslaved performer ʿArīb, a noted celebrity at her time, had originally belonged to the master of the caliph's horses, who "trained her, educated her and taught her singing".[108] Enslaved girls were also trained to become concubines in Mamluk Egypt and at the 10th/16th-century Ottoman court.[109]

Ḥimyar acts both as the narrator and as the central go-between linking the different characters in the plot surrounding Warda. The story begins with a private conversation between Mufliḥ and Ḥimyar:

> Ḥimyar said: I remember of [Mufliḥ's] virtue that one day he invited me when he was vizier and said: "Life became troubled for me for reason of what I hear all the time about the singing of Warda, the concubine (*jāriya*) of the amir ʿUthmān al-Ghuzzī, and what is described to me about her beauty. I leaned on all doors of tricks to get her to me." I said: "If you want her for fornication (*sifāḥ*), I offer my best in the service of the vizier." He replied: "By God, since I was created, I never disobeyed God the exalted by my pleasure." I asked: "For how much does the vizier buy her?" He said: "For whatever her master (*mawlā*) suggests."[110]

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105   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 78–9.

106   In a similar vein, a later passage describes a concubine as having been "raised by the traders" (al-Ḥakamī, 85). This fact obviously raised her profile, suggesting that she, too, had received some sort of training. Besides being a scribe and selling enslaved girls, Ḥimyar also dealt in poison. "Everyone of the Najahids and of their viziers who died", the author remarks, "died from Ḥimyar b. Asʿad" (al-Ḥakamī, 78–9).

107   Yawānīs al-Mukhtār ibn Buṭlān, *Trattato generale sull'acquisto e l'esame degli schiavi*, trans. Antonella Ghersetti (Catanzaro: Abramo, 2001), 76–7.

108   Myrne, "Narrative, Gender and Authority in ʿAbbāsid Literature on Women," 98.

109   Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 9. Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 141.

110   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 76–7.

This passage is part of a short chapter dedicated to Mufliḥ's life and achieve-ments which is full of praise for his character.[111] "Sensual desire was not dis-cerned in him," al-Ḥakamī remarks, "neither in youth nor in maturity."[112] And yet, the above quote shows Mufliḥ lusting after another man's concubine. It appears that at this point, Mufliḥ had neither seen Warda nor heard her sing-ing;[113] rumours about Warda's beauty and musical talent alone sufficed to enflame his desires and seek the help of her former slave trader to gain access to her.

The conversation between Ḥimyar and Mufliḥ quickly turns into a negoti-ation, with Ḥimyar freely peddling Warda's sexual services. That Ḥimyar feels entitled to provide Mufliḥ with sexual access to the concubine of another man is remarkable. Islamic jurisprudence at the time condoned sexual relations only between an owner and his own unmarried female slave. Sexual relations between a man and someone else's slave were prohibited; even his wife's slaves were off-limits. Nor could an owner force his slave to engage in sexual activi-ties with someone other than himself. The only legitimate way to gain sexual access to a female slave was thus to buy her. The two men are clearly aware of this: Ḥimyar speaks of "fornication" when offering to provide Mufliḥ access to Warda, and Mufliḥ rejects this proposal in moral indignation. His reaction underlines the vizier's piety and decency: despite his ardent desire for Warda and the access promised by Ḥimyar, Mufliḥ insists on following God's com-mand and buying Warda first. Only at the end of the conversation, Warda's owner is recognized as having the final say on her fate, possessing the right to accept or decline her sale.

Although the whole paragraph revolves around Warda, she neither speaks nor acts but features as a mere object of desire and of commercial transactions. The reader is presented with al-Ḥakamī's account of Ḥimyar's narrative, who in turn also reports Mufliḥ's words. The narrative thus consists of three layers of transmission, and Warda remains mute in all of them. Ḥimyar appears in control of the situation, able to present several solutions to Mufliḥ's problem. The subsequent paragraphs show his shrewdness at work. Warda was the prop-erty of the amir ʿUthmān al-Ghuzzī, a commander of Turkic troops that had

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111   Al-Ḥakamī also relates, however, that "[t]he slaves (ʿabīd) of Fātik gave Mufliḥ the derisive name 'the mule'", which bears connotation of low or "impure" birth, as well as of rough-ness and an evil disposition (al-Ḥakamī, 76. Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 230).

112   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 76.

113   The wording cited above leaves open whether Mufliḥ himself had heard Warda sing or whether others had described her vocal skills to him. However, the next sentence suggests that he had never attended one of her performances, since her beauty was only known to him by hearsay. Alternatively, she might have performed behind a curtain or fully veiled.

been brought to Yemen by the Najahid king Jayyāsh.[114] These Ghuzz controlled vast territories around Zabīd and collected taxes there; however, the first generation of soldiers had largely passed away, and their sons were of no use to the Najahid state. Ḥimyar therefore advised Mufliḥ to suspend the Ghuzz's rights to these territories, which caused their leader ʿUthmān great distress. Having thus orchestrated a conflict between the two men, Ḥimyar positioned himself as the mediator, promising ʿUthmān that he would facilitate a settlement between him and Mufliḥ. To that end, he arranged a series of visits to ʿUthmān's luxurious residence, where the host attempted to win over his guest with lavish banquets and expensive gifts. These passages aim at illustrating the power play between Mufliḥ and ʿUthmān. Both want something from the other: Mufliḥ desires Warda, while ʿUthmān hopes to regain his territories. However, Mufliḥ occupies the higher position in the Najahid hierarchy and is thus angered by ʿUthmān's conspicuous displays of wealth, which threaten his social superiority.[115] Again, Ḥimyar takes control of the situation, rebuking ʿUthmān in private:

> When they withdrew, I said to ʿUthmān: "You are a beast, you have no reason. Do you think that the vizier rather visited you for food and drink? How reduced is your ambition and how blind your judgement?" He said: "Direct me." I said: "Exhibit what you have." He spoke of the horses, the equipment, the camels, gifts and treasures. I made apparent to him a fault in everything and rebuked him for it. He said: "What do you see?" I answered: "Look for a present that is not hidden in the storages, and not hidden from his eyes. The intention is that he remembers you by your gift." And when he had paid attention to it, he said: "What do I have except Warda, and she is my soul (*hiya rūḥī*)? But if she is suitable for him, I will give her up, even if I will die."[116]

This passage revealingly lists Warda as one among ʿUthmān's many possessions, albeit as the most precious and beloved of them all. The melodramatic

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114   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 77. It is likely that these Ghuzz soldiers were mercenaries, but due to the dearth of evidence we cannot exclude that they might have been enslaved. Al-Ḥakamī reports that Jayyāsh had ordered two thousand Ghuzz to march from Mecca to Zabīd. He then regretted his decision fearing that they might seize his sovereignty and had the majority of them poisoned before they reached Yemen. For the role of the Ghuzz, and the Kurds in particular, in the Ayyubid and Rasulid periods, see Mahoney, "Political Agency of Kurds as an Ethnic Group."

115   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 80.

116   Al-Ḥakamī, 80–1.

exclamations attributed to ʿUthmān ("she is my soul [...] I will die") ring hollow, considering that he would rather regain his territories than keep Warda. It was not uncommon in medieval Yemen to give away slaves as luxury gifts, attesting to the wealth and generosity of the donor and honouring the donee.[117] Ḥimyar's narration continues:

> I said: "If he [Mufliḥ] accepts her, she is thus suitable for him." He replied: "Speak to him about her, and if he accepts her, you will receive one thousand dinars from me." Then we ordered her presence, as the tenth of ten [enslaved girls]. They kissed the hands of the vizier and began to sing in his presence, with uncovered faces. I advised the vizier to shun Warda and to appreciate the others, which he did. Thereby the determination of her owner that she would be accepted by him became strong. Then ʿUthmān became drunk and slept, and the women became drunk, except Warda. I had wanted her to be alert. I went to the privy, called for Warda and informed her of the story. She said: "I don't desire anything except my owner."[118]

After lengthy passages in which Warda is merely discussed, desired and bargained over, she finally appears in person. More specifically, she is ordered to appear, together with nine other enslaved girls. Having spent a long period yearning and strategizing, Mufliḥ can finally see the object of his desire. Again, it is Ḥimyar who takes charge, from requesting the enslaved girls' presence and advising Mufliḥ to conceal his desire for Warda, to making sure that Warda remain awake and sober. After the host and his other concubines have withdrawn, Ḥimyar finally lets Warda in on the plot surrounding her and gives her the opportunity to speak. Her statement, while likely a fictional representation by al-Ḥakamī, is nevertheless indicative of the precarious situation female slaves faced when they transitioned from one owner to another. On the outset, her wording appears like a formulaic declaration of loyalty to her master ʿUthmān and a submission to his will. Warda might however also have

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117   Mufliḥ himself gave four Ethiopian slaves to an Egyptian sheikh (al-Ḥakamī, 82.) The famous Sulayhid queen and ruler Asmāʾ bint Shihāb (d. 1087) gifted her favourite palace page and confidant with singing girls, slaves and eunuchs (al-Ḥakamī, 38). Other examples include al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.361, II.294. This practice had a sinister flipside: especially concubines given as presents were sometimes tasked with killing the presentee. Najāḥ, the founder of the eponymous Najahid dynasty, was allegedly poisoned by a "beautiful enslaved girl" (*jāriya*) given to him by his rival al-Ṣulayḥī (al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 18).

118   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 81.

addressed her former owner Ḥimyar or her potential owner-to-be Mufliḥ. In a situation where she could become the property of an unknown new owner at any minute, Warda's answer is very diplomatic. Whatever the outcome, she has expressed submission to whichever man might have authority over her next. An alternative interpretation gives her statement a more rebellious undertone: perhaps Warda expresses her discontent at being offered to Mufliḥ for sexual services, subtly reminding Ḥimyar of the fact that she still belongs to ʿUthmān and is not ready to submit to anyone else. Whatever Warda's intention, it remains without effect, as Ḥimyar yet again steers the course of events:

> I called the vizier into a sitting room, and Warda and I entered. He made promises to her and awakened her desire. I intended to depart from them, but he held me back and told me: "By God, this will never be!" Then we returned together into the sitting room. And by God, he did not satisfy his eyes with her, and did not enable her [to kiss] his hands upon farewell. When her lord had sobered up, we asked him for permission to leave. It was near the hour of the latest evening prayer, and before it ended, Warda was in our possession.[119]

Again, Warda is the centre of attention but depicted as utterly passive. The narrative focuses on Mufliḥ's personal qualities of piety and righteousness, while Warda mainly provides a foil for his display of exemplary behaviour. The passage closes with Warda becoming Mufliḥ's possession, which for her meant the relocation to a new household and submission under the authority and the sexual desires of at least her third owner. Ḥimyar, meanwhile, had successfully brought to a close the textbook example of a ruse. While it has been argued that women in medieval Arabic societies could mainly exercise control through ruses,[120] in al-Ḥakamī's chronicle this strategy is deployed by men and women alike to secure their personal advantage.

The plot has an epilogue which reveals a lasting connection between Warda and Ḥimyar:

> As for the vizier, he called for me at night, bestowed a robe of honour on me and said: "Your daughter/girl (*bintak*) Warda swore to me that I cannot approach her until I have sought to satisfy Ḥimyar. So what is it

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119   Al-Ḥakamī, 81.

120   Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

that satisfies you?" I said: "The estate al-ʿAbāda with all the agriculture it contains and the cows that belong to it." And he registered it to me.[121]

Surprisingly, the statement ascribed to Warda in this passage expresses loyalty and obedience not to her new owner but to her former trader Ḥimyar. Both her appellation as his "girl" or "daughter" and the fact that she protects his interests before submitting to the will of her new owner are testimony to Warda's lasting loyalty to Ḥimyar. This fascinating dynamic is unique within the sources analysed for this study: while sustained bonds between slaves and their current owners are described in several instances (Surūr and ʿAlam being a good example), I did not encounter any other evidence for such a bond after an enslaved person had been sold on to a successive owner. The well-documented lives of eunuchs at the Rasulid court usually involved several changes of owner, but life-long relations with former owners are never mentioned. This may be a mere coincidence due to scarce source material. However, it is conceivable that female slaves had a greater need for a constant male figure in their lives. In medieval Yemen, a woman was usually represented in public by a male relative or guardian: her father, husband, brother or eunuch administrator (see chapter 3). What we know about Warda portends that at this stage in her life, she was unmarried and childless. Thus, according to medieval Islamic law, her owner was responsible for her upkeep and acted as her guardian. However, since she could be sold to someone else at any moment, Warda would have been wise to sustain a more long-term relationship with an influential man. Ḥimyar was the obvious choice since she had lived in his household as a child, perhaps right after having been enslaved and separated from her family.[122] He was therefore likely the only candidate for a father figure available to her and, as will be shown below, she explicitly called upon him to fill this role. To Ḥimyar, on the other hand, Warda provided opportunities for profit even after he had sold her. In fact, the closing paragraph of the anecdote above clearly shows that for Ḥimyar, the ultimate goal of the ruse involving Warda, Mufliḥ and ʿUthmān was to amass more wealth. At this point, it seems doubtful that the continued relationship with Ḥimyar was in fact beneficial to Warda. However, the narrative does not end here. The final part of Warda's story as told by al-Ḥakamī reveals a shift in the power dynamic between the two.

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121   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 81.

122   Alternatively, if Warda was not trafficked to Yemen as a child, she might have been born to slaves.

After the incidents related above, Warda temporarily disappears from the historical narrative and only re-emerges after Mufliḥ's death. This time, she is the narrator of her own story. Al-Ḥakamī does not mention whether he knew Warda personally, but considering his strong ties to many of the men she interacted with, it is certainly possible. Warda thus either conveyed her perspective directly to the author, or he imagined her side of the story as such:

> Warda, the concubine (*jāriya*) of the vizier Mufliḥ said: "When my master (*mawlā'ī*) died in the mountains at the castle of al-Karish[123] or Mukarrish, the vizier Iqbāl, the leader (*qā'id*)[124] Surūr, the leader Ishāq b. Marzūq and the leader Ali b Masʿūd, lord of Hays, asked for my hand in marriage. I made a nice promise to the messenger of each one of them and sought the advice of my master (*mawlā'ī*) Manṣūr, son of my master Mufliḥ, regarding the people's messages. He indicated Surūr and said: "Seek the help of sheikh Ḥimyar b Asʿad's advice." She said: "I summoned him from the Tihāma to the mountains."[125]

At this point in her life, Warda clearly possessed greater influence and agency than when she first appeared in the chronicle of the Najahid dynasty. No longer was she about to be sold to a new owner without her consent; rather, she now had the choice between four suitors of high rank who wished to marry her. Although al-Ḥakamī still introduces her as "Warda, the concubine of Mufliḥ", she must have been a free woman by now. Most Islamic legal schools stipulate that a free Muslim man can marry an enslaved woman only if he is absolutely unable to marry a free woman or to acquire a concubine.[126] Warda's suitors were certainly able to marry free women and to acquire concubines (see below). Hence, if we assume that this legal principle was respected, it follows that Warda was free at the time of receiving her marriage proposals.[127] Mufliḥ

123　The vocalization is unclear, as the source only gives the consonants k-r-sh.

124　In the medieval Yemeni context, the title *qā'id* is usually given to high-ranking military leaders.

125　Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 85.

126　Al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-Ṭālibīn*, 385. Only the Ḥanafī school permits marriages between a free man and an enslaved woman unconditionally, provided the man does not already have a free wife (Mohammed Hocine Benkheira, "Un libre peut-il épouser une esclave? Esquisse d'histoire d'un débat, des origines à al-Shāfiʿī [m.204/820]," *Der Islam* 84, no. 2 [2008]: 246–355). If a free man wished to marry his own female slave, he had to manumit her first, after which she could choose whether to accept or refuse his marriage proposal (de la Puente, "Slaves in Al-Andalus through Maliki Watha'iq Works," 204).

127　The evidence examined for this study shows that the Islamic legal principles governing slavery were certainly well known and usually followed.

must have either manumitted her during his lifetime or through a provision in his testament, or she had born him a child and as *umm walad* automatically gained her freedom upon her owner's death. Al-Ḥakamī no longer features her in a supporting role but as actively shaping her own future. Nevertheless, she seeks the advice of two men to whom she was presumably closely connected: the son of her last owner Mufliḥ, whom she calls "mawlā'ī", and Ḥimyar, the trader who had raised her. A marriage in medieval Yemen was customarily contracted by a woman's guardian on her behalf, and in Warda's case, this responsibility fell on Mufliḥ's son. An enslaved person's manumission resulted in a relation of patronage (*walā'*) wherein the freed slave and their former owner became forever linked by a relationship that has been characterized as "artificial kinship",[128] entailing mutual (albeit unequal) responsibilities. The legal scholar al-Nawawī specifies that a former owner was obliged to perform duties usually undertaken by relatives, such as marriage tutelage, for his former slave.[129] In the case of the former owner's death, the *walā'* relationship was carried on by family members. In line with this principle, Warda turns to Mufliḥ's son, who inherited this responsibility vis-à-vis Warda from his father. He recommends her to choose Surūr, ʿAlam's slave whose remarkable career and bitter rivalry with Warda's former owner Mufliḥ has been analysed above. He then redirects her to Ḥimyar, as if wanting to defer the guardian responsibility to him. Consequently, Warda "summons" Ḥimyar to her residence in the mountains. The wording conveys authority, in stark contrast to her sparse earlier statements. Ḥimyar complies and provides her with the requested advice. His lengthy justification of why Surūr is the most suitable marriage partner deserves a closer look:

> He said: "Regarding ʿAlī b. Masʿūd, he has ninety concubines (*suriyya*) and four wives (*zawjāt*). As to Iqbāl, he has twenty singers (*mughanniya*). Further, he has Nāḥir, raised by the traders, and her son Manṣūr is in his sight up to this time.[130] Regarding the leader Ishāq b. Marzūq, he has the daughter of ʿAwayd,[131] mother of his son Farāj, and he has his female paternal cousin Uḥdūl: by God, none walking the earth of the Tihāma is her equal. But I recommend to you the leader Abū Muhammad Surūr

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128   Marmon, *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, 15. It is important to keep in mind that *walā'* and related terms have described vastly different relationships throughout Islamic history (Urban, "Early Islamic Mawālī").

129   Yaḥyā b. Sharaf Al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn*, 590.

130   This phrasing probably means that Manṣūr was still a minor and under the direct supervision of his father.

131   Vocalization unclear.

al-Fātikī, because he has wide ambition and was raised by King Fātik b Manṣūr, and by our lady, the mother of Fātik b Manṣūr." She said: "The leader Abū Muhammad Surūr al-Fātikī married me."[132]

The crucial criterion setting Surūr apart is the absence of love interests in his household, while the complex relationships entertained by Warda's other suitors are related by al-Ḥakamī in detail. The lord of Ḥays possessed ninety concubines besides the four wives legally permitted to a Muslim man.[133] His inclusion in the list of suitors poses a riddle: As he was unable to take another wife, what role could Warda have played in his household? Had she been enslaved, she could have become his concubine, but as a free woman, her only option to legally cohabit with a man was marriage. Perhaps this is the reason why Ḥimyar was quick to discount him as a candidate. The second suitor, a vizier, possessed twenty female enslaved singers and one *umm walad* whose good reputation is underlined by the comment that she was "raised by the traders (*al-tujjār*)". It is probable that she underwent a similar training as Warda did in Ḥimyar's house. The third suitor enjoyed the company of both an *umm walad* and a paternal cousin, evidently his wife. In contrast to his three rivals, Surūr was not emotionally involved – although he did own concubines, as we learn later on. Additionally, that Surūr had been raised by ʿAlam, a woman of high social standing, was certainly seen as a guarantee of his refined character.

This passage attests to the strikingly complex family arrangements of 6th/12th-century Najahid elites and the strong presence of female slaves in them. It was common for wealthy men to entertain sexual relations with free wives, concubines and liberated former slaves. The available evidence does not reveal whether these women all cohabited under one roof or whether separate residences were established for individual wives and/or concubines and their respective children. In any case, the husband/owner was required to provide for these women and for the children fathered with them, who were all considered his legitimate offspring. As such, concubinage was indeed "one of the pillars of the Muslim family"[134] among the elites of the Najahid era.

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132   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 85.
133   "Ninety concubines" should probably be understood not as an exact count but as expressing a large number.
134   De la Puente, "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children," 43.

Turning our focus back to Warda, the above passage marks yet another step in her tumultuous life, as she moves from her third owner and household to the fourth.[135] Again, her lasting bond with Ḥimyar is noteworthy, especially since she was now presumably a free woman. It is often assumed that slave traders were a fleeting presence in slaves' lives, but the case of Ḥimyar strongly contests this notion. Warda's story is reminiscent of Barker's remark that in Mamluk Egypt, "there was a merchant – slave relationship of patronage parallel to the owner – slave relationship of patronage".[136] Warda's story offers a rare glimpse into the relationships that could develop between female slaves and slave traders in the medieval Yemeni setting.

It is worth noting that although Warda was able to freely choose her marriage partner from among a number of suitors, al-Ḥakamī depicts the groom as in charge at the moment of the wedding ("The leader Abū Muhammad Surūr al-Fātikī married me"). Thereafter, Warda attempts to gain influence over Surūr:

> I found [Surūr to be] a man diverted from the world, from women and prosperity, by attention to the highest matters. I did not let up on him until I loosened him, progressed in his intimacy, and took possession of him. For all his roughness and rigidity and the anguish of his concubines from him, he does not oppose me when I see him. If I became angry at him, he was as if he had disengaged from life.[137]

This paragraph features a literary trope often found in Abbasid *adab* literature, namely the inversion of gendered power relations.[138] The remark that Surūr was feared by his concubines further underscores the fact that his submission to Warda contradicts the usual gendered hierarchy between powerful men and their (former) slaves. It also stands in stark contrast to earlier descriptions of Surūr as an austere and dominant military leader. Such is the discrepancy between the vizier's reputation and his submission to his new wife that al-Ḥakamī

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135   Al-Ḥakamī mentions that Warda had been part of Ḥimyar's, ʿUthmān's and Mufliḥ's household. It is of course possible that she was owned by, or married to, additional men not mentioned in the source.

136   Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade," 253. Barker even detects a dynamic she calls "reversible patronage" between slaves and their traders: "[T]he career prospects of young slaves, both male and female, depended on the initiative taken by their traders to market them in elite circles and place them with powerful owners. [...] If successful, the adult mamluk or concubine might then show gratitude towards the trader through gifts and patronage" (251). Yemeni source evidence on slave traders is too thin to examine whether a similar dynamic existed here, as well.

137   Al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 85.

138   Myrne, Narrative, Gender and Authority in ʿAbbāsid Literature on Women, 36, 67.

calls upon another witness to corroborate Warda's account. This man supports her claims with the full weight of his elevated rank as vizier and envoy of the Ḥasanī sharif of Mecca:[139]

> I came from my country as messenger to the leader Surūr al-Fātikī, to conclude a truce between us and him. His vizier ʿUbayd b. Baḥr said: "If only your arrival had been later or earlier! By chance, you met the leader very occupied in his mind." I stayed two or three days, and when I had not met with the leader, Ḥimyar b. Asad came to us. ʿUbayd b. Bahr, the vizier of Surūr, said to me: "Now your knot became dissolved, after the arrival of Ḥimyar." I asked: "How is that?" He replied: "Indeed, the mother of Amr, Warda, is angry at him and swore not to talk to him and does not allow him to come to her until her father (*abūhā*) comes, and he is the sheikh Ḥimyar b. Asʿad." […]
>
> And when it became night, we were invited to a meeting at which there was wine, singing and perfume. We sat down and when the leader had come to us, we greeted him. Then we heard clamour and pleasant sound from behind the curtain, as never had been before, and there was Warda. Ḥimyar had made amends between her and the leader and she came to sing for him. After what had happened, I was impacted in my heart by the weak state of the *qāʾid* and the feebleness of his determination. As if guessing what was on my mind, he spontaneously uttered a poet's saying about her:
> "We are people whom the glance of large black eyes melt / Even though we melt iron."[140]

This final chapter in the documented interactions between Warda and Surūr contains a number of interesting points. Unbeknown to the envoy, Surūr was caught up in a domestic drama which left him unable to attend to his political duties. The anecdote thus confirms Warda's previous claim that she had gained full control over her husband. Al-Ḥakamī also mentions in passing that Warda had a son by the name of Amr. Based on our information, three possible fathers come to mind: ʿUthmān, Mufliḥ and Surūr.[141] If she had become an *umm walad*

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139 Al-Ḥakamī gives his name as Sheikh Muslim b. Yashjub, vizier of the Sharif Ghānim b. Yaḥya al-Ḥasanī (al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 85).

140 Al-Ḥakamī, Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd, 85–6.

141 It is likely that Ḥimyar sold the enslaved girls he raised and trained as virgins in order to yield a higher price. The fact that Ḥimyar and Warda referred to each other as father and daughter also suggests that. Similarly, the famous Abbasid slave singer ʿArīb portrayed in Abū al-Faraj ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī* was first owned by the

while in ʿUthmān's possession, her sale would have been illegal by Islamic law. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that such principles were at times disregarded. A paternity by Mufliḥ would explain why Warda's position was significantly strengthened after his death – *as umm walad*, she would have gained her freedom and the right to choose a husband, as in fact she did. However, she would have lost the right of custody over her son if she remarried, and the boy would have stayed in Mufliḥ's family. It is unlikely that she would have retained the *kunya* "mother of Amr" if she had left her son behind. Furthermore, this is the first mention of the child in al-Ḥakamī's chronicle, making it most plausible that Surūr was his father. The passage yet again illustrates the relationship between the former enslaved girl and the man who had trained and sold her. Surūr's vizier refers to Ḥimyar as Warda's father, mirroring the earlier passage where Warda is called his daughter/girl. Ḥimyar seems to be the only one able to reconcile Warda and her husband and yet again performs the role of go-between.

Finally, in the last part of the passage, the narrating visitor expresses his disapproval for the "weakening" and "feebleness of determination" of the renowned vizier. His condemnation of Surūr's behaviour indicates that it transgressed prevailing gender roles of the time. His submission to Warda also starkly contradicts his reputation as a tough military leader and highly respected politician. Surūr is well aware of his guests' disapproval. His poetic retort attempts to generalize man's susceptibility to female beauty ("we are the people whom the large black eyes melt") and eloquently dissolves the contradiction between such emotional vulnerability and virile force ("even though we melt iron").

Unlike ʿAlam, who figures in al-Ḥakamī's chronicle as a character in her own right, Warda mainly plays a supporting role in the author's portrayal of various influential men. Her appearances first as an object of desire and later as a dominating wife serve to illustrate the complex characters of Mufliḥ and Surūr, two of the most influential political figures of the time. As such, al-Ḥakamī's representation of Warda might be less factual than literary. Nevertheless, her story offers a number of insights into the institution of concubinage in the Najahid era more generally. The recurring role played by Ḥimyar in Warda's life shows that slave traders not only trained enslaved girls before selling them but that this practice could result in sustained relations between female slaves and their former traders. Lacking the support of kin and unable to control who would own them next, some enslaved women likely sought protection from

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master of the caliph's horses who raised her, taught her how to sing and sold her as a virgin (Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in ʿAbbāsid Literature on Women*, 98).

the slave traders who had raised them from a young age. Warda's life story also strongly attests to the fact that even the most privileged concubines led a precarious existence and were ultimately at the mercy of whichever man owned them at any given moment. Moments of transition from one owner to another left enslaved women particularly vulnerable, as they had to adapt to a new household and succumb to the authority of another stranger.

At the same time, Warda's biography also exemplifies the possibilities of social advancement open to a select number of female slaves. The personification of the powerless female slave at the beginning of the narrative – owned by one man today, sold on to another tomorrow – she gradually improved her social standing and expanded her autonomy. At the end of al-Ḥakamī's account, she was a free woman and wife of a Najahid vizier who indulged her every whim. In this regard, Warda's story resembles that of ʿAlam, who as enslaved performer gained first fame, then freedom and lastly formidable political influence. Marriage, motherhood and manumission were three crucial turning points in the biographies of concubines. A female slave who became her owner's wife or bore him a child had thereby won her freedom and the chance to improve her social standing. These opportunities were not regularly available, however, to the majority of enslaved women who are largely absent from the historiographic record.

3 Rasulid Case Studies

Let us now turn to two case studies from the Rasulid period. Female slaves hardly appear at all in al-Khazrajī's chronicle, making it nearly impossible to offer any detailed information on their lives. It takes a rare event and a beautiful poem to bring women of slave descent into the foreground of the narrative.

3.1 Nukhba's Story: Female Slavery at the Rasulid Court

Nukhba,[142] an enslaved domestic of Queen Jihat Ṣalāḥ, appears as the source and narrator of a story set during the reign of Sultan al-Mujāhid (r. 721–64/ 1321–63). In the year 724/1324, the castle of Taʿizz was besieged by a certain ʿUmarb. Tāliyāl al-ʿAlamī, known as "son of the dūwaydār",[143] who was supported

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142 Nukhba (meaning choice or selected item) is a typical slave name. Al-Khazrajī provides exact information on its pronunciation, perhaps to distinguish it from Nakhba, which is the bite of an ant (Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 2776; al-Khazrajī, Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya, 385).

143 Al-Khazrajī, Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya, 11.19. His father's non-Arabic name suggests that he had been a mamluk. The position of dūwaydār was known in Mamluk Egypt as dawādār

by the sultan's rebellious paternal cousin al-Ẓāhir b. Mansūr Ayyūb. The sultan and his mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ were trapped in the castle, moving from one place to the next to avoid heavy ballista attacks. Nukhba relates that she had just brought the sultan water to perform his ablutions when suddenly a wall split open and a beautiful young man emerged, swiftly carrying the sultan to another location. Immediately thereafter, the spot where the sultan had been sitting was hit by a rock. Having barely escaped death through the stranger's intervention, the sultan asked him:

> "Who are you, brother, with whom God has blessed me?" He replied: "By God, I really am your brother, and my father is by God your father, Dawūd al-Muʾayyad, and my mother is the enslaved girl (*jāriya*) so-and-so. But I was taken from my mother's womb and raised with the *jinns*[144] until I became like you see me."[145]

The stranger reveals himself as the sultan's brother, conceived by a concubine of al-Mujāhid's father and predecessor al-Muʾayyad Dāwūd (r. 696–721/1296–1321). Jihat Ṣalāḥ, who had been at her son's side during his miraculous salvation, confirms and elaborates on this curious story:

> Truth, by God. She [the *jāriya*] was pregnant by your father until she was near to giving birth. On one of those days, she woke up and her child was taken from her body. It was as if she had never been pregnant, and no trace of the pregnancy appeared after that. Thereafter, she lived for a while and then died.[146]

("the bearer and keeper of the royal inkwell") and usually given to mamluk amirs (Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army III," 62). The position is mentioned several times in anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.120, II.141, II.146, but its exact role in medieval Yemen remains unclear.

144 According to Islamic thought, jinns are shape-shifting creatures made of fire that are usually evil. For their perception in the Yemeni context, see G. Rex Smith, "Magic, Jinn and the Supernatural in Medieval Yemen: Examples from Ibn Al-Muǧāwir's 7th/13th Century Guide," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 13 (1995): 7–18; Andre Gingrich, "Spirits of the Border: Some Remarks on the Connotation of Jinn in North-Western Yemen," Quaderni di Studi Arabi 13 (1995): 199–212; Huda Seif, "Marginality and Allegories of Gendered Resistance: Experiences from Southern Yemen," in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, ed. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores Walters (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

145 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.20.

146 Al-Khazrajī, 21.

The tale's veracity is certainly doubtful, although al-Khazrajī insists on providing its full chain of transmission: he heard it from one man who had heard it from another to whom Nukhba herself had told the story.[147] The enslaved woman's credibility as a source certainly does not stem from her social standing but from the fact that she witnessed the event at close range. Her task of carrying water led her to be present during the intimate moment of the sultan performing his ritual purification. As such, the episode underlines the fact that enslaved women and girls worked in the most private parts of elite households where they certainly saw and heard many things that the public was excluded from. Their servile state and ensuing dependence on their owners meant they could be assigned to lowly tasks and trusted with sensitive information. At the same time, attributing this tale to an enslaved woman might also have been a strategy to ascribe a fabrication to a purported eyewitness who could not object. The story of the sultan's supernatural rescue can be read as a piece of political propaganda claiming that even supernatural beings supported his God-given right to rule. With the *jinn*'s help, al-Mujāhid's men were able to deal their besiegers a heavy blow. Nevertheless, the siege remained in place for over eight months until ʿUmar's mamluks abandoned him, forcing him to retreat.[148]

Besides Nukhba, the anecdote features a nameless concubine who became pregnant by Sultan al-Muayyad Dāwūd, Jihat Ṣalāḥ's late husband. Such a liaison is presented as unsurprising and wholly acceptable not only by al-Khazrajī but also by Jihat Ṣalāḥ herself and in no way diminishes the late sultan's reputation. As such, the story is further evidence for the pervasiveness of concubinage among the Rasulid elites. It also exemplifies the dual role of enslaved women as domestic workers on the one hand and concubines on the other. The following case study addresses the impact of concubinage on Yemeni society more broadly and highlights the complex social standing of women of African slave descent in this setting.

3.2 *A Poet's Perspective on the Impact of Concubinage*

Poems and sayings are frequently interspersed into *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*. In his account of the year 679/ca. 1280, al-Khazrajī portrays a tribesman called Yaḥyā b. al-ʿAmmak who was famed for his wisdom and literary talent. Among his

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147   I have found no further information on these two men, Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Manṣūr and Ḥassan b. Mūsa b. Baʿlān. Al-Khazrajī himself was born around six years after the siege, in ca. 730/1330.

148   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.23.

surviving works is a poem entitled "In Praise of Blackness" (*fī madḥi-l-sawād*),
which al-Khazrajī transmitted in part. It opens with the following verses:

> Relate to me your tale of the day of the sand dune[149]
> And console me therewith from my desolate heart.
> At black nightfall,[150] after she had first
> stolen a glance at me from nearby
> And felt safe from the ambush of the secret enemy,
> The ear of his denouncer, and the eyes of the observer,[151]
> She appeared to us between the houses
> Trailing the abundance of her new robe,
> Showing us the best parts:[152] the hooked nose,
> The body of a twig and buttocks of a dune.
> A Muwallada of the *Mawālī*'s daughters,[153]
> Like a strange gazelle, raised in the house.[154]

In style and content, this poem falls within the tradition of the *ghazal*, a
classical genre of Arabic love poetry.[155] It is written in a metre (*baḥr*) known

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149   *Al-kathīb*, likely a reference to *al-kathīb al-abyaḍ*, a large sand dune in Abyan that had
      been an important pilgrimage site since pre-Islamic times. It is mentioned in a number
      of sources, including in al-Janadī (*Al-Sulūk fī ṭabaqāt al-ʿulamāʾ wa al-mulūk*, II.447) and
      al-Sharjī (*Ṭabaqāt al-khawāṣṣ ahl al-ṣidq wa-l-ikhlāṣ*, 72, 101, 142). Perhaps the poet first
      saw the object of his admiration on the "day of al-kathīb", when large crowds gathered at
      the dune to receive the *baraka* it was famed for. See also Robert B. Serjeant, "The 'White
      Dune' at Abyan: An Ancient Place of Pilgrimage in Southern Arabia," *Journal of Semitic
      Studies* 16, no. 1 (1971): 74–83.

150   Either the scribe or the editor chose to add a *fatḥa* to *sawdāʾ*, indicating an *iḍāfa* with a
      diptotic nomen rectum expressing an adverbial expression of time. However, without the
      fatḥa, *sawdāʾ* would be the noun, in which case the sentence could read: "At nightfall, a
      black woman approached."

151   The secret enemy (*kāshiḥ*) and the observer (*raqīb*) are stock characters of the Arabic
      ghazal poem (Serjeant, "Al-Shiḥr").

152   *Al-nuqāʾ*. I thank Stephan Procházka for correcting my earlier, less convincing translation
      of this word.

153   The line reads "muwallada, min banāt al-mawāl". Perhaps the final "yāʾ" of *mawālī* was
      shortened for metric reasons, or simply due to an editor's mistake.

154   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.182. I thank Johann Heiss and Lorenz Nigst for their
      advice on this translation. Parts of the poem's translation were first published in Moorthy
      Kloss, "Race and the Legacy of Slavery in Yemen.", where I analyse it in the context of Yemen's
      history of racialized rhethoric. Permission to reprint was granted by tandfonline.com.

155   R. Blachère and A. Bausani, "Ghazal," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed.
      P. Bearman et al., 2012. Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth, eds., *Ghazal as World
      Literature 1: Transformations of a Literary Genre* (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2005).

as *mutaqārib* (lit. tripping, taking short steps).[156] A chance encounter with a beautiful woman, unbeknownst of enemies and observers, constitutes the typical point of departure for a *ghazal*. A woman is the active but silent subject in these verses; her furtive glance and beautiful appearance captivate the poet's heart. However, the reader soon learns that the object of the poet's desire is not of impeccable ancestry as the *ghazal*'s convention would dictate. Rather, her origins are described with the two Arabic terms Muwallada and Mawālī, which both encompass a broad spectrum of meanings. Muwallada is commonly used to denote either a woman of both Arab and non-Arab descent, or a non-Arab born and raised in an Arabic household.[157] The common theme in these variants is a focus on the non-Arabness of the person described. In the medieval Arabic context, the designation Muwallad and its female version Muwallada were usually deployed in the context of slavery and often referred to individuals born of illicit unions between enslaved women and free men who were not their owners.[158] The term *Mawālī,* with the singular *Mawlā*, is equally complex and can be read in several ways.[159] Given these terminological intricacies, the exact social status of the poem's female protagonist remains a mystery. Nevertheless, her association with slavery is alluded to throughout the text. The last line above vividly paints the woman's liminal position between in- and out-group: "Like a strange gazelle, raised in the house." The gazelle is a well-known symbol of female beauty and grace in the Arabic literary tradition; however, the two adjectives "strange" and "raised in the house" add another layer of meaning to the metaphor. The Arabic word for strange, *gharīb*, has the same dual denotations of "foreign" and "different" as its English equivalent. The second

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156 William Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, ed. William Robertson Smith and Michael J. de Goeje, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1996), 2: 363–4.

157 Rāgib translates the term as raised in the master's house, which fits neatly with the poem's next line "raised in the house" (Rāgib, *Actes de Vente d'esclaves et d'animaux d'Égypte médiévale*, 6–8). Gordon has noted that in the Abbasid context, the term Muwalladāt is frequently used for Qiyān who had a free father and an enslaved mother ("Abbasid Courtesans and the Question of Social Mobility").

158 Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 161–62; Rāgib, Actes de Vente d'esclaves et d'animaux d'Égypte médiévale, 1.

159 For a detailed analysis of the shifting meanings of the term *mawlā* in the early Islamic period, see Urban, "Early Islamic Mawālī." Shaun Marmon discusses the use of these terms in the medieval Egyptian context, concluding that unrecognized children of enslaved women were labelled as Muwallad/a and sold, while the freeborn children of African concubines were never associated with this label ("Intersections of Gender, Sex, and Slavery: Female Sexual Slavery," in Perry et al., *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, 2: 205–10).

adjective, *rabīb*, when used for horses and gazelles, signifies that they were raised in a household rather than in the wild.[160] While the first adjective epitomizes the woman's alterity, the second denotes her familiarity. As such, the verse is an apt metaphor for the status of the Muwallada, who belonged to a local household but was nevertheless considered to be foreign. The image of a wild animal raised in the house evokes connotations of capture and domestication, and thus, of slavery. Given these contextual clues, it is likely that the poet's beloved was the daughter of an enslaved woman of African descent and a free Yemeni man. While we do not know whether she was born in a legitimate relation of concubinage and therefore free, or the result of an illegitimate union and thus born a slave, it is clear that her African slave ancestry negatively affected her social position.

The poem continues:

> If people reproach me for loving her,
> they are never right.
> They say "[she is] Black", and although they judged correctly
> Still, this is not shameful.

In these intriguing verses, the poet highlights societal prejudices against women of African slave descent while simultaneously refusing to accept them.[161] He reveals that his infatuation is seen negatively by the people around him, thereby again tapping into a standard theme of classical Arabic love poetry. In fact, the upbraider (*lāʾim*) is a stock figure of the genre who typically rebukes the poet for his excessive expressions of love. However, in this case, the reproach is directed not at the fervour of the poet's emotions but at the person who has stirred them. A Black woman, it seems, is not a fitting love interest for a man of Yemeni tribal ancestry. The poet strongly rejects this notion and launches into an eloquent defence of blackness, rich in poetic imagery:

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160   The word derives from the Arabic root *rabba*, which carries the basic meaning of *possess* or *own* but also *raise* and *foster* (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 1002).

161   These verses bring to mind a poem found in the popular Arabic epic *Sīrat ʿAntar*, set in the 6th century, which also uses the wording "were it not for blackness" to extoll the virtues of the colour black (Rachel Schine, "On Blackness in Arabic Popular Literature: The Black Heroes of the Siyar Shaʿbiyya, Their Conceptions, Contests, and Contexts" [PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2019], 129–31).

For were it not for blackness
and the wondrous beauty of mystery that God has endowed it with,
It would not dwell at the centre of the eyes,
Nor would it dwell at the centre of the hearts.[162]
Neither would the mole embellish the young man's cheek
Nor decoration adorn the scholar's paper.[163]
Indeed, the corner stone [of the Kaʿba in Mecca][164] is the best of all stones
And musk the most delightful of all perfumes.
Indeed, people's passion in their lifetime
Is in praising [the black hair of] youth and disparaging white hair.[165]
The eye is not embellished if the eyelids are devoid of *kuḥl*[166]
And neither is the palm of the hand if it is not tinted.
Not every eye is like the eye of the lover
Nor every heart like the heart of the beloved.

In the Arabic scriptural tradition, the colour black has often been laden with negative connotations such as damnation, pollution and slavery. The poet instead illustrates the aesthetic qualities of the colour black by drawing up rich imagery, some of which also has a long tradition in Arabic literature.[167] For example, the qualities of musk and the black stone of the Kaʿba are lauded in al-Jahiz's famous compendium *Fakhr al-Sudan*.[168] The metaphoric language adopted here is also reminiscent of the so-called "Crows of the Arabs", a group of Black Arab poets from the classical period whose works sought to counter the racialist

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162   In Arabic, *suwaydāʾ al-qalb* (lit. "the little black thing of the heart") is the innermost part of the heart (Lane, 1462).

163   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 1.182.

164   The "black stone" (*al-ḥajar al-aswad*) is built into the eastern wall of the Kaʿba, Islam's most important sanctuary located in Mecca's great mosque. Its veneration predates Islam (A. J. Wensinck and J. Jomier, "Kaʿba," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012).

165   Al-mashīb (Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 1627).

166   "As a cosmetic, al-kuḥl was ground as fine as possible and then used by women to dye their eyebrows and eyelashes or the edges of the lids" (E. Wiedermann and J. Allan, "Al-Kuḥl," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012).

167   Schine, "On Blackness in Arabic Popular Literature," 88.

168   In contrast, al-Ṭabarī's widely read historical work claims that the Kaaba had in fact been white when God sent it down to earth, and that it turned black through the touch of impure pagan women in pre-Islamic times, tapping into the common association of blackness with contamination and impurity (Schine, "On Blackness in Arabic Popular Literature," 88).

discrimination they faced.[169] Given the focus on visual blackness in society's rejection of the poet's beloved, and in his ensuing metaphorical eulogy of the colour black, it stands to reason that the woman's visual alterity and not her slave descent or status was the main cause for critique. However, since the conflation of blackness with slavery was already firmly established in Yemen during medieval times, it is difficult to hold the causes for her social devaluation apart.[170] What is clear, however, is that the poet pinpoints a discrepancy between the normative framework surrounding slavery and lived everyday practice. If she was the daughter of a Yemeni slave owner and a concubine of African descent, she would have possessed the same patrilineal Arab pedigree and rights as any other free Yemeni woman. Nevertheless, she could have been perceived as inferior on the basis of her visual alterity, and/or due to her mother's foreign and servile origins. As Elizabeth Urban and Majied Robinson have shown, the legal acceptance of children born in concubinage was only acquired in the mid-8th century.[171] A rhetorical shift led to the dismissal of enslaved mothers as irrelevant to the social identity and status of their sons born in concubinage, who were subsequently considered to be full Arabs and eventually even preferred for the role of caliphs, because they were seen as "maternally undefined". Meanwhile, anecdotal evidence from the Abbasid era suggests that concubines' daughters were not always acknowledged by their free fathers and sometimes sold, suggesting a gender bias in the legal protection of concubines' children.[172] Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that the legal equality of concubines' children – especially of their daughters – was fully acknowledged socially. Based on the information given in the poem, it is however more likely that she was born of an illicit relation and thus considered a slave. In this case, the poem would be a rare piece of evidence for the sexual exploitation of enslaved women outside the legally sanctioned institution of concubinage.

The poet's words vividly illustrate the difficult position of women of Yemeni/African descent in medieval Yemen as liminal figures between insiders and outsiders, slaves and free. It uncovers one critical boundary to the acceptance of women of African slave descent into medieval Yemeni society. Nobody would have reproached the poet for entertaining a sexual relationship with an African concubine, as so many elite men did at the time. By declaring his love for a Black woman and honouring her with a poem, however, he apparently

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169   Bernard Lewis, "The Crows of the Arabs," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 88–97.

170   Not all enslaved Africans were described as "Black" in the sources. For example, a Shāfiʿī manual from 10th/16th-century Yemen mentions a "yellow-coloured Ethiopian *jāriya* of age from Damūt" (Serjeant, "Forms of Plea," 13). This categorization is rare in medieval Yemeni sources and requires further study.

171   Urban, *Conquered Populations*; Majied Robinson, "Statistical Approaches to the Rise of Concubinage in Islam," in Gordon and Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans*.

172   Gordon in Urban, *Conquered Populations*, 168.

crossed the line of socially acceptable behaviour. At the same time, the poet not only transgresses this boundary but also rejects its validity and seeks to change the minds of his critics through verse. His writing also sheds light on the troubled history of the terms Muwallad and Muwallada and their entanglement with slavery. It is certainly no coincidence that these terms, which had been part of racialized classification systems surrounding the practice of slavery, are used as racial slurs against Black persons in Yemen today.[173]

4   Conclusion

Despite different life stories and contexts, all four examined case studies are united by the common theme of concubinage. ʿAlam and Warda were concubines, Nukhba tells the story of an unnamed concubine, and the poet's beloved Muwallada was likely a concubine's daughter. Although it would be a mistake to infer from the lives of these four women conclusions about female slaves in medieval Yemen in general, the individual trajectories of the four protagonists do however reveal a number of broader patterns that characterized the institution of concubinage at the time.

The life stories of ʿAlam and Warda are perfect examples for a common theme in the biographies of concubines in medieval Arabic societies at large. Their social standing was not stable over time but could in fact alter dramatically through the change of an owner, the birth of a child from an owner, marriage and manumission.[174] In contrast, the status of a free woman was determined by her father's and to a lesser extent her mother's lineage and thus remained relatively stable throughout her lifetime (unless she threatened her social position by an unsuitable marriage or a transgression against social norms). Marriage and motherhood could bring increased prestige and authority to free women but did not usually cause a change nearly as drastic as the improvement in social standing and legal status obtained by concubines through these life events. At the same time, concubines were entirely dependent on their owners and could not turn to their family of origin in case of abuse, a strategy available to free women in the face of marital strife. While concubines might have enjoyed a relatively privileged lifestyle compared to the conditions of low-ranking slaves, they had to endure sexual exploitation, usually by several owners successively. Their privilege depended entirely on their owner.

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173   Alongside other, more benign uses (Marina de Regt and Aisha Aljaedy, "Muwalladeen in Yemen: Racialization, Stigmatization and Discrimination in Times of War" [Sanaʿa: Sanaʿa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022]).

174   Gordon, "Abbasid Courtesans and the Question of Social Mobility"; Pernilla Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects in Abbasid Baghdad," in Gordon and Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans*.

The remarkable social advancement of ʿAlam and Warda must be understood against the backdrop of the Najahid dynasty which had been founded by Ethiopian slaves and struggled to find a solid footing in the Yemeni socio-political landscape. Although religious dignitaries, judges, merchants and scholars from long-established Yemeni families such as al-Ḥakamī himself were allied with the dynasty and enjoyed its patronage, its entire leadership consisted of African slaves or former slaves. No marriages between men of this ruling elite and women of the Yemeni upper class are documented. The Najahid court thus formed a unique microcosm within Yemeni society, where African slave origins constituted the norm rather than the exception. In fact, ʿAlam and her owner and later husband sultan Manṣūr had an African and enslaved descent in common. Although Manṣūr himself had been born free, his patrilineal ancestor was Najāḥ, the Ethiopian slave who had founded the eponymous dynasty in 412/1022. Information on his mother is lacking, but his paternal grandmother had been an Indian concubine.[175] As for Warda, her trader was a free Yemeni and her first owner a (presumably free) Ghuzz commander, but her subsequent owners Mufliḥ and Surūr were both of African slave origin. In the Najahid setting, the two women's background isolated them less from the elite circles they entered through concubinage and marriage than would have been the case among the Rasulids.

In contrast, the Rasulid sultans chose free high-born Yemenis as their wives and top officials.[176] Yet, as the case studies have illustrated, concubinage was an integral part of elite households during the Rasulid era as well. The scarcity of related evidence in al-Khazrajī's works also requires contextualization. The Rasulids, a dynasty of likely Turkoman descent, sought to buttress their claim to power by fabricating a South Arabian genealogy for themselves and actively cultivating close alliances with local elites.[177] As a court historian during a time of great challenges to the Rasulid's sovereignty, al-Khazrajī's chief task was to record the dynasty's political and military achievements – entertaining anecdotes about the sultans' private lives were irrelevant to his writing project. Our second major source on the early Rasulid period, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, offers detailed information on salaries and provisions given to eunuchs and other male slaves at the Rasulid court. In

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175   Najāḥ was Manṣūr's great-grandfather through Fātik (I) and Jayyāsh. His grandfather Jayyāsh had spent six months exiled in India around 482/1088 and returned with an Indian concubine who subsequently gave birth to Fātik (I) (al-Ḥakamī, *Al-Mufīd fī akhbār Zabīd*, 68).

176   The poem analysed above has revealed that in Rasulid Yemen, African slave origins could diminish a woman's social standing even if she was free. Conversely, the biographies of influential eunuchs analysed in chapter 4 show that some male African slaves were able to attain high ranks during this era.

177   Mahoney, "Writing the Ethnic Origins of the Rasulids."

contrast, female slaves are virtually absent from these documents, suggesting that they did not receive salaries. They might however have been subsumed under the category *al-ʿiyāl* (dependants)[178] found in lists of provisions, allowances and gifts allocated to the households of Rasulid women which likely encompassed the children of the woman in question, her female slaves and possibly also concubines and their children belonging to the same paterfamilias. The silence surrounding enslaved women in the Rasulid sources cannot simply be taken as proof that female domestic and sexual slavery was less prevalent at the time. In fact, it is easily imaginable that some of the Rasulid sultans themselves were born to enslaved African mothers, just as the mothers of the Abbasid caliphs had usually been concubines. Perhaps such genealogies did not fit the Rasulids' political propaganda of a South Arabian origin and were therefore de-emphasized by al-Khazrajī.[179]

Another characteristic pattern of concubinage emerging strongly in the case studies is the precariousness and vulnerability of even the most privileged concubines. Their status of unfreedom meant they could be bought and sold anytime, which in turn meant having to submit to sexual exploitation by a new owner and entering a new household and family constellation over and over again. This brings us to another important aspect of concubinage, namely that concubines were part and parcel of their owner's family. This should not be understood in a sentimental way: family structures can be as exploitative as they can be nurturing, and in the case of medieval Yemen they were certainly highly hierarchical.[180] The paterfamilias exercised authority over all family members, albeit to varying extents.[181] This raises complex questions such as to what extent a free wife possessed more autonomy over her own life than a concubine. Kecia Ali has compared the position of women and female slaves in the family on the basis of legal texts from the first Islamic centuries, reaching the conclusion that "basic control over [the wife's] sexuality and physical mobility that the husband gains by the marriage contract […] is the same" as the control

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178   *Al-ʿiyāl* can be translated as family, household or "persons whom a man feeds", i.e. dependants (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2201). Jāzim notes that in contemporary Yemen, the term means small children or boys (*Nūr al-maʿārif*, 529.) Nevertheless, in these specific lists in *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I believe it is best translated as dependants.

179   It must be noted that the author provides only scant information on the wives and mothers of the Rasulid dynasty in general.

180   The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff has pointed out that "to modern Westerners, the kinship metaphor suggests nurture and closeness; in Africa, and elsewhere, it conveys authority and subordination" ("Slavery," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11, no. 1 [1982]: 215).

181   As Meillassoux has noted, "[p]ubescent girls, cadets, wives and pawned people are, like the slave, subject to the absolute power of the head of the family" (*Anthropology of Slavery*, 10).

held by the owner over his female slave.[182] Despite this thought-provoking parallel, a free wife had a significantly greater number of rights than a female slave. What is more, she usually possessed a vast social network and a family of origin which took her in if her husband was severely abusive.

In fact, it is instructive to briefly pause and compare the life stages of free and unfree women as they are shaped by their relationships to the heads of their households – fathers, husbands and owners. Our sources do not offer information on the frequency of marriage and divorce in medieval Yemen, but if we consider ethnographic data and assume a minimum of historical continuity, it is likely that girls married very young and had more than one husband during their lifetime, whether due to divorce or widowhood. Due to prevailing patrilineal and patrilocal principles, a girl would grow up in her father's house and move in with her husband after marriage. Divorce or widowhood would lead her back to her father's house, where she would stay until a new marriage was contracted. The paternal home thus constituted a base to which a free woman returned whenever a marriage ended or if marital strife made cohabitation unbearable. Female slaves, on the other hand, were moved from one owner's household to the next and had no place to retreat to if they experienced severe mistreatment. Islamic religious and legal thought insisted on the good treatment of slaves, but the legal texts did not stipulate any punishments for abusive slaveowners. The wellbeing of slaves was therefore entirely dependent on the goodwill of their owners.

It is tempting to see concubines as the natural rivals of free wives, as some modern scholars have.[183] However, our evidence has shown that free women also profited from slave labour. More specifically, elite women could only maintain the secluded lifestyle that marked their status and privilege by relying on female slaves who ran their households, cared for their children and accessed male-populated spheres on their behalf. It is possible that free women also made use of concubines, both to evade conjugal and childbearing duties and to indirectly gain access to domains such as male social gatherings which were inaccessible to them. Since private interactions between free and enslaved women were never recorded by the male historians on whose accounts we rely, the full truth on these matters will never be known.[184]

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182   Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 186.

183   Fatima Mernissi has argued that the pervasiveness of concubinage in the Abbasid era caused the status of free women to decline dramatically, with the effects still felt in Islamic societies today (*Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*, trans. Emily Agar [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1996], 69ff).

184   Myrne, "A Jariya's Prospects in Abbasid Baghdad," 53.

Enslaved workers of low rank

The lives of enslaved persons performing menial tasks for their owners still constitute a major blind spot in modern scholarship on medieval Islamic slavery.[1] Yemen is no exception here. Given the courtly character and strong elite bias of most surviving sources, it is unsurprising that evidence on enslaved workers of low rank is scarce and widely scattered. In chronicles, these individuals are either casually mentioned as commonplace figures requiring no further comment or are suddenly thrown into the limelight by unusual circumstances. A perfect example for the latter is Nukhba, a *jāriya* performing household chores in the Rasulid palace whose name and narration was recorded only because she witnessed a ballista attack on Sultan al-Mujāhid (see chapter 4). Unfortunately, these rare glimpses in narrative sources are insufficient to sketch even the roughest outline of menial slave labour during Najahid and Rasulid times. Hence, *Nūr al-maʿārif* shall again be drawn upon to at least partially fill this significant research lacuna.

1 Evidence from *Nūr al-maʿārif*

The broad range of administrative documents that make up *Nūr al-maʿārif* gives some indication of the breadth of slave labour at lower levels of the palace administration and related fields. The survival of this information is largely due to two conventions of the time, namely the remuneration of enslaved persons for their work and the distribution of gifts and provisions to them during religious festivals. Male slaves at the Rasulid court received wages or in-kind compensation for their service. For example, a long list of salaries disbursed in the year 693/1294 attests to the employment of slaves in the royal kitchens, the treasury (*khizāna*) and different warehouses.[2] The practice of remunerating slaves seems to have been common in medieval Islamic societies and is taken for granted in the legal opinion of al-Shāfiʿī concerning slave marriages, where

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1 E.g. Janet J. Ewald, "Slavery in Africa and the Slave Trades from Africa," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (1992): 480–1; De la Puente, "Mano de obra esclava en Al-Andalus," 136–7.

2 Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 1.565–6. The salary list also includes amounts paid to mamluks and various members of the sultan's entourage (*ḥāshiya*).

he contends that a male slave whose owner allowed him to marry had to pay his wife's dower and maintenance out of the gains he obtained for his work.[3] Similarly, medieval Islamic jurisprudence granted slaves the possibility to buy their own freedom, which presupposes their ability to earn money. At least in theory, this right also extended to female slaves.[4] However, the almost complete absence of female slaves in *Nūr al-maʿārif* especially when compared to the mention of male slaves in various salary lists, often by name, strongly suggests that they generally did not obtain salaries for their work but were instead maintained within the royal household. Notable exceptions which have been discussed in chapter 4 were enslaved girls (*jawārī*) who obtained salaries for producing buttons, and a handful of enslaved female cooks. Slaves also appear in lists of gifts and food distributed during religious festivals. Seven such lists enumerate sweets, meat and other provisions handed out to the sultanic family, their entourage, dignitaries and workers including slaves during Ramadan, Eid and the festival of mid-Shaʿbān.[5] The documents illustrate how the Rasulid sultans used these occasions to demonstrate their generosity and perhaps gratitude to everyone under their patronage, including slaves at the lowest level of the palace hierarchy.

Taken together, the salary and gift lists contained in *Nūr al-maʿārif* attest to a range of menial jobs carried out by slaves in and around the Rasulid palaces. They allow glimpses behind kitchen doors and stable gates into spheres that likely ran on slave labour but are usually absent from the historical record. As such, they offer a more nuanced understanding of slave labour during Rasulid times. Unfortunately, due to a dearth of sources, similar information on the Najahid era is entirely lacking. Therefore, this chapter will focus solely on the Rasulid context.

Most slaves mentioned in the salary and gift lists of *Nūr al-maʿārif* are labelled as *ʿabīd* and thus clearly distinguishable from servants (*farashūn*) included in the same documents. Additionally, workers labelled as *ghilmān* (sg. *ghulām*) appear frequently and deserve a brief discussion. The term's basic meaning is "young boy", but it was also a common euphemism for slave used frequently not only in medieval Yemeni texts but in Arabic sources of the

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3   Al-Nawawī, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn*, 393.

4   Al-Nawawī, 393.

5   *Shaʿbān* is the eighth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. The middle of this month had religious significance and was preceded by a period of fasting. "According to popular belief, in the night preceding the 15th, the tree of life on whose leaves are written the names of the living is shaken. The names written on the leaves which fall down indicate those who are to die in the coming year" (A. J. Wensinck, "Shaʿbān," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012).

time in general.[6] According to a hadith relayed by Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, the Prophet Muḥammad himself urged his followers to address their male slaves by this term, in order to preserve their dignity.[7]

Modern scholars have defined the term in different ways. Perry notes that in the Geniza documents, the term ghulām is rarely used for domestic servants but most often designates the aides of merchants and other communal officers, as well as slaves acting as business agents.[8] For Rasulid Yemen, Vallet translates ghilmān as servants or guards without discussing their state of (un)freedom.[9] Jāzim offers a useful minimal definition of a ghulām as someone at the service of the sultan. In fact, free or enslaved men carried the label ghulām during the Rasulid period, and their occupations ranged from lowly workers to business agents of merchants and specialized craftsmen. As an example of the latter, Jāzim highlights a certain Muḥammad al-Idānī, an instrument builder for Sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf whose name very strongly suggests free origins. Jāzim considers salaries to be the prerogative of free ghilmān, but it is likely that enslaved ghilmān also obtained monetary compensation for their work, just as the wage-earning ʿabīd found in *Nūr al-maʿārif*.[10] The earning of wages is thus not a reliable indicator for the freedom of a ghulām. In some instances, context reveals whether the mentioned ghilmān were slaves or free men. For example, Ibn al-Mujāwir mentions that no taxes were imposed on Indian ghilmān entering Yemen via al-Shiḥr in the late Ayyubid period.[11] Their description as "import products" unmistakably proves the unfree state of these ghilmān. In most cases, however, the textual evidence is too thin to unambiguously ascertain the state of freedom or enslavement of individuals labelled as ghilmān. In what follows, the category of ghilmān will be included in the discussion of low-ranking slaves, albeit as a problematic group whose enslaved state cannot always be established with certainty.

2   Kitchen Service

Four different documents contained in *Nūr al-maʿārif* confirm that enslaved persons worked in the sultanic kitchens which formed part of the castle of Taʿizz.

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6   "ʿAbd"; D. Sourdel, "G̲h̲ulām," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012.

7   Franz, "Slavery in Islam," 77.

8   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 12, 82.

9   Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 227.

10   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.37.

11   Al-Mujāwir, *Tārīkh al-mustabṣir*, 142–3.

A salary list from 693/1294 contains the names of sixteen cooks whose typical slave names unequivocally reveal their unfree state:[12]

> **The cooks – 153.5:**
> Ṣawāb 20, ʿAnbar 15, Zaʿrūr 15, Jawhar 15, ʿAnbar 10, Shafiʿ 10, Rayḥān 10, Rayḥān 7.5, Muḥsin 7.5, Yāqūt 7.5, Muftāḥ 7.5, Bayān 7.5, Mukhtār 7.5, Dīnār 7.5, Saʿīd 3, Masʿūd 3.[13]

Twelve of these cooks reappear in a larger list of salaries for mamluks, slaves and retainers from the same year. Here, the cooks are divided into "caliphal" and "permanent" cooks (*al-khalīfatīya/al-mustamirūn*). According to Jāzim, the former designate cooks who prepared the meals for Sultan al-Muzaffar, the only Rasulid who was given the title of caliph.[14] The permanent cooks remained in the royal kitchen while the sultan was travelling.

> **The cooks – 207:**
> The caliphal ones – 152: Mubashir Ḥawī 15, Ṣawāb 20, ʿAnbar the Elder 15, Zaʿrūr 15, Jawhar 15, ʿAnbar 10, Rayḥān the Young 10, Rayḥān the Elder 7.5, Muḥsin 7.5, Yāqūt 7.5, Bayān 7.5, Dīnār 7.5, Mukhtār 7.5, Yāqūt 4, Maʿawala 4.
>   The permanent ones – 55: Shukr 15, Dīnār 10, Ṣawāb 10, Mithqāl 5, Rashīd 7, ʿAnbar 5, Mufliḥ 3.[15]

Two separate lists of sweets distributed for the festival of mid-Shaʿbān also mention kitchen slaves as beneficiaries of this dispensation.[16] All four lists of cooks contained in *Nūr al-maʿārif* consist of typical slave names, and the salaries display a wide range from twenty to three dinars, suggesting a hierarchy among unfree kitchen staff assigned to different duties. Other specific kitchen workers such as sweet-makers, butchers and pickle-makers are also mentioned in *Nūr al-maʿārif*, albeit without information on their state of freedom or unfreedom. A person responsible for grilling meat (*shawāʾ*) bears the typical slave name Yaqūt (sapphire).[17]

The sultanic kitchens also employed eunuchs, as the following passage from the same salary list exemplifies:

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12   The typical slave names of these cooks have been discussed in chapter 4.
13   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.561.
14   Anonymous, I.569.
15   Anonymous, I.569.
16   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.123, II.135.
17   Anonymous, II.123.

The eunuch cooks (*al-khuddām al-tabbākhīn*)[18] – 47: Shukr 10, Ṭayyiba 9, Dīnār 7, Ṣawāb 7, Kāfūr 4, Mukhtār 3, Mithqāl 3, Rayḥān 4.[19]

Eunuch cooks also appear in three different lists of sweets distributed during the festival of mid-Shaʿbān.[20] Individual names are not given here, with the exception of the chief eunuch Ḍīyāʾ al-Dīn Dinār al-Ḥaḍramī, who bears the title "commander of the cooking eunuchs" (*muqaddim al-khuddām al-tabbākhūn*).[21] Furthermore, the kitchen of a certain Shukr is mentioned in several documents, and his name is also contained in the above salary list for enslaved cooks.[22] It thus appears that one of the kitchens in the sultanic palace was known as "the kitchen of Shukr", likely because it was managed by a eunuch called Shukr. Lewis A. Coser has remarked that eunuchs occupied the role of heads of imperial kitchens in a wide range of historical settings.[23] The deployment of eunuchs – expensive slaves usually designated for elite positions – in the Rasulid sultanic kitchens prompts the assumption that they held supervisory functions over other staff. However, this hypothesis is not supported by evidence from *Nūr al-maʿārif*. In fact, the salaries for eunuch cooks given above are in the middle and lower range of salaries paid to cooks labelled as slaves (*ʿabīd*). It is important to consider that the conventional image of eunuchs is strongly shaped by their representation in narrative sources which however only mention highly successful individuals. There was certainly a percentage of eunuchs who lacked the personal qualities or simply the luck to serve their owners in prestigious positions and who were instead assigned to more modest tasks.

Surprisingly, one female name – Ṭayyiba – appears in the salary list for eunuch cooks. A few other passages also confirm that female slaves worked in the sultanic kitchens and baked bread.[24] Male bread-bakers are mentioned elsewhere in *Nūr al-maʿārif*,[25] suggesting that this domain was not exclusively female as it seems to have been in other Islamic contexts.[26]

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18   The documents of *Nūr al-maʿārif* are not always grammatically precise.

19   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.566.

20   Anonymous, II.123, II.133, II.128.

21   Anonymous, II.128. The eunuch's *nisba* al-Ḥaḍramī probably refers to a former owner stemming from the Ḥaḍramawt.

22   Anonymous, I.534, I.539, I.566. "Shukr, the cook" is also mentioned in a list of individuals receiving sweets on the occasion of the mid-Shaʿbān festival (II.135.).

23   Coser, "Political Functions of Eunuchism," 882.

24   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.557, II.92.

25   Anonymous, I.105, I.135, II.143, II.147.

26   In 4th/10th-century al-Andalus, female slaves were in charge of baking bread (de la Puente, "Mano de obra esclava en Al-Andalus," 143).

3   Employment in Palace Storage Facilities

Nūr al-maʿārif's salary lists attest to the work of enslaved persons in three
distinct storage facilities that formed part of the Rasulid palace: the storage
where provisions for the sultanic kitchens were kept (*al-ḥawāʾij khānā*),[27] the
storage house for drinks and glassware (*al-sharbakhāna*),[28] and the crockery
store (*al-tashtakhāna*).[29] These terms, all composites of Persian words, are fre-
quently found in *Nūr al-maʿārif* in connection with enslaved workers.

The *ḥawāʾij khānā* contained the food supplies necessary for catering to the
sultan and his entourage,[30] as well as cooking utensils of the sultanic kitch-
ens (*al-maṭābikh al-khāṣṣ*). The great majority of workers here were labelled
as *ʿabīd*.[31] They were supervised by a person known as *mihtār* (chief)[32] or *nāʾib*
(representative).[33] One passage suggests that the slaves working in the *ḥawāʾij
khānā* were supervised by a mamluk.[34] While the exact roles of these positions
remain unclear, the duties of the so-called "treasurer eunuch" are described
in some detail and provide insights into working procedures and hierarchies
within the *ḥawāʾij khānā*:

> **Function of the treasurer eunuch (*al-khādim al-khāzin*) in the storage
> for the sultanic kitchens (*al-ḥawāʾij khānā*):**
>   The keys are with him overnight, and the scribes (*al-kuttāb*) seal the
> *ḥawāʾij khānā*. If the opening of the *ḥawāʾij khānā* is wanted, the keys are
> requested. If he is present, the eunuch (*khādim*) comes, or if he is not
> present, his representative, the *rakhtawān*.[35] He enters with the slaves
> (*ʿabīd*). And when they leave the *ḥawāʾij khānā*, the scribes examine

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27   Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen," 7.
28   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.531.
29   Anonymous, I.299.
30   Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen," 7. The sultanic resi-
     dences and fortresses were supplied with food and other provisions sourced from regions
     under Rasulid rule through an elaborate system described in *Nūr al-maʿārif* (e.g. anony-
     mous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.557). By paying for these supplies, the Rasulid state actively stimu-
     lated local agricultural production (Vallet, "Pouvoir, commerce et marchands," 310). Baba,
     "Yemen under the Rasūlids during the 13th Century."
31   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.122, II.129, II.132, II.135, II.140, II.141, II.148. Ghilmān are
     mentioned on pages II.138 and II.141.
32   Anonymous, I.141.
33   Anonymous, II.123, II.128, II.143.
34   Anonymous, II.148.
35   According to Jāzim, the *rakhtawān* was in charge of caring for fabrics and textiles, rais-
     ing tents and cooking meat (Anonymous, I.119). As will be discussed below, this position
     could be held by slaves. Further mentions of the *rakhtawān* can be found in anonymous,
     II.128, II.143.

them as they leave. That mentioned eunuch neither stays [in the *ḥawāʾij khānā*], nor does he seal it. Only the utensils of the sultanic kitchens (*al-maṭābikh al-khāṣṣ*)[36] are under his control. He has the command of the eunuchs and cannot be challenged regarding whatever is shown to him in the *ḥawāʾij khānā* concerning the breaking of cooking pots. One equal in value is asked for, as is the case with drinking cups (*makāb*),[37] winnowing baskets (*manāsif*), stone vessels (*ḥajr*), brass or stone drinking vessels (*tawr*),[38] sieves (*manājil*) made of hair, etc., whatever is no longer suitable to present due to its broken condition. The compensation is taken from the *ḥawāʾij khānā*.[39]

The treasurer eunuch is described as having authority over other eunuchs, most likely over the cooking eunuchs working in the sultanic kitchens who have been discussed in the preceding section. He had the final say about whether broken kitchenware needed to be replaced and was authorized to take new utensils from the *ḥawāʾij khānā*. Furthermore, this passage reveals a system of checks and balances designed to safeguard the provisions and utensils stored in the *ḥawāʾij khānā*. The treasurer eunuch was entrusted with the keys overnight and unlocked the door in the morning to enter with the slaves working there. However, anyone who left the *ḥawāʾij khānā* was searched by scribes, three of whom are mentioned in various distribution lists.[40] They also sealed the entry to the *ḥawāʾij khānā* after the eunuch had locked its doors, thereby making it impossible for the eunuch himself to enter during the night. The treasurer eunuch and the scribes thus mutually controlled each other, making theft impossible.

The fact that a eunuch was put in charge of the keys to this important storage facility yet again speaks to the important role played by eunuchs during the Rasulid period. Similarly, al-Khazrajī's chronicle of the year 722/1322 features a eunuch entrusted with the keys of the fortress of Taʿizz.[41] The treasurer eunuch was however not blindly trusted but closely monitored by scribes to prevent any abuse of his position.

The workforce of the crockery store (*al-tashtakhāna*) featured both slaves (*ʿabīd*) and ghilmān.[42] ʿAnbar, an enslaved worker in this storage facility, held

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36   Literally the special kitchens, these were the kitchens for the sultan and his family.

37   The term could not be found in any lexicon, but since a drinking vessel is called *kūb* (pl. *akwāb*), the likely meaning of *makāb* is drinking cups (Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 2635).

38   Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, 455.

39   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.115.

40   Anonymous, II.129, II.127, II.143, II.147.

41   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.5.

42   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.128, II.135, II.140, II.144, II.147.

the position of *rakhtawān* which is also mentioned in the *ḥawā'ij khānā*. According to Jāzim, this position entailed caring for the sultan's textiles, raising tents and cooking meat,[43] a description which however does not quite match its appearance in two storage facilities of the sultan's palace. The full extent of the *rakhtawān*'s professional activities thus remains unclear.

The warehouse for drinks and glassware (*al-sharbakhāna*) employed slaves (*ʿabīd*), ghilmān and mamluks,[44] as well as workers whose names strongly suggest that they were free (see below). The presence of enslaved individuals in the *sharbakhāna* is also attested by al-Khazrajī, who relates that Sultan al-Mujāhid ʿAlī, who had been deposed in 722/1322, regained access to the castle of Taʿizz with the help of slaves working in the *sharbakhāna* who pulled his supporters up on ropes and provided them with valuable advice that led to their successful capture of al-Mujāhid's rival al-Manṣūr Ayyūb.[45] Eunuchs were also assigned to functions in the *sharbakhāna*.[46] The recipients of sweets distributed on the occasion of the festival of mid-Shaʿbān in 693/1294 include "the chief eunuch (*ṭawāshī*) Zakī al-Dīn Dakwān, lord (*ṣāhib*) of the sharbakhāna".[47] A subsection on the *sharbakhāna* in another distribution list names four chief eunuchs, one of whom carries the *nisba* "the bread-maker" (*al-khabbāz*).[48] Given the frequently disorganized nature of these lists, however, it is unclear whether these men actually worked in the *sharbakhāna* or whether they constituted a separate category that was accidentally inserted into this document.

Both the *tashtakhāna* and the *sharbakhāna* employed workers who are difficult to classify as free or enslaved, as the following salary list exemplifies:

> The crockery store (*al-tashtakhāna*) – 40.5: Najīb 4.5, Saʿīd 6, Bilāl 2.5 dinars, Faṣīḥ 5, Ḥassan b. Maʿlūm 4, Ḥussayn al-Ḥaraḍī 3, Muwaffaq 3.5, Rayḥān 3, Shabīb 3, Rayḥān 3, Bilāl the manumitted [al-ʿatīqī] 3, Rashīd 3.

> The warehouse for drinks and glasses (*al-sharbakhāna*) – 27: Mufliḥ 7, al-Ṣābrī 6, Muhammad bn. Maʿlūm 4, Faraḥ 4, Iqbāl 3, Milḥ 3.[49]

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43   Anonymous, I.119.

44   Anonymous, II.128, II.135, II.140, II.144, II.147, II.560. A salary list for workers in the *sharbakhāna* mentions the certainly free Muḥammad b. Maʿlūm alongside individuals bearing typical slave names (I.566).

45   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.5. Al-Manṣūr Ayyūb deposed sultan al-Mujāhid ʿAlī with the help of mamluk troops in 722/1322 and in turn fell prey to a conspiracy aimed at reinstating al-Mujāhid a year later.

46   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.531.

47   Anonymous, II.128.

48   Anonymous, II.147.

49   Anonymous, I.566.

Several men on this list bear typical slave names, for example Faṣīḥ (eloquent, clear in speech), Rayḥān (sweet basil) or Mufliḥ (fortunate, prosperous). Others such as Ḥassan b. Maʿlūm and Ḥussayn al-Haraḍī must have been free workers, since such names were never given to slaves. Interestingly, enslaved workers did not obtain lower salaries than their free colleagues. This list also features a manumitted slave, a rare piece of hard evidence on a practice that might have been frequent. It is likely that even after having been freed, this man continued performing the tasks he had carried out as slave. A different version of this salary list features a number of additions and slight variations.[50] In this document, Saʿīd bears the *nisba* "takrūrī" (West African) and Farāḥ the *nisba* "al-Shāmī" (the Levantine/Northerner), two highly unusual identifications for slaves in medieval Yemen. As previously discussed, however, these suffixes could also refer to the slaves' previous owners rather than to their own places of origin.

The evidence analysed thus far has highlighted various low-ranking tasks performed by slaves within the Rasulid palaces. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall look beyond the palace walls and explore other domains in which slaves contributed to the wealth and comfort of the Rasulid dynasty.

4　　　　Protective Services

A large body of evidence refers to slaves and ghilmān performing protective roles for their owners. Members of the elite usually travelled with an entourage of ghilmān.[51] When the sultan's brother Manṣūr ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās diverged from his travel companions and ghilmān en route to Fashal in 788/1386, he was promptly attacked and killed by tribesmen.[52] In 790/1388, a conflict arose between the amir of Zabīd and a judge, as both of them laid claim to a plot of agricultural land in the valley of Zabīd. The judge and his associates set out to cultivate the plot, but the amir's ghilmān prevented them from doing so, wounding the judge in the process.[53] Another responsibility conferred upon ghilmān was the protection of residences. When the house of a high-ranking baḥrī mamluk[54] was attacked by ʿAwarīn tribesmen, his ghilmān fought them

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50　　Anonymous, I.570.

51　　Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.66, I.84, II.189, II.85.

52　　Al-Khazrajī, II.185. He was a full brother of the Rasulid sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl.

53　　Al-Khazrajī, II.185.

54　　The *baḥriya* or *baḥariyya*, a regiment of slave soldiers founded by Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb, ultimately overthrew the Ayyubid dynasty of Egypt to establish Mamluk rule. Under the Mamluks, the baḥariyya maintained an influential role in the army (Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army II," 463ff., 474; Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*,

off on horseback.[55] It is difficult to assess whether the ghilmān employed as guards and protectors were free or enslaved. Some of them carried typical mamluk names, while the names of others suggest free status. For example, the entourage of a nephew of Sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf included two ghilmān named Sunjur ʿAlawī and Muḥammad b. al-Sakākīnī.[56] When Sultan al-Mujāhid was arrested by a Mamluk contingent in Mecca and abducted to Egypt, he was allowed to take only one of his ghilmān with him. He chose a mamluk amir called Fakhr al-Dīn Ziyād b. Aḥmad al-Kāmilī.[57] Again, it is evident that the category ghulām/ghilmān was not clearly delineated but included both free and enslaved persons, both civilians and military men.

Slaves (ʿabīd) also formed part of the travel entourage of high-class men and were occasionally tasked with executing defensive and punitive measures for their owners.[58] Al-Khazrajī's chronicle mentions weapon-bearing slaves several times. In two of these instances, the sultan ordered these armed slaves to subdue rebellious mamluks together with the so-called "ghilmān of the mules" (ghilmān al-baghlā), suggesting that the latter were not simply grooms but must also have been armed and able to engage in battle. From these instances, it appears that the Rasulids trained some of their slaves and ghilmān for combat in order to counterbalance the military prowess of their mamluks who posed a serious threat to their sovereignty.

5   Stable Duties

The royal stables (al-iṣṭablāt al-saʿīda) housed the mounts of the Rasulid family, as well as of its administration and military, including mules, horses, camels and elephants. They were located both in the castle of Taʿizz and in the city of Thaʿbāt,[59] and were headed by a government official known as *amīr*

183; Marmon, *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, 106; Northrup, "Bahrī Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250–1390," 247). It is probable that the institution came to Yemen with the Ayyubids and was maintained throughout the Rasulid period, where it appears frequently in the sources (e.g. anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.41, II.126, II.142, II.143, II.148). In 722/1322, the baḥari-yya mamluks revolted, arrested the young sultan al-Mujāhid and attempted to install his uncle al-Manṣūr Ayyūb on the throne (al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, 1906, II.5ff.).

55   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.27.
56   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.554.
57   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, I.85.
58   E.g. al-Khazrajī, I.67, II.189.
59   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.390–3. Muḥammad Jāzim, personal correspondence, 8 April 2019. Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl's palace in Zabīd included a stable, but evidence from *Nūr al-maʿārif* predates the construction of this building by a hundred years (Mahoney,

akhūr.[60] While one would expect to find large numbers of enslaved workers in this environment, evidence from *Nūr al-maʿārif* does not feature any ʿabīd and is thus inconclusive. According to this source, the staff largely consisted of *ghilmān al-isṭabl* (stable ghilmān) who worked under the supervision of a *rak-abdār*.[61] This term derives from the Persian *rikābdār*, which denotes the person in charge of the stirrup when his master mounts.[62] Additionally, *Nūr al-maʿārif* mentions other stable workers with unclear states of (un)freedom such as grooms (*sāʾis*) and hay-makers (*hashāshīn*).[63] Two sections in this source deal with payments to cameleers who however remain unnamed and unknown.[64] Al-Khazrajī notes that a procession marking the circumcision of Sultan al-Ashraf Ismāʿīl's youngest sons in 794/1392 included grooms, "people of the stable" (*ahl al-isṭabl*) and elephant-keepers (*al-fiyālin*),[65] thereby expanding the repertoire of positions in the royal stables without furnishing any proof of slave workers among them. Evidence on the Rasulid stables is thus too thin to allow for any assessment of the role of slave labour in them.

6   Craftsmanship and Other Specialized Work

The role of enslaved workers in crafts and artisanal production in the medieval Islamic world is generally poorly documented. Legal sources from the 4th/10th century attest to the existence of enslaved craftsmen in al-Andalus, citing bricklayers and soap-makers as examples.[66] Rapaport has noted that the great majority of women in the Mamluk era worked for wages, with textile

"Role of Horses in the Politics of Late Medieval South Arabia"). For a detailed study of Thaʿbāt, see G. Rex Smith, "The Yemenite Settlement of Thaʿbat: Historical, Numismatic and Epigraphic Notes," in *Studies in the Medieval History of the Yemen and South Arabia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), XIV, 119–34.

60   Smith, "Rasulid Administration in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yemen," 236.

61   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.554, I.557, II.129, II.135, II.144, II.148.

62   J. Deny, "Rikābdār," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2012.

63   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, 555.

64   Anonymous, I.59–61, I.120. The latter short list of remunerations for cameleers features the typical eunuch names Shibl al-Dawla, Shujāʿ al-Dīn ʿAnbar and Ṣawāb. However, it appears that this list is organized according to the household of Rasulid women known by the names of their eunuch administrators. The cameleers probably served these households. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the last name mentioned is "lady of ʿAfīf", and by the fact that Shujāʿ al-Dīn ʿAnbar and the lady whose household he administered are well documented in *Nūr al-maʿārif* (see chapter 4).

65   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.234.

66   De la Puente, "Mano de obra esclava en Al-Andalus," 142–4.

production being the main occupational field.[67] It seems natural in such a context that women would have received help in this task from female domestic slaves living under the same roof. According to Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Rāziq, enslaved women also supported free women in trades such as hairdressing.[68] Perry's study of domestic slavery in Jewish households in Cairo between the 4th/10th and 7th/13th centuries has shown that female domestic slaves not only performed household work but also spun flax and wool and may have contributed to the production of embroidered textiles.[69]

The Yemeni sources analysed for this study do not contain any information on male slaves working in craftsmanship and feature only one reference to female slaves engaged in this field. The chronicles and biographical dictionaries are predictably silent about this topic, but since *Nūr al-maʿārif* contains a wealth of information on artisanal work and craftsmanship, this lacuna is surprising. Besides materials and prices, the source discusses salaries for artisanal work but usually mentions neither names nor categories of workers. It is therefore entirely possible that a large enslaved workforce contributed to medieval Yemeni artisanal production without leaving any trace in the historical record. As discussed in chapter 4, a section in *Nūr al-maʿārif* enumerating the wages for different handicrafts reveals that enslaved women and girls (*jawārī*) produced buttons made of silk thread. A different passage in *Nūr al-maʿārif*, dictated by a certain Rayḥān al-Burājimī (the button-maker) al-Muẓaffarī, specifies the taxes due for buttons.[70] This man apparently supervised the production of buttons and is clearly identifiable as an enslaved person by his typical first name. His *nisba* indicates that he belonged to Sultan al-Muẓaffar and strongly suggests that he was a eunuch. As textile production was a flourishing enterprise in Yemen throughout the medieval period, it is quite probable that much larger numbers of slaves were employed in this field.[71] Based on our very limited evidence, it is impossible to determine whether this was an exclusively female industry.

As for other specialized tasks carried out by slaves, *Nūr al-maʿārif* recorded the slave (ʿabd) of a doctor who appears to have been a drug-maker.[72] A ghulām is mentioned among the blacksmiths. While other workers in the smithery

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67   Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society," 24f.

68   Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Rāziq, *La femme au temps des mamlouks en Égypte* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1973), 92.

69   Perry, "Daily Life of Slaves," 172.

70   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.141.

71   Robert B. Serjeant, "Material for a History of Islamic Textiles up to the Mongol Conquest," *Ars Islamica* 13 (1948): 75–117.

72   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, II.128. Similar evidence comes from 10th-century Spain, where an apothecary was aided by twelve slaves who produced medicine (de la Puente, "Mano de obra esclava en Al-Andalus," 144).

earned a wage, he was merely given charcoal as compensation for his work, suggesting that he performed the lowest tasks.[73] Ghilmān are also mentioned among the sultan's hunters. As always, their state of (un)freedom is unclear, but the fact that their salary was half the amount received by the falconers and only a quarter of that given to hunters working with trained cheetahs indicates that they were at least of lower status, if not unfree.[74] Lastly, *Nūr al-maʿārif* mentions ghilmān travelling aboard Rasulid ships, in one instance referred to as "ghilmān of the sea".[75] Unfortunately, a lack of context precludes us from determining whether these ghilmān were slaves and what tasks they performed. Vallet assumes that slaves built and repaired ships for the Rasulid state, but the sources analysed for the present study did not yield any concrete evidence supporting this hypothesis.[76]

7   Agriculture

Scholarly works on slavery in the medieval Islamic context rarely discuss the role of slaves in agricultural production.[77] The only well-documented case stems from 3rd/9th-century Iraq when the large-scale deployment of African slaves transformed the marshes around Basra into farmland.[78] The appalling conditions on these plantations are said to have fuelled the famous Zanj rebellion (255–70/869–83) recorded by al-Masʿūdī and other contemporary historians. Generally, however, a lack of source evidence renders the examination of slave labour in medieval Islamic agriculture nearly impossible. Benjamin Reilly has combined environmental history, epidemiology and genetic studies to overcome these source limitations, concluding that African slaves played a vital role in premodern farming on the Arabian Peninsula.[79]

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73   Anonymous, *Nūr al-maʿārif*, I.294.

74   Anonymous, II.353.

75   Anonymous, I.126, I.175.

76   Vallet, L'Arabie marchande, 127.

77   Benjamin Reilly, *Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria in the Arabian Peninsula* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 3.

78   Gwyn Campbell, "East Africa in the Early Indian Ocean World Slave Trade: The Zanj Revolt Reconsidered," in *Early Exchange between Africa and the Wider Indian Ocean World*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Palgrave Series in Indian Ocean World Studies (Cham: Springer International, 2016); Alexandre Popović, *Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the Third/Ninth Century*, trans. Léon King (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999). Kurt Franz considers this unusual case to have been a customary practice that should not be considered part of slavery in the Islamic context ("Slavery in Islam," 104).

79   Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria in the Arabian Peninsula, 50.

The Yemeni historical record offers very limited evidence on the subject. There is, however, minimal evidence indicating that slaves were deployed in farming, especially in cattle husbandry. Ibn Ḥātim, describing a volcano outbreak that darkened the sky in Yemen in the year 600/1203, calls the following witness to the stand:

> The chief eunuch (ṭawāshī) Ḥussām al-Dīn ʿAnbar al-Ashrafī who is among the most senior in rank in the council of chief eunuchs (ṭawāshiya) and their eldest in age, informed me, saying: the news of the ashes happened when I was in my country in those days on leave,[80] without being aware. I had gone out to the pasture with the cows of my people (ahlī) when this matter happened. The world became dark until I could only find the way to the house by holding the tail of one of the cows. It kept walking and I held on until I entered the house.[81]

This passage is intriguing in several respects. First, a eunuch seems an unlikely candidate to tend to cattle. As has been shown, eunuchs were significantly more expensive than regular slaves and usually occupied prestigious positions in the military and political administration. What is more, ʿAnbar was the senior and most high-ranking of the group of chief eunuchs serving the Ayyubid sultan al-Nāṣir Ayyūb (r. 608–10/ca. 1212–14).[82] He reports being on leave in his territories, which suggests that he might have been the owner of a revenue estate (iqṭāʾ), a common award given to eunuchs for their service (see chapter 3). The cows ʿAntar cared for belonged to his ahl – a term which could signify relatives, the inhabitants of one household or someone of the same origin or occupation.[83] It is likely that the cattle formed part of the eunuch's estate and was therefore their family's property. Nevertheless, a high-ranking eunuch ploughing a field remains an unusual appearance, even if this seems to have been an occasional task he pursued during his leave and not his primary occupation. While we cannot deduce from this anecdote that eunuchs regularly engaged in agriculture during the Ayyubid period, Nūr al-maʿārif furnishes surprising evidence suggesting that eunuchs did indeed perform farm work for the Rasulid state. A section describing the harvest of farmers and sharecroppers outlines the compensation given to "the eunuch (khādim) with the bulls"[84] who was in

80   Fī rīḥi, a phrase which in the medieval Yemeni context usually means "on leave from (military) duty". My thanks are due to Johann Heiss for this information.

81   Ibn Ḥātim, Al-simṭ al-ghālī al-thaman fī akhbār al-mulūk min al-ghuzz bi-l-Yaman, 110–12.

82   Serjeant and Lewcock, "Early and Medieval History of Ṣanʿā," 63.

83   Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, 120.

84   Anonymous, Nūr al-maʿārif, 1.373.

charge of ploughing the fields with the help of a bull. He was compensated for his work in-kind, with ratios of cereal and other agricultural products whose volume depended on the quality of the land he had ploughed. While the strenuousness of this job easily explains why it was assigned to an unfree labourer, the deployment of an expensive eunuch appears odd. The role of eunuchs in farming therefore remains unclear.

With the exception of the enigmatic eunuch with the bull, *Nūr al-maʿārif* remains silent on the role of enslaved workers in agriculture. An isolated reference reaches us via al-Khazrajī, however. In *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, the author reports that the Banū Durayhim, a tribal group, regularly raided the slaves of another group, the ʿAbādīl, in order to steal their cattle.[85] This passage is fascinating because it broadens our horizon beyond the source's usual elite and urban bias into Yemen's rural tribal communities.[86] Not only does this passage confirm that tribal groups owned slaves; it also suggests that these slaves worked as caretakers of their owners' cattle. An even more subtle hint at slave labour comes from Ibn al-Mujāwir, who notes that in 615/1218 everyone in Yemen started growing madder due to its high yields compared to other crops. "They [all] planted it," he writes, "even slaves, enslaved girls, women, the tribal shaykhs and the very rich."[87] Unfortunately, the author does not offer any further context that might help interpret his statement. In sum, while scattered hints confirm the role of slaves in medieval Yemeni agriculture, the topic remains a major blind spot in relevant sources and can therefore not be evaluated comprehensively.

8   Mining

The deployment of slaves in mining can readily be imagined. Al-Ṭabarī's famous description of the *zanj* slave rebellion includes the witness account of an enslaved man named Rayḥān b. Sālah who worked in a saltpetre mine and vividly described the appalling living conditions endured by enslaved workers there.[88] Al-Hamdānī's 3rd/9th-century work *Kitāb al-Jawharatayn al-ʿatīqatayn al-māʾiʿatayn al-ṣafrāʾ wa-ʾl-baiḍāʾ* on the extraction and purification of gold

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85   Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿUqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, II.217.

86   As Salah Trabelsi has noted, "classical [Arabic] historical, legal and literary sources are loathe to deal with the dull and insipid life of the rural world, especially that of the amorphous and resigned slave masses" ("Memory and Slavery: The Issues of Historiography," *International Social Science Journal* 58, no. 188 [2006]: 241.)

87   Ibn al-Mujāwir, Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia, 186.

88   Al-Ṭabarī in Trabelsi, "Memory and Slavery," 241.

and silver documents mining activity in northern Yemen but does not mention slave labour.[89] Timothy Power raises the question whether mining in the ʿAsīr region in today's south-western Saudi Arabia might have been made economically feasible through the use of slave labour.[90] However, the only references found in the sources analysed for the present study concern slaves quarrying stones. The 7th/13th-century traveller Ibn al-Mujāwir relates that the Zurayʿids, a local dynasty that ruled Aden on behalf of the Sulayhids between 476/1083 and and 569/1173, forced their slaves to quarry stones around Abyan and carry them to the port city in order to build the first stone houses there.[91] This information is repeated by Bā Makhramā, who in his 10th/16th-century chronicle of Aden specifies that the slaves were of *zanjī* origin, and that the quarries were located in the mountains around the city.[92]

9   Conclusion

The combined evidence found in chronicles and administrative documents from Rasulid Yemen shows a remarkable breadth of menial tasks carried out by slaves at the time. However, the sources doubtlessly remain silent on many other domains which were sustained by slave labour. The construction industry, heavily boosted by the Rasulids' commissioning of royal residences, mosques, schools and other public buildings, is only one case in point here.[93] In fact, the transmission of relevant information in key sources such as *Nūr al-maʿārif* is often coincidental.[94] As a result, it is impossible to fully assess the contributions of unfree workers to the economy of medieval Yemen, let alone to the smooth running of its households and palaces. Furthermore, while the biographies of individual eunuchs and concubines have survived due to their association with elite personalities, we know very little about the many slaves who toiled at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This is particularly regrettable

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89   Al-Hamdānī, Kitāb al-Gawharatayn al-ʿatīqatayn al-māʾiʿatayn aṣ-ṣafrāʾ wa al-bayḍāʾ.

90   Power, Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, 132.

91   Ibn al-Mujāwir, Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia, 145.

92   Bā Makhrama, "Tārīkh taghr ʿAdan," A.9.

93   See works by Noha Sadek, e.g. "Zabid: The Round City of Yemen," in *Studies on Arabia in Honour of G. Rex Smith*, ed. John F. Healey and Venetia Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); "In the Queen of Sheba's Footsteps."

94   Arnold Esch has described "chances and coincidences of transmission" (*Überlieferungs-chancen und Überlieferungszufälle*) as a methodological problem for historians ("Überlieferungschancen und Überlieferungszufall als methodisches Problem des Historikers," *Historische Zeitschrift* 240 [1985]: 529–70).

since these children, women and men in all likelihood constituted the majority of slaves in medieval Yemen and in countless other historical settings.

At this point, it is thus impossible to provide a comprehensive study of the realities of slavery in medieval Yemen. However, the relative over-representation of higher-ranking slaves in the textual evidence needs to be counterbalanced by a determined effort to also recover the lives of enslaved workers of low rank. In order to reconstruct the experiences of slavery in their full variety, scholars must meticulously examine every shred of evidence that might contribute to a better understanding. This chapter has attempted to do so through specified source material, uncovering for example that the Rasulid palaces employed kitchen slaves who received salaries ranging between twenty and three dinars, pointing towards a strong hierarchy and diversification of tasks among them. If even within the narrow domain of Rasulid palace kitchens the prospects of individual slaves displayed such variety, it can only be imagined how manifold they must have been within medieval Yemen at large.

Conclusions

This research has provided a first understanding of the phenomenon of slavery in Yemen's medieval period as reflected in textual sources. Following anthropological approaches to slavery research, special attention was paid to the life paths of enslaved persons and to how these relate to the larger socio-cultural setting. A comparison between the Najahid and Rasulid eras of Yemeni history has proven particularly fruitful for examining the phenomenon of slavery in its full variety and for overcoming source limitations.

Islamic law regulating slavery was examined in detail, as it demonstrably shaped perceptions and practices related to slavery in medieval Yemen and proved indispensable for interpreting the source material. Slavery and freedom in Islamic contexts should be understood as a continuum rather than as a strict dichotomy.[1] At the same time, the core Islamic legal principle that anyone who was not known to be enslaved was free and should remain so is noteworthy, since a binary opposition between freedom and slavery has often been portrayed as a Western exception.[2] This important premise meant that only children born into slavery and enemies captured in warfare could legally be enslaved. Slave marriages or offspring are virtually absent from medieval Yemeni sources, although they certainly existed, but we cannot assume that the enslaved population simply reproduced itself. Furthermore, neither the Najahids nor the Rasulids were engaged in warfare against non-Muslims whom they could have captured and enslaved. Islamic law also considered the children of enslaved mothers and their owners to be free and encouraged manumission, thereby further decreasing the availability of slaves. As a result, a commercialized slave trade developed, exploiting the fact that no specific legal provisions existed which regulated the commercial acquisition of enslaved persons from abroad.

The sources clearly show that East Africa was the most readily available source of slave labour for medieval Yemen, although enslaved individuals from India and other parts of the world are also occasionally mentioned in the texts. Most information on slave trading activities concerns a route from the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea in the Rasulid period. Administrative documents

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1 Rainer Oßwald, *Das islamische Sklavenrecht. Baden-Baden: Ergon-Verlag, 2017*: 208–9.

2 For example, Miers and Kopytoff have argued that "in the Western conception, the antithesis of 'slavery' is 'freedom', and 'freedom' means autonomy and a lack of social bonds". Conversely, in African societies, "the antithesis of 'slavery' is not 'freedom' qua autonomy but rather 'belonging'" (*Slavery in Africa*, 17). This argument was rejected as culturalist by Frederick Cooper ("The Problem of Slavery in African Studies," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 1 [1979]: 103–25).

attest to the acquisition of enslaved children in the port of Zaylaʿ in today's Somaliland, including prices paid for different categories of slaves, their arrival and sale on the public market of Aden, and their onward overland journey. Taken together, this body of evidence suggests a well-established trading system which created profit for African and Yemeni traders as well as for Yemeni slave owners, chiefly for the Rasulid state which benefitted both by exacting taxes on slave imports and by claiming the most desirable individuals for itself.

What the Yemeni sources do not reveal is at whose expense this profit was made. The exact origins of the African individuals trafficked to Yemen could not be established, since information on medieval slave trading routes in the African hinterland is scarce, and Arab authors commonly labelled enslaved persons with geographically vague ethnonyms. In fact, an exhaustive study of the full extent and impact of slavery in a given regional and historical setting would require the consideration of all actors involved in this system of exploitation: the societies plundered for individuals to be enslaved, those who benefitted from their capture and sale, and slave-holding societies.[3] Such a study would by far exceed the scope of this book and, in the present case, founder on a lack of sources. Nevertheless, the trade of enslaved individuals to Yemen clearly required that vulnerable populations in parts of what is today Ethiopia and adjacent regions were systematically raided and thus depleted of the human resources they had spent years to nurture. The recurrent trauma of raids and abductions of family members must have scarred these societies for generations to come. The absence of information on the exact origins of the enslaved Africans encountered in the sources also means that many basic questions about them cannot be answered. What languages, cultural practices and beliefs did these individuals grow up with?[4] Were they able to preserve their cultural heritage despite the "loss of origins" inflicted upon them through enslavement? It is hoped that the recent surge in research on the history of slavery in Ethiopia will allow for a more comprehensive examination of the slave trading system linking East Africa with Yemen in the future.

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3   As Meillassoux put it, "[t]he anthropological dimension [of slavery] is significant only in the context of the economy and the demography of all the people concerned, both the plundered and the plundering". *Anthropology of Slavery*, 21.

4   A rare piece of evidence in this respect is the 8th/14th-century Arabic–Ethiopic glossary covering several Ethiopian languages, which according to Maria Bulakh is likely based on linguistic information provided by enslaved Ethiopians. This source also suggests that at least some of the informants were Christians ("Al-Malik al-Afḍal's 14th-Century 'Arabic–Ethiopic Glossary' as an Attempt at Language Documentation," ed. Anne Regourd and Nancy Um, *Chroniques du Manuscrit au Yémen* 1 [2017]: 1–30).

Returning to the Yemeni side of the story, the question arises of the impact the influx of enslaved persons had on societal structures there, from the household to systems of political organization. While this book has discussed various categories of slaves – eunuchs, enslaved women and girls, as well as enslaved workers of low rank – separately, in order to highlight the diversity of their lived experiences, the insights gathered in these different chapters will now be integrated into a unified analysis of the phenomenon of slavery and its repercussions on Yemeni society at large.

Slavery's impact at the household level is chiefly attributable to enslaved women and girls who were exploited not only as producers but also as reproducers, performing sexual work and birthing offspring for their owners. The legally sanctioned institution of concubinage created complex family compositions which included free wives and concubines as well as their children, all of whom were free and the legitimate descendants of the household head. Other children were considered enslaved from birth, having been born to two enslaved parents or in illicit unions between enslaved women and men other than their owners. The sources suggest that in the Rasulid era, children of African slave descent were sometimes exposed to societal prejudice. At the same time, we will never know how many elite personalities were of matrilineal slave descent without suffering any negative consequences for their career and status. It appears striking that enslaved women and girls, whose reputation starkly contradicted the ideals of female virtue held at the time, were made instrumental in perpetuating the patriline, a key identity marker and source of honour for Yemeni elites throughout the centuries. The question arises of whether the generation of offspring was an intended aim of concubinage or simply an inevitable side effect of the sexual exploitation of female slaves.[5] The Najahid and Rasulid dynasties pursued different marriage policies which affected the social positions held by their concubines. The Najahids took family members or formerly enslaved women as wives, suggesting that these rulers of Ethiopian slave descent were shunned as marriage partners by local elites. In contrast, the Rasulids married relatives or daughters of the local tribal and scholarly establishment. Hence, while Najahid concubines could hope to be freed and married by their owners, thereby joining the ruling elite, it appears that their Rasulid peers were never elevated to the status of wives.

The role of female slaves as attendants and domestics of elite women is also amply attested, proving that slave labour benefitted not only male but also female owners. The line between enslaved female domestics and concubines

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5 According to Urban, concubines in the early Islamic era were used primarily for sexual pleasure, not for reproduction (*Conquered Populations*, 114). However, if medieval scholars of Islamic law considered concubines to be capable of a certain degree of agency, they must have foreseen that the *umm walad* provisions incentivized concubines to bear their owners children in order to secure their own manumission.

was not neatly drawn, as the occasional "reassignment" of the former to sexual tasks shows. Concubines enjoyed more rights and had better chances of social advancement than other enslaved women and girls, but they had to endure sexual exploitation, usually by a number of successive owners on whom they were fully dependent.

Najahid case studies illustrate that some (ex-)concubines were able to attain positions of remarkable influence and prestige, as exemplified by the life story of 'Alam. She advanced from enslaved singer to queen and was able to shape the political developments of her time, even after the death of her husband and son had stripped her of any direct link to the throne. One key to her success was her reliance on a group of enslaved men whom she had raised from childhood and who later represented her on the political stage. 'Alam thus appropriated for herself a strategy deployed by male rulers, namely the appointment of trusted slaves to key administrative and political tasks.

Enslaved individuals occupied crucial positions in both the Najahid and Rasulid state apparatus. The Najahid dynasty, itself founded by enslaved Ethiopians, placed kin, slaves or former slaves in all positions of influence. The Rasulid political and military leadership consisted of a mix of family members, men from Yemen's established elites, mamluks and eunuchs. While in the Najahid era, eunuchs were primarily assigned to tasks related to women and children, the Rasulids entrusted them with key political and military positions. This extension of eunuchs' responsibilities beyond the female quarters is likely attributable to Ayyubid and/or Mamluk influences. Combining evidence from chronicles, biographical dictionaries and administrative texts has yielded a detailed picture of the roles played by eunuchs at the Rasulid court. The life stories that surfaced follow a common pattern. Young endslave boys were castrated in specialized centres on the African continent and then traded to Yemen, at prices three to five times higher than those paid for uncastrated enslaved boys. Some of them were selected by Rasulid government officials as soon as they set foot on Yemeni soil and handed over to a commanding eunuch who oversaw their education and training. A subset of eunuchs then made stellar careers in the Rasulid military and political administration, reaching the ranks of governors and military commanders. In biographical texts, the professional advancement of these eunuchs is often directly attributed to the decisions of their owner, usually a sultan, revealing a relationship of marked dependence. Rasulid eunuchs also sponsored religious endowments (*awqāf*), attesting to the significant wealth these men accumulated. Since eunuchs had no heirs to bequeath their wealth to, patronage was their only chance of perpetuating their name and memory. Eunuchs were also deployed as administrators in the households of Rasulid noblewomen, who were referred to by their name ("lady

of the eunuch so-and-so"). Contrary to the common assumption that eunuchs controlled elite women on behalf of male relatives, Rasulid evidence shows that women made use of eunuchs in order to carry out their political projects. Eunuchs were also charged with the education of royal offspring, which enabled them to form lasting bonds with future regents.

The prominent roles given to slaves in the Najahid and Rasulid state apparatus brings to mind Ernest Gellner's note that "[t]he exclusive cohesion-engendering power of kinship is in a way confirmed by the fact that in pre-modern times, bureaucracy, which is the antithesis of kinship, is recruited by preference from priests, eunuchs, slaves or foreigners – people deprived in one way or another of real, avowable or socially relevant ancestry or posterity".[6] Yemeni sources amply attest to the fact that both Najahid and Rasulid rulers frequently came under threat by usurping family members and struggled to bring to heel Yemen's notoriously independent tribes. Slaves, meanwhile, could be deployed to any function without any risk of disturbing complex governance structures. Placing enslaved men in sensitive positions allowed these two dynasties to isolate both relatives and tribal elites to a certain extent from the centres of political power. The eunuch institution in particular must be acknowledged as an integral part of the Rasulid system of government. It has also been shown that enslaved individuals sustained the functioning of Rasulid palaces and residences at the lowest level through their work in kitchens and warehouses. These enslaved workers of low rank, some of whom are recorded by name in administrative documents, obtained varying salaries and allowances, pointing to a specialization and hierarchization of tasks. However, due to the sources' strong elite bias, the lives of most enslaved workers relegated to the bottom of the social ladder are forever lost to scholarship.

Finally, we return to the central questions posed in the introduction to this book. What did it mean to be enslaved in medieval Yemen? How could a sultan's enslaved cook and his concubine belong to the same legal category of "slave", given their radically different life trajectories? Does the label "slave" have any explanatory power if it includes men who toiled in stone quarries as well as eunuchs who commanded over armies? Meillassoux's distinction between the *state* of an enslaved person as unfree and their *condition*, which was determined by the roles and positions assigned to them, has proven analytically useful in gaining clarity on these issues. All enslaved individuals shared the legal

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6 Gellner considers this strategy, pursued by the Mamluk and Ottoman empires, to be the antithesis of Ibn Khaldūn's famous model of state formation outlined in the *Muqaddima* (*Muslim Society*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 32 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 77).

status of unfreedom, which meant they were their owner's property and lacked most of the rights awarded to free persons. Although different forms of manumission and the special rights acquired by concubine mothers meant that some enslaved individuals could gain varying degrees of freedom through the course of their lifetime, the line between enslaved and fully free persons was nevertheless clearly drawn. A free worker, however exploited and dependent, could not be sold and had the right to own property and marry at will (within the constraints imposed by societal norms). Furthermore, he could usually count on the support of his paternal and maternal kin and on a network of friends and acquaintances. In contrast, the uprooting suffered by children trafficked to Yemen meant they had no families of origin to rely on. This loss further increased their dependence on their owners, a central theme found in all biographies analysed in the present study. The state of unfreedom thus translated into a real dependence and precariousness shared by all enslaved individuals, irrespective of their condition. The orientalist glamour evoked by sultanic concubines or eunuch amirs in the imaginations of contemporary Western readers should not blind us to the exploitation and extreme dependence experienced by these individuals. At the same time, case studies have shown that enslaved persons made use of the opportunities inherent in their assigned condition to advance their own interests. The strategies deployed were not open rebellion or flight but a careful weighing of options (which were few) and a cautious navigation of complex circumstances and relationships to achieve incremental change. Enslaved individuals may have suffered "social death" by being torn from their society of origin, but they did not remain in that state. Their utility to their owners and their own struggles to forge meaningful lives depended on their rebirth as social persons, however marginalized, in Yemen.

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