

Serena Tolino

# Naming Eunuchs in Islamicate Societies

## 1 Introduction

Over the last years, research on slavery has undergone a rapid revival, also within the field of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, and an impressive number of publications on the topic have appeared.<sup>1</sup> This scholarship, despite different theoretical and disciplinary approaches, seems to agree on at least two points: the first is that slavery (including Islamic slavery) should be situated in a continuum of different forms of dependency that encompasses different forms and degrees of coerced labour. This is also true when looking at slavery in Islamicate societies.<sup>2</sup> Even though slavery is a legal institution on its own, Islamic Law did not provide a clear-cut definition of it. As Kurt Franz has shown, in the history of Islamicate societies, some forms of slavery departed from the legal norms so much that it has been questioned ‘whether it is at all helpful’ to address them ‘by reference to the term “slavery”’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Ehud Toledano put it more than 25 years ago, ‘it is quite obvious that what we are dealing with here is a continuum of various degrees

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1 Just to mention some of the publications on slavery in the Middle East over the last five years: Bernard K. Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand. The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Mary Ann Fay, ed., *Slavery in the Islamic World. Its Characteristics and Commonality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (Oxford: One-world Publications, 2019); Almut Höfert, Matthew M. Mesley and Serena Tolino, eds., *Celibate and Childless Men in Power. Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2018).

2 With this term I refer to what historian Marshall G.S. Hogdson defined as ‘the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims’, in contrast to ‘Islamic’, which is instead used to refer to what has to do specifically with Islam as a religion. Marshall G.S. Hogdson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 59.

3 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 Christoph Cluse (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017): 125.

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**Note:** For the transliteration of words from Arabic I used the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* in this article. Research for the present article has mostly been carried out during my fellowship at the Heinz Heinen Center for Advanced Study (Summer Semester 2020) and builds upon previous research on eunuchs I carried out as project member of the project “Hermaphrodites, Eunuchs and Priests: Gender Ambiguities and Masculinities in the Arab and Latin Middle Ages”, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (2011–2018, P.I. Almut Höfert).

of servitude rather than a dichotomy between the slave and the freeborn':<sup>4</sup> such a dichotomy would not only be un-productive, but would not allow us to see other forms of dependency, which go beyond the category of slavery and which would go unnoticed if we only consider a rigid slavery/freedom binary.

The second point is that, to counter Western-centric narratives on slavery and dependency, it is necessary to generate empirically-based research that focuses on a number of different social and historical contexts. Indeed, as Stefan Hanß and Juliane Schiel stated in 2014,<sup>5</sup> even though a 'working' definition of slavery as an institution that gives some people more or less absolute power over other people who are understood as commodities is necessary to start any investigation on slavery, this is certainly not enough and does not provide fresh insights into the specific practices and meanings this concept has in different geographical and social contexts. Such a broad definition makes it complicated to obtain new insights into the specific practices and meanings this concept had for social practices. If slavery is a context-specific social relationship, then it is important to look at how slaves are addressed and described by the sources or, as noted by Hanß and Schiel, at the semantics of slavery, which are particularly relevant because 'the semantics used to describe and represent this relationship express complex lifeworlds and a variety of practices'.<sup>6</sup>

In a programmatic article recently published, historians Christian De Vito, Juliane Schiel and Matthias van Rossum suggested that one of the main historiographical trends that has not only the potential to change research on slavery, but to revolutionise the entire traditional framework of labour history and the master narrative that connects slavery to pre-modern societies and free labour to the modern period is Historical Semantics. As pointed out by De Vito, Schiel and Van Rossum:

Instead of operating with the analytical categories, conceptual dichotomies, and social taxonomies of post-1789 European experiences and discourses to describe bondage and coercion in labor relations, this strategy takes inventory of the words, expressions, and verb phrases people used in a specific time, place, and situation to articulate social domination and dependence in contexts of work. Rather than trying to fit social realities into the abstract terminology of Western humanities by translating concrete situations of word usage as slave-ry, serf-dom, serv-itude, or freedom, this approach focuses on those parts of speech (like verbs) that create and express social relations.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Ehud Toledano, "Late Ottoman Concepts of Slavery (1830s–1880s)," *Poetics Today* 14, no. 3 (1993): 483 [Issue: *Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Modern Period I*, ed. Israel Gershoni and Ehud Toledano].

5 Juliane Schiel and Stefan Hanß, "Semantics, Practices and Transcultural Perspectives on Mediterranean Slavery," in *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800): Neue Perspektiven auf mediterrane Sklaverei (500–1800)*, ed. Stefan Hanß and Juliane Schiel (Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2014): 11–23.

6 *Ibid.*: 15.

7 Christian De Vito, Juliane Schiel and Matthias Van Rossum, "From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History," *Journal of Social History* 54, no. 2 (2020): 8–9.

The variety of words used in Islamicate societies to define different aspects of slavery and dependency in both the pre-modern and the modern period is impressive and largely unexplored. This means that we are also unable to make sense on the one hand of the relevant terminology in different parts of the Islamicate world, and on the other of the ruptures and continuities in declining different forms of slavery over different historical periods.

In order to contribute to this discussion, this article focuses on the case of eunuchs in Islamicate societies, to show how such an approach can help us to better conceptualise the social history of slavery in such societies. This paper is part of ongoing research into terminology on slavery in Islamicate societies. In this sense, these findings are only initial and should not be taken as conclusive.

Looking at the variety of words and concepts used to refer to slaves enables us to draw a much more nuanced picture of the slave. Indeed, sources did not always use the same words to refer to slaves: different documents used different terms in relation to different typologies of slaves, but also to define the same typology of slaves. For example, a eunuch was addressed with the general word servant (*khādim*) in chronicles, but was defined according to the grade of castration in discussions on divorce and marriage in books of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). While in chronicles the main focus was on his function as a servant, in legal discussions it was more relevant whether only his testicles had been cut (*khaṣī*) or also his penis (*majbūb/mamsū*): belonging to one or the other category would give the eunuch more or less rights to marry, to perform certain kinds of divorce and to have his paternity recognised. These terms are, first of all, specific legal terms: but far from being only legal terms, they constitute an integral part of the legal discussion, as they set legal consequences in motion that are relevant to the self-image as well as to the image that the society has of the eunuch.

To reconstruct how eunuchs were named in pre-modern Arabic-speaking Islamicate societies and what this can tell us about their functions, I will look here at three kinds of sources: lexica, manuals of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and chronicles. With the exception of the lexica, which are partially later sources, the main focus will be on the period from the ninth to the twelfth centuries.

With regards to chronicles, I will focus here on the Fatimid Empire (296/909–566/1171), the first shiʿī Ismāʿīlī dynasty that was able to rise from secrecy to power and create an empire. The Fatimid Empire, originally based in Tunisia, included at its peak the Maghreb, Egypt, Sudan, Sicily, the Levant and Ḥijāz, leaving a remarkable impact in particular on Tunisian and Egyptian history, culture and architecture. Egypt fell under the Fatimid general Jawhar in 358/969. The fourth imam-caliph al-Muʿizz (d. 365/975) ordered then to build a new capital, al-Qāhira al-Muʿizziyya, the Victorious of al-Muʿizz, nowadays known simply as Cairo, where the imperial family and the entire Fatimid Court moved in 362/973. The scientific developments of medicine, mathematics, astronomy and astrology started to flourish, and Cairo became an imperial city. It underwent rapid growth and an incredible expansion, quickly becoming one of the most important cities of the Islamicate world and the centre of an impressive trade network connecting

Egypt to Southern Europe through Alexandria and Damietta, and to South Arabia and India via the Red Sea. However, starting around 1060, the Fatimid Empire underwent a major crisis. As a consequence of a serious famine, a civil war between different army factions started that was settled only thanks to the intervention of the general al-Badr al-Jamālī (d. 487/1094),<sup>8</sup> who was appointed as vizier. This marked the beginning of the last phase of the caliphate, wherein the real powerholders of the empire were the military viziers and not the imam-caliphs. The last of these military-viziers was Saladdin, who established soon a new dynasty, the Ayyubid one, bringing Egypt back to the sunnī world in 566/1171.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at different types of sources will allow us to better situate eunuchs within Islamicate societies. We know that most of the written sources we have at our disposal for this period allow us to reconstruct the vision of only one specific layer of society (namely the well-educated urban cosmopolitan elite), basically from the masculine perspective: these sources were often written by male authors of the elite for a male public of the elite. This does not mean that women did not compose works, but that most of them were excluded from the process of text-canonisation and are not extant today. As a consequence, when doing research with sources from this period that were passed down to us, we must understand that they have been preserved on the basis of exclusionary mechanisms, and that any research for which they are the basis will offer an incomplete picture. This becomes even truer if we focus on one single kind of source. Despite an effort to look at a more diverse set of genres, this article should be in no way understood as a comprehensive overview of the terms used to refer to eunuchs in Arabic sources: it should be considered a first mapping of some of these terms, but a more extensive study of these sources would be necessary to reach a complete picture.

## 2 Eunuchs in Islamicate Societies: Preliminary Remarks

When discussing eunuchs in Islamicate societies it is always important to remember that castration is not only prohibited in Islamic Law, but also subject to the law of retaliation. Jurists considered it a change in the creation of God, something that they understood as being completely forbidden by the Qur'an.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 205–6; Heinz Halm, *Die Kalifen von Kairo. Die Fatimiden in Ägypten 973–1074* (Munich: Beck, 2003): 419–20. <sup>9</sup> Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire*: 289–95; Heinz Halm, *Kalifen und Assassinen. Ägypten und der Vordere Orient zur Zeit der ersten Kreuzzüge 1074–1171* (Munich: Beck, 2014): 282–94.

<sup>10</sup> This is explicitly forbidden by verse 30: 30 of the Qur'an, which states: 'So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fiṭrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people

Still, this does not mean that eunuchs did not exist in the Islamicate world. On the contrary, we know that since the third/ninth century eunuchs emerged as ‘a major political and social presence in Islamic Courts’,<sup>11</sup> after a period in which their presence had been much more marginal: it was in particular during the Abbasid Empire, indeed, that they became ‘an important presence in Islamic political life’, something that the historian Hugh Kennedy explained with two main reasons: one factor was ‘the gradual restriction of female members of the ruling dynasty to the caliphal palace’.<sup>12</sup> While in the first half of the Abbasid Empire the powerful female members of the dynasty had their own palaces and households on the Tigris, by the third/ninth century they had mostly moved to the central *Dār al-Khilāfa*. The second factor was the radical change in the design of imperial palaces, which became much larger and now included a vast number of chambers and gardens. These palaces, unlike the Umayyad palaces, constituted practically small towns and had segregated areas for women, forbidden to male visitors. The separation between segregated and non-segregated spaces was ensured by gatekeepers: these were almost exclusively eunuchs. This gave them an immense power.<sup>13</sup>

In the Fatimid Empire, the shī‘ī counter-caliphate of the Abbasids, things were no different. The presence of eunuchs was so impressive that the historiographer al-Maqrīzī, referring to the Fatimid palace, wrote: ‘When Saladin took possession of it (the Fatimid palace) and ousted whoever was there, the number of its dwellers was 12.000, none of them was a non-eunuch, with the exception of the Caliph, his kinfolk and his children.’<sup>14</sup> Even though this number is clearly an exaggeration, it still gives an idea of how imposing the presence of eunuchs must have been. This number seems at first sight also incompatible with the prohibition of castration that Muslim jurists considered to be based on the Qur’an. However, we must remember that usually castration happened outside the Islamic empire, where *sharī‘a* did not apply at

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do not know’, but also in verse 4:119, which states ‘and I will lead them astray and I will tempt them with false hopes and give them my order so they shall slit the ears of cattle and I will give them my order so they shall alter the creation of Allah. And whoever takes the Satan as friend instead of Allah has incurred an obvious loss.’ Translation Saheeh International. The mālikī Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) for example wrote that according to ibn ‘Umar and Anas b. Mālik this refers to castration, while according to Ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Ikrima and Abū Ṣāliḥ this refers to tattoos. According to others, this refers to changing God’s religion. See Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhkar*, vol. 8, ed. Sālim Muḥammad ‘Aṭā and Muḥammad ‘Alī Mu‘awwaḍ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2000): 432.

11 Hugh Kennedy, ‘Mu’nis al-Muẓaffar. An Exceptional Eunuch,’ in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power. Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Almut Höfert, Matthew M. Mesley and Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2018): 79.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā‘iz wa-l-‘tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-Āthar*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Bulaq, 1854): 497, quoted by David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999): 21.

all, or towards its borders, where structures were much more fluid and the government had a weaker grip in comparison to the centre of the empire. Moreover, it is reported by some sources that even the Prophet Muḥammad himself accepted a eunuch as a gift:<sup>15</sup> certainly this contributed to making it easier for jurists to see no contradiction in forbidding castration and still allowing the possession of castrated slaves. All in all, the buyer of a castrated slave was not seen as responsible for his castration, which had happened before the purchase. As a consequence, very few jurists opposed the presence of eunuchs in Islamicate societies, maintaining that, in order to avoid this mutilation, it was a duty of a Muslim to refrain from buying eunuchs, or at least to limit their number to one per master.<sup>16</sup>

Most eunuchs were technically, from the perspective of Muslim jurists, slaves, and therefore property of their masters, unless manumitted. Still, this does not mean that they could not reach important positions. On the contrary, eunuchs were established in the most important fields of the political and administrative spheres, both at the Court and outside the Court. They could act as commanders, administrators and admirals. Moreover, they had prominent positions in the police and in the *hisba*,<sup>17</sup> or as provincial governors. Finally, they are also well-known as harem guardians,<sup>18</sup> an important function that allowed them to move freely between the masculine and the feminine worlds and to become close to the women (and the children) who populated the harem. Far from being an irrelevant position, being a gatekeeper to the harem was central: indeed, as has been already demonstrated, the harem was a very important centre of power in Islamicate Courts,<sup>19</sup> and being well connected to the women

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15 According to the sources, the eunuch, whose name was Mābūr, was offered to him together with the slave Māriya al-Qibṭiya, Maria the Copt, her sister and other gifts by al-Muqawqis, usually identified with the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria. Muḥammad b. Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, vol. 10 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānījī, 2001): 201. See also 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*, ed. Almut Höfert, Matthew M. Mesley and Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2018): 252.

16 Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, *Kitāb al-Ḥujja 'alā Ahl al-Madīna* (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1980): 474.

17 The supervision of moral behavior, especially in the market, whose responsible is called *muhtasib*. See Kirsten Stilt, *Islamic Law in Action: Authority, Discretion, and Everyday Experiences in Mamluk Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 41.

18 The word refers to those parts of a house to which access is forbidden, usually reserved for women.

19 The literature on the topic is really extensive. See for example Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Caliphal Harems, Household Harems: Baghdad in the Fourth Century of the Islamic Era," in *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, ed. Marilyn Booth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 87–103; Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ayse Saraçgil, *Il maschio camaleonte: strutture patriarcali nell'Impero ottomano e nella Turchia moderna* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

who populated it would have had a number of advantages.<sup>20</sup> Besides, eunuchs often also acted as teachers and guardians to the caliph's children: this meant that they were particularly close to the potential successor of the imam-caliph. It is not surprising that for them it was crucial to secure their pupil's accession to the throne, and we can only imagine what this meant in terms of loyalty to him and by extension to his mother.

If we stick to a dichotomy of slavery/freedom, we certainly fail to properly situate their relevance. However, it is clear that, regardless of their power, they were still in a dependent position in relation to their master. Here the concept of asymmetrical dependency, namely the 'ability of one actor to control the actions and the access to resources of another', as introduced by the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, seems particularly useful.<sup>21</sup> The relation of dependency between master and eunuch was especially strong and multifaceted. It also included a feeling of trust and loyalty that was stronger than in cases of non-castrated servants: probably this has much to do with the eunuchs' status as castrated slaves; not only had they been eradicated from their family of origin, as most slaves, but, because of castration, they could not even create a new family, as non-castrated slaves could.<sup>22</sup> The eradication, combined with their lack of opportunity to build a new family, probably partially explained why they were perceived as so loyal. That is, they had nothing but their master, and the advantages their proximity to him could guarantee them made the eunuchs, to use Kathryn Ringrose's expression for Byzantine eunuchs, 'perfect servants'.<sup>23</sup> This dependency was still asymmetrical. Indeed, no matter how powerful eunuchs may have become, if they lost favour with their master, they would lose all the privileges they had obtained or, in the worst cases, even be killed, as the case of the eunuch Barjawān demonstrates: he was guardian and then regent of the Fatimid imam-caliph al-Ḥākim (d. 411/1021), who ascended to the throne when he was only

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20 See on that for example Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Guarding the Harem, Protecting the State: Eunuchs in a Fourth/Tenth-century Abbasid Court," in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power: Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Almut Höfert, Matthew M. Mesley and Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2018): 65–78.

21 Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler and Stephan Conermann, "On Asymmetrical Dependency," *Concept Paper 1*, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (2021): 2, [https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/concept-papers/bcdss\\_cp\\_1\\_on-asymmetrical-dependency.pdf](https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/concept-papers/bcdss_cp_1_on-asymmetrical-dependency.pdf) [accessed 31.10.2022].

22 This is different from eunuchs in China, for example, as the latter had the possibility to adopt, something that was prohibited by *sharī'a*. On eunuchs in China adopting, see, for example, Michael Hoeckelmann, "Celibate, But Not Childless. Eunuch Military Dynasticism in Medieval China," in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power: Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Almut Höfert, Matthew M. Mesley and Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2018): 118.

23 Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).



eleven. For four years Barjawān practically controlled him and the reign's affairs, till al-Ḥākīm decided he was becoming too powerful and had him killed.<sup>24</sup>

### 3 Defining Eunuchs in Lexicographic Sources

I focus here on three lexica, namely the tenth-century lexicon *Tāj al-Lughā wa-Ṣiḥāḥ al-'Arabīyya* by al-Jawharī<sup>25</sup> (d. c. 393–400/1002–1003 to 1009–1010); the thirteenth-century lexicon *Lisān al-'Arab*<sup>26</sup> (the tongue of the Arabs), by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312), the most well-known and comprehensive dictionary of classical Arabic language; and the fourteenth-century lexicon *Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, by al-Firūzābādī (d. 817/1415).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, I also look at the legal lexicon of the mālikī jurist Ibn 'Arafa (d. 803/1401).

What makes Arabic lexicographic sources so interesting is that they work by accumulation: therefore, these works do not only show us how a given lexicographer understood a given concept in a specific historical moment but also what former lexicographers said on that concept up to the moment the lexicon was compiled. For example, the *Lisān al-'Arab*, a thirteenth-century source, is based on five earlier works ranging from the tenth to the late twelfth centuries.<sup>28</sup> This means that, even though the *Lisān al-'Arab* itself is a source from the thirteenth century, it allows us to obtain a glimpse of sources going back to the end of the tenth century. In this way, we get an overview of what a given concept meant in former periods but also in a larger number of sources than only those consulted, allowing us to obtain a much broader picture.

For the purpose of this article, I decided to look at the Arabic roots<sup>29</sup> *kh-ṣ-ī*, *j-b-b* und *m-s-h*, which I knew from legal sources as being the most frequently used ones to

<sup>24</sup> This happened with the support of another eunuch, the bringer of his parasol, Raydān. On his killing, see in particular Halm, *Die Kalifen von Kairo*: 178–80. See also Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire*: 129.

<sup>25</sup> Abū Naṣr Ismā'īl b. Ḥamād al-Jawharī, *al-Ṣiḥāḥ. Tāj al-Lughā wa-Ṣiḥāḥ al-'Arabīyya*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Tāmir, Anas Muḥammad Shāmī and Zakariyyā Jābir Aḥmad (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> Majd al-Dīn al-Firūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, ed. Muḥammad Na'im al-Arqūṣī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Namely, al-Azharī's (d. 370/980–981) *Tahdhīb al-Lughā*, Ibn Sida's (d. 458/1066) *al-Muḥkam*, al-Jawharī's (d. c. 400/1010) *al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, Ibn Barrī's (d. 582/1186–1187) *al-Hawāshī* and Majd al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr's (d. 606/1210) *al-Nihāya fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Athar*. See Ramzi Baalbaki, "Ibn Manẓūr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Words in Arabic are mostly derived by a sequence of consonantal letters called 'roots'. In Semitic languages these roots usually consist of three consonants, but they can also consist of two or four. Nouns, adjectives and verbs are formed from these consonantal skeletons with different strategies, such as inserting vowels, inserting long vowels, doubling consonants or adding prefixes, infixes or suffixes.



refer to castrated men. In particular in *fiqh*-works there are two terms that are mentioned when referring to eunuchs, namely *khaṣī* and *majbūb*. The first term refers to the man whose testicles have been cut, while the second refers to the man whose penis has also been cut. This second category of castrated men probably represented the majority of eunuchs in Islamicate societies. In lexicographic sources the difference is less clear. For example, al-Jawharī defines the term *khaṣā*, the verb connected to *khaṣī*, as ‘to take out the two testicles’, and says that ‘a *majbūb* is a *khaṣī* if the cut is clear’ (which could also mean total).<sup>30</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, however, clearly distinguishes between the two terms, stating that *khaṣī* refers to a man whose testicles have been cut. The term comes from the same root as the Arabic term for testicle (*khuṣya*).

When looking at the root *j-b-b*, Ibn Manẓūr gives the meaning ‘to cut’, but also ‘to uproot’.<sup>31</sup> He defines the *majbūb* as ‘the *khaṣī* to which both his penis and his testicles have been eradicated’. Al-Fīrūzābādī, writing almost a century later, defines the *khaṣī* as the one that suffered from castration, or whose testicles have been removed.<sup>32</sup> He states also the same regarding the term *majbūb*, defining the verb ‘*jabba*’ as the ‘cut’, or the extraction of the testicles.<sup>33</sup> So, it seems that al-Fīrūzābādī is less clear in distinguishing between a *khaṣī* and a *majbūb*.

More specific works, like the book of legal definitions of Ibn ‘Arafa, distinguish more clearly between the two terms, defining *khaṣī* as the one whose testicles have been cut and *majbūb* as the one to whom ‘everything has been cut’.<sup>34</sup> This shows how the intended audience of the work clearly impacted how the terms were understood and explained: focusing on legal definitions, the distinction between *khaṣī* and *majbūb* was much more central for Ibn ‘Arafa than it was for other lexicographers.

A rarer term, which I mostly identified in legal sources, but that Ibn Manẓūr also mentions, is *mamsūh*, literally ‘cancelled’, which is used as a synonym of *majbūb* (‘a *khaṣī* is a *mamsūh* if his penis is also cut’, which indeed seems to be the same as *majbūb*).<sup>35</sup>

30 al-Jawharī, *al-Ṣiḥāh*: s.v. “*kh-ṣ-r*”.

31 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*: s.v. “*kh-ṣ-r*”.

32 al-Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*: s.v. “*kh-ṣ-r*”.

33 Ibid.: s.v. “*j-b-b*”.

34 Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Raṣṣā’, *Sharḥ Ḥudūd Ibn ‘Arafah al-Mawsūm al-Hidāya al-Kāfiyya al-Shāfi‘iyya*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Ajfan and Ṭāhir al-Ma‘mūrī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993): 253.

35 Ibid.: s.v. “*j-b-b*”.

## 4 Defining Eunuchs in *fiqh*-Sources

When looking at *fiqh* manuals, it is much clearer that jurists use *khaṣī* to refer to a man whose testicles only were cut off, and *majbūb* or *mamsūh* for a man whose penis was also cut off. This is not too surprising; indeed, for jurists, it was very important to be absolutely precise on this difference, as it set a series of legal consequences in motion. For example, the great majority of jurists agreed that if a woman was informed about the castration of her husband (either a *khaṣī* or a *majbūb*) and if she accepted it, then the marriage was valid.<sup>36</sup> However, if the wife complained that the husband was not able to sexually satisfy her, then, as in the case of an impotent man, the eunuch had the right to one more year (*ajal*) to sexually penetrate her; otherwise, the marriage was considered void. What is interesting is that according to jurists, this *ajal* could be given only to a *khaṣī*, not to a *majbūb*, because in that case the jurists thought that there was no possibility for the husband to penetrate his wife.<sup>37</sup>

This difference is also important for a wife who applies to a judge for the annulment of the marriage: in case she was not informed that he had been castrated, and she declared that she has not been penetrated by him and he was a *majbūb*, then the marriage could have been immediately annulled without any delay.<sup>38</sup> The difference is also central in a specific kind of divorce initiated by the man, the so-called *ilā'*. In this kind of divorce, the husband takes an oath that he will not have any sexual intercourse with his wife. If sexual intercourse did not resume after four months, then the marriage was automatically dissolved. However, while for the *khaṣī* it was necessary to wait four months before the marriage was dissolved, most jurists believed there was no need for that for the *majbūb*, as they did not consider him able to have intercourse anyway.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See for example Muḥammad b. Idris al-Shāfi'ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, vol. 5, ed. Rifat Fawzy 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib al-Mansūr (Cairo: Dār al-Wafā' li-l-ṭibā' wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī', 2001): 557.

<sup>37</sup> For example, in the ḥanafī *mukhtaṣar* of al-Qudūrī (d. 428/1037) it is mentioned that 'if the husband is impotent, then the judge grants him an *ajal*, and if after that he manages to penetrate her, she does not have the possibility to choose the dissolution of the marriage, otherwise they are separated (if she wants so), and she is entitled to the full *mahr* if he was alone with her. And if he is a *majbūb*, then the judge separates them immediately and there is no need for *ajal*. If he is a *khaṣī* then he has the *ajal* like the impotent man'. Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ğafar al-Qudūrī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Qudūrī fī al-Fiqh al-Ḥanafī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997): 150. Al-Sarakhsī is even more explicit and says that 'if she (the wife) finds that her husband is *majbūb*, then the judge gives her the opportunity to choose, because in the case of the impotent the *ajal* is in the hope that he can penetrate her, which is missing in the case of the *majbūb*, in which the "instrument" has been cut'. al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūṭ*, vol. 5 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'arif, 1999): 103. For an overview of these legal debates see Serena Tolino, "Eunuchs in the Sunni Legal Discourse: Reflections on the Gender of Castrated Men," *Studi Magrebini* 20, no. 2 (2022): 117–36.

<sup>38</sup> See for example al-Muzanī, *Mukhtaṣar al-Muzanī fī Furū' al-Shāfi'iyya*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Shāhīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998): 238.

<sup>39</sup> See for example *ibid.*: 267; al-Ghāzālī, *al-Wasīṭ fī al-Madhhab*, vol. 6, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Tāmīr (Cairo: Dār al-Salām li-l-ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1997): 29; al-Kāsānī, *Badā'i' al-Ṣanā'i' fī Tartīb al-Sharā'i'*, vol. 4, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Bayḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997): 275.

These examples make clear that for Muslim jurists the difference between a *khaṣī* and a *majbūb* was not only a terminological one, but also a legal one, with a number of clear consequences.

## 5 ‘Real’ Eunuchs: What About Chronicles?

The terms *khaṣī* or *majbūb* are often understood almost as antonyms of the two terms *rajul* and *fahl*, which refer instead to an uncastrated man.<sup>40</sup> These terms, as Hans-Peter Pökel pointed out, refer only to the physical state of castration and do not offer any indication regarding the social status of the castrated person. While these terms are very specific and are often used as such in legal sources, as noted already by the historian David Ayalon, chronicles are less consistent, and the term *khaṣī* is used even when the context would bring us to believe that the author refers to a completely castrated man.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, a number of other terms are used as well. Referring in particular to Mamluk sources, David Ayalon argued that we find three main terms used to identify eunuchs in chronicles, namely *khādīm* (servant), *khaṣī* and *ṭawāshī*.<sup>42</sup> In particular the term *khādīm* has been subject to a number of discussions. Indeed, literally meaning ‘servant’, it is, according to David Ayalon, used only to refer to eunuchs, though other scholars have objected to this opinion.<sup>43</sup> In any case, what is striking is that, when looking at chronicles, it is extremely difficult to be absolutely sure if a given person was castrated or not. Regarding the sources I looked at for the Fatimid period, the terms *khādīm* and *khaṣī* are the most widely used general terms that refer to castrated men, while *ṭawāshī* is not yet in use. Indeed, as the historiographer al-Maqrīzī noted, this is a term of Turkish origin introduced by the Mamluks and was not used during the Fatimid period.<sup>44</sup>

Other terms that Ayalon mentions, and that I also identified in sources on the Fatimid Empire much more often than *khaṣī*, are *ustādh*, *mu’allim* (lit. teacher), *shaykh* (an honorific title originally related to age, but also used simply as a form of respect), with the first being the most frequent. These three terms seem to refer mostly to the teaching function that eunuchs had. Also the term *ḥurāmī*, which is connected with

40 Hans-Peter Pökel, *Der unmännliche Mann: Zur Figuration des Eunuchen im Werk von al-Ġāhiz (gest. 869)* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2014): 72.

41 David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*: 309, quoted in Pökel, *Der unmännliche Mann*: 105.

42 David Ayalon, “On the Eunuchs in Islam,” in *Outsiders in the Lands of Islam: Mamluks, Mongols and Eunuchs* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988): 91.

43 David Ayalon, “On the Term ‘Khādīm’ in the Sense of ‘Eunuch’ in the Early Muslim Sources,” *Arabica* 32, no. 3 (1985): 289–308; Abdallah Cheikh Moussa, “De la synonymie dans les sources arabes anciennes. Le cas de ‘Hadim’ et de ‘Hasiyy’,” *Arabica* 32, no. 3 (1985): 309–22.

44 See David Ayalon, “The Eunuchs in the Mamluk Sultanate,” in *The Mamlūk Military Society* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979): 268. See also Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*: 265.

the harem, is used, albeit less often, while I could not yet find recurrences of the term *fatā*, even though these may well be possible, as the term was mostly used in the Muslim West, meaning al-Andalus but also the Maghreb. It seems that these terms were primarily used as honorific titles for eunuchs connected to the caliphal household or other important households. Still, I could not yet identify a specific rank between them, and more research would be needed to find conclusive results. A more specific term is described by al-Qalqashandī<sup>45</sup> (d. 821/1418) when he refers to eunuchs of the Fatimid Empire. Author of one of the most important works of Arabic administrative literature, he was a later author and cannot be defined as a ‘Fatimid author’. However, his main source for the Fatimid period was a lost chronicle of Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, a high-ranking official of the later Fatimids and early Ayyubids. Therefore, his main source for the period was a member of the Fatimid administration.

According to al-Qalqashandī, there was a special group of men who had a particular prominence within the dynasty, the so-called ‘*muḥannakūn*’ eunuchs. Al-Qalqashandī mentioned that the term refers to ‘those who wrap their head turban to cover their mouths as the Bedouins and the Maghrebines do now. They are the closest to the caliph and his favorite and they are more than one thousand’.<sup>46</sup> Al-Qalqashandī states also that there were nine functions which were strictly reserved to *muḥannakūn* eunuchs: the *shadd al-tāj*, the winder of the crown, who was responsible for wrapping the crown of the caliph in a specific way that no one except for him knew; the *ṣāhib al-majlis*, who had the function of a chamberlain; the *ṣāhib al-risāla*, who was responsible for delivering the caliph’s messages; the *zimām al-quṣūr*, the majordomo; the *ṣāhib bayt al-māl*, the director of the treasury; the *ṣāhib al-daftar*, who was in charge of writing down what happened during the audiences of the caliph; the *ṣāhib al-dawāh*, in charge of the inkwell, an imperial insignia; the *zamm al-aqārib*, in charge of the caliphal family, and the *zamm al-rijāl*, in charge of the caliphal food and banquets.<sup>47</sup> Chronicles do not tell us anything about what kind of castration the *muḥannakūn* had undergone and whether there was any relation between that and their function. What seems clear, however, is that, within the Fatimid Court, and especially in the late phase of the dynasty, the *muḥannakūn* were certainly eunuchs with a higher standing. At the same time, this higher position was strictly related to their closeness to the imam-caliph, which, we should mention, also meant in a wider sense a closeness with ‘sacredness’. Indeed, the imam-caliph had a special importance for the Fatimids, as he had not only a political function,

45 He was a legal scholar and secretary in the Mamluk chancery. He composed several works, which can be classified as books of law, *adab* and *kitāba*, chancery. His work *Subḥ al-A’shā fī Ṣinā’at al-Inshā’* is considered the most important secretarial manual of the Mamluk period and the entire Arabic chancery. See C.E. Bosworth, “al-Qalqashandī,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam Online*, 2nd ed., [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_3832](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3832).

46 al-Qalqashandī, *Subḥ al-A’shā fī Ṣinā’at al-Inshā’*, vol. 3 (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1922): 481.

47 Ibid.: 485–86. See also Heinz Halm, *Kalifen und Assassinen: 147–52*; Serena Tolino, “Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire”: 259.

but also a strictly religious one as successor of the Prophet, and as possessor of the *baraka*, literally the ‘blessing’, or the charisma, as translated by historians Shaun Marmon and Heinz Halm,<sup>48</sup> a term referring to a force coming from God and directly transmitted to the Prophet Muḥammad, his family, the *ahl al-bayt*, and their successors, as the imam-caliphs were believed to be.

Notwithstanding these different terms and the fact that most eunuchs in Islamicate societies were slaves, it is remarkable that none of the terms found in chronicles on the Fatimid Empire directly refer to them as being slaves, with the exception of *khādim*, which is connected more to the function of ‘service’ than to the notion of being ‘possessed’ by someone else. More technical legal terms for slaves, for example the terms *‘abd* or *milk al-yamīn* (literally what your right hand possesses, referring to slaves) are not mentioned explicitly: probably the eunuchs’ status as slaves was less relevant to those eunuchs who made it into an imperial chronicle and who, as such, must have had power that helped them rise in comparison to ‘common’ slaves.

## 6 Conclusions

At this stage of the research, it is too early to draw conclusions on the basis of the terms that I looked at for this article. However, what is already clear is that while chroniclers usually use terms that specifically refer to the function a eunuch had in a given household as well as his rank, legal sources focus on the kind of castration the eunuch had undergone. This is due to the fact that different kinds of castration had different legal consequences, which were relevant for the jurists, but much less for the chroniclers, who were more interested in what kind of function a person had within the court. Further research is needed in order to understand what the different terms referring to eunuchs in Islamicate societies could tell us. It would be necessary for example to look systematically at more lexica, more legal sources and more chronicles in a diachronic perspective to see whether any pattern could be identified on how the specific meaning of each term may have evolved over time. At the same time, it would be interesting to see if there is any geographical aspect that should be considered; for example, maybe different meanings in terms like *khaṣī* and *majbūb* could be explained by the different geographical provenance of the authors. All in all, looking at the specific terms used in Arabic to identify, in this case, eunuchs, but in general also other kinds of slaves, can help us to reconstruct a more nuanced picture of how slavery was constructed in Islamicate societies and contribute to the discussion of how different forms of dependency took shape in different historical and geographical contexts.

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48 Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Societies* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 13; Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi. The Rise of the Fatimids*, trans. Michael Bonner (Leiden: Brill, 1996): 156.

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