

On the “Guile” of Slaves: Thirteen Recommendations of Samaw’al b. Yahyā al-Maghribī (d. 570/1175) on the Purchase of Male and Female Slaves

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Introduction

There is a large corpus of premodern Arabic literature dealing with sexual matters, from a variety of perspectives.^[1] The *Nuzhat al-aṣḥāb fī mu’āsharat al-aḥbāb* (A Friends’ Jaunt in Coitus Between Lovers, hereafter *Nuzhat*) of Samaw’al b. Yahyā al-Maghribī is an interesting example of such a text. The author, a well-known physician of the 6th/12th century, discusses eroticism with particular attention to its medical aspects.

The first part of the text deals extensively with *ghilmān* (young boys) and *jawārī* (maidens). Both terms were sometimes used in premodern literature to denote enslaved boys and girls,^[2] which is true of the present text. The term *jāriya*, the singular form of *jawārī*, is also used to indicate enslaved women generally, regardless of age. The chapter of the book translated below presents a numbered list of thirteen recommendations (*waṣāyā*) on how to purchase suitable *ghilmān* and *jawārī*. The text is evidently addressed to an elite male audience. As a work that discusses sexual matters, moreover, suggestions on how to inspect the bodies of enslaved maidens and young boys during purchase are far from innocent. It is clear that the author discusses their purchase with an eye toward their use for sexual purposes.

This post emphasises the agency of enslaved people, rather than dwelling on the horrors of sexual slavery. I decided to focus on those parts in which the author warns against the “guile” of maidens and young boys, which demonstrates that these people did not always accept their lot resignedly.

On the Author

Abū Naṣr Samaw’al b. Yahyā al-Maghribī was a physician and mathematician. His father was a rabbi and a poet of Moroccan origin who migrated to Baghdad. He married an educated woman, Hanna, stemming from a prominent family of Jewish scholars in Basra. Samaw’al was born in Baghdad in 518/1125 and received a classical Jewish education until the age of thirteen. Because of his precocious intellect, his father decided to remove him from religious schooling and make him study mathematics and medicine.^[3] He embraced Islam in 558/1163, a conversion recounted in his famous anti-Jewish polemic, *Badhl al-majhūd fī ifhām al-Yahūd* (The Exertion of Effort in Silencing the Jews), edited and translated into English by Moshe Perlmann, and subsequently re-edited (based on the earliest of two versions the author wrote) by Ibrahim Marazka, Reza Pourjavady and Sabine Schmidtke.^[4] Al-Maghribī wrote extensively about physics, mathematics, and medicine. Unfortunately, most of his works have been lost. The only elements of his medical work that remain extant are those featured in the *Nuzhat*, dealing with sexual dysfunction and sexual health more generally.

Description of the Text

There are several partial editions of the *Nuzhat*, many of which are unpublished PhD dissertations. The most recent edition of the work was prepared by Sayyid Kisrawi Ḥasan and was published in Lebanon in 2008. It is based on the incomplete manuscript MS Escorial 830. The manuscript used for this edition is missing several parts, including the long chapter on tribadism (*saḥq*, literally ‘rubbing’, i.e. female homoeroticism), present in the following manuscripts: Gotha 2045; Berlin 6381; and Paris Bn Far 3054.^[5]

The *Nuzhat* was translated into English by Salah Addin Khawwam and ‘Adnan Jarkas, and was published in Toronto by Aleppo Publishing in 1978 with the title “Jaunt in the Art of Coition”.

As with other texts in the genre, al-Maghribī’s work is characterised by a heterogeneous style, and ranges from a technical register (particularly medical) to one more characteristic of *adab* or belles-lettres (with the inclusion of interesting anecdotes and verse).

The work is divided in two parts. The first part is on “etiquette” (*ādāb*), in which the author presents advice on how to comport oneself in a range of social situations, such as drinking sessions and in relations with enslaved persons. The second part focuses on more medical aspects, and its style resembles that of the *kutūb al-bāh*, the books dealing with the so-called *‘ilm al-bāh* (science of coitus).^[6] As one typically finds in works of this kind, in this part there is a chapter dealing with the humoral mixtures (sing. *mizāj*) and the four temperaments, as well as lists of common dysfunctions and a section on their treatment.

The Text

As mentioned, a significant portion of the first part of the book is dedicated to enslaved people. From pp. 92–97 there is a numbered list of thirteen recommendations on the “sale and the purchase” (*fī-l-bay’ wa-l-shirā’*) of enslaved maidens and youths. The author explains how to select the most suitable ones, emphasising the scrupulous inspection of their bodies. For example, he suggests not to decide at first glance, because “the hungry person finds good every dish that satiates him.”^[7] The author also explains the consumer rights, as it were, of those purchasing enslaved persons. For example, it does not matter if the buyer has already had intercourse with an enslaved woman: if there is some defect (*‘ayb*) in her body, or she was not a virgin, he is authorised to return her to the seller, who must take her back. The author presents just one exception, namely the case of the Egyptians (*ahl miṣr*): “When someone [among the Egyptians] buys a maiden, a contract is made between the seller and the buyer, containing all the defects and diseases one by one, and she is sold on immunity from all these, otherwise she is not sold.”^[8]

A great deal of attention is devoted to the maidens’ pregnancy. Having their owner’s child would have improved their condition, since it would have ensured them the status of *umm al-walad*, or “mother of the child.”^[9] The author warns: “Investigate whether slave girls are free from pregnancy before taking possession of them.”^[10] Here the author talks explicitly about the *istibrā’*, or “the period of sexual abstinence imposed on an unmarried female slave whenever she changed hands or her owner set her free or gave her in marriage.”^[11] Apparently, concealing an existing pregnancy was not rare. The author is very keen to warn his readers against the lies of the women, who try to pass somebody else’s child off as theirs. He also warns against “unwanted pregnancies” in recommendation number ten: “After the purchase, the buyer should be careful not to get the maiden pregnant unintentionally, because even if he buys a young woman who has not developed yet, she may have attained puberty during their union without his knowing it, and she might have concealed that from him for the desire for a child. Beware of the pregnancy of maidens who claim that they are sterile or hate pregnancy. They may have deceived their owner.”^[12]

These warnings against the “false claims” of—in this case—women are far from novel. Instead, they are part of a wider discourse on the character of women, typically portrayed as deceitful. Women’s guile occupies a considerable place in classical Arabic *adab*, with Qur’ān 12:28 (“This is of your women’s guile; surely your guile is great”) often cited as a basis for this view.^[13] The unfaithfulness of women is also the main element of the framing story of *Alf layla wa-layla* (One Thousand and One Nights), in which the three betrayals (Shahzaman’s wife with a servant, Shahriar’s wife and all his harem with other servants, and the maiden of the *‘frit* with one hundred men) bring the powerful Shahriar to mistrust every woman.^[14] The unfaithful woman who finds her way out of trouble through lying—as well as astonishing dialectical skills—is a *topos* in Arabic erotica. For example, the 7th/14th century erotic work *Kitāb al-zahr al-aniq fī-l-lubūs wa-l-ta’niq* (Book of Delicate Flowers Regarding the Kiss and the Embrace) of Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Baghdādī (fl. 7th/14th century) deals exclusively with stories of unfaithful women who save themselves from being caught with their cunning, fast thinking, and brilliant lies.

In the case of al-Maghribī’s text, however, the reader’s mistrust is directed to boys no less than to women: “Do not believe the first thing you hear from the young boy or girl [when questioning them], as it may be that they are speaking in agreement [i.e. from prior instruction from their owner], or in order to meet with the acceptance of the one they speak to.”^[15] The servant, therefore, might be conspiring with the seller to deceive the potential buyer.

Lies can be used to deceive the owner, and can be used to escape from him: “Those travelling with male and female slaves should have some of the witness-notaries of the city, on first arrival, testify to the slaves’ admission of their enslavement to him, or should [at least] contrive to have a group of people bear witness to his status and his slaves’ subjection [to him]. This should suffice to ensure that his male and female slaves do not become recalcitrant [by] absconding, or claiming that they are free or are enslaved to somebody else.”

Conclusion

Al-Maghribī’s text belongs to a tradition of manuals on the science of coitus that are addressed to an elite male audience. Among the discussion of diseases and various medical issues, al-Maghribī provides his readers with suggestions on how to purchase a male or female slave. While it is undoubtedly true that the work is written with an elite audience in mind, representing a small portion of the society in which he lived, it also betrays the attitudes of the subaltern, demonstrating that enslaved persons did not always accept their status without resistance, contestation, or even flight.

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^[1] Al-Ṭūṣī and Newman 2014.

^[2] See “*jāriya*” in Lane 1984.

^[3] Schwarb 2020; Firestone in EI²; Rosenthal 1950.

^[4] Al-Maghribī and Perlmann 1964; al-Maghribī 2006.

^[5] The chapter on tribadism is analysed extensively in Myrre 2020:163–64; and is quoted in Jaquart and Tomasset 1985: 124.

^[6] Franke 2012. Al-Maghribī is said to have written another book of this kind, *Kitāb fī-l-bāh* (Book on Coitus), which is unfortunately no longer extant. Cf. al-Ṭūṣī and Newman 2014: 167. Many are the books on *‘ilm al-bāh* written in the classical period. Most of them were penned by doctors like *Qusṭā b. Lūqā* (d. 300/912) and Abū Bakr al-Razī (d. 313/925 or 323/935), as well as others, such as the philosopher al-Kindī (d. 265/873). Among those available in English, there is the *Fī-l-jimā’* (On Coitus) of Maimonides (d. 601/1204), and the *Zād al-musāfir wa-qūt al-ḥādir* (Provisions for the Traveller and Nourishment for the Sedentary) of Ibn al-Jazzār (d. 369/979–80), both translated by Gerrit Bos in 2018 and 1997 (first edition), respectively. In Italian there is the *Kitāb al-bāh* (Book on Coitus, or “Libro sul coito”) of al-Kindī (Celentano 1979).

^[7] Al-Maghribī 2008: 92.

^[8] Ibid.: 97.

^[9] The legal status of an *umm al-walad*, one of the three foci of the TraSIS project, is assigned to an enslaved woman who gives birth to her owner’s child, whose paternity he acknowledges. This holds true even in the case of a stillborn child, but opinions differ concerning miscarriages. Once established, the status leads to a reduction of the woman’s workload and to her being manumitted upon the death of her owner, in addition from the prohibition of her sale, according to classical Sunnī jurists. See Schacht in EI².

^[10] Al-Maghribī 2008: 96.

^[11] Linant de Bellefonds in EI².

^[12] Al-Maghribī 2008: 96.

^[13] The translation of the Qur’ān used here is Arberry 1955.

^[14] Denaro 2015.

^[15] Al-Maghribī 2008: 94.

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