

Slavery and the Historiography of Non-Muslims in the Medieval Middle East

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The study of non-Muslims in Islamic societies has long been a robust subfield in the historiography of the medieval Middle East. But its literature has blind spots, a significant example of which concerns slavery as a constitutive institution of non-Muslim communities. Much recent scholarship on medieval non-Muslims has tended to privilege religious affiliation as an explanatory category of social experience, leaving other legal statuses and modes of identification—especially slavery—underanalyzed. This piece will survey this historiographical hole. It will then offer a brief analysis of some Abbasid-era Syriac Christian material in which slavery figures prominently, concubines and concubinage in particular. My goal is to provide an example of how attending to the place of slavery in non-Muslim communities facilitates a much-needed historiographical shift of focus from reified religious identities to the social practices, institutions, and hierarchies upon which those communities were built.

In the historiography on non-Muslims, slavery features relatively prominently in accounts of the 7th-century caliphate and the relationship between conquerors and subjects. The Arab-Muslim conquests brought about a large-scale movement of peoples in the form of captives taken from the frontiers of war to the caliphate's urban centers. Thus, in addition to the common refrain that the lives and institutional structures of the conquered populations carried on more or less as they had previously, it is generally well recognized that enslaved non-Muslim populations were crucial to the constitution of the earliest caliphal societies.¹ Those peoples, through manumission and conversion if they were male or by bearing children for their masters if they were female, swelled the numbers of early Muslim communities and became the ancestors of scholars, administrators, courtiers, and others who would be so influential in the elaboration of Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions and caliphal governance.

If the constitutive role of slavery and its connections to non-Muslims in the 7th-century caliphate is clear enough, slavery as an institution and practice largely disappears from scholarly narratives of the history of non-Muslims afterward (with one main exception, noted below). Religious affiliation becomes the definitive analytic, and much scholarship (particularly on Christians) focuses on “religious identity,” religio-communal boundaries, and the interaction of non-Muslim intellectual traditions with Islamic thought.² Such approaches are illuminating and integral to the historiography.³ But they tacitly suggest that religious affiliation is the only element of social and juridical identity worthy of scholarly attention: that it determined the horizons of experience of the caliphate's non-Muslim subjects enough to preclude consideration of how other categories—gender, age, class, slavery/freedom—did so as well. A historiography of non-Muslims overly focused on religious identity thus elides a host of subjectivities other than that of the free, adult, elite males who produced our literary source material, and whose own subjectivities were not as flat as is often suggested. “Intersectionality”

is a watchword in many a humanities field; this corner of Middle East studies could benefit by taking its implications more seriously.

Cairo Geniza scholarship is the lone, very instructive exception here; it maintains a much stronger tradition of intersectional analysis than the study of early medieval Middle Eastern Christians.⁴ Recent studies of slavery in the Geniza, for example, have demonstrated how the institution was constitutive of Egyptian Jewish communities in fundamental and distinctive ways (e.g., through household and commercial labor and the conversion and integration of freed people).⁵ The Geniza's exceptional documentary material lends itself particularly well to such approaches, but that does not excuse scholars focused on other communities from considering the heuristic problems that the Geniza reveals.

Even if a full answer is impossible, then, an adequate history of non-Muslims in Islamic societies needs to consider the role of slavery in shaping their communities. In this connection, I will turn to a brief reading of some literary and prescriptive sources related to Christians and slavery in Abbasid Baghdad and Samarra. My intent is to show that, although we lack a documentary basis comparable to the Geniza in this area, asking how the patterns and practices of slaveholding fit into the historical picture shifts our focus away from reified religious identities and toward a thicker analysis of the bonds and hierarchies out of which social groups are built.

The literary culture of Abbasid cities has furnished some of the best evidence for the patterns and functions of slaveholding and the life of the unfree in medieval Islamic societies. Historians of the period are well acquainted with cultured, singing slave women and powerful military slaves; literary sources have also facilitated some degree of reconstruction of what urban Abbasid households looked like and the significant place of slaveholding within them.⁶ How did the institution of slavery intersect with the large Christian communities of Abbasid Iraq, and what can it tell us about them? While details are few and far between, we find scattered references in Arabic chronicles and biographical dictionaries to elite Christian men, especially physicians of the caliph's court, keeping slave concubines.⁷ Concubinage was antithetical to the Christian principle of monogamy, however, so Christian legal texts penned in Syriac by ecclesiastics in the 8th and 9th centuries exhibit a clear concern to regulate it. At times they simply emphasize the institution's unlawfulness; at others, they decree that the offspring of Christian men and slave concubines are ineligible to receive inheritance, marking them as illegitimate.⁸

Even these small notices related to slavery point to aspects of the social constitution of Christian communities that the historiographical concern with religious identity leaves obscure. Those communities' social stratification, for example, is immediately apparent. Descriptions of concubines owned by Christians attest to the unsurprising presence of domestic slaves in urban Christian households; but more notably, they throw into relief another Christian social class: the male courtly elite. While Abbasid-era Christian physicians and bureaucrats are familiar to scholars, asking explicitly how slavery fit into the fabric of Christian communities highlights the practices by which those individuals constituted themselves as a distinct class—namely, by keeping concubines in spite of ecclesiastical law. It also exemplifies the degree to which those elites adopted the same practices and symbols of social prestige as Muslims. In these respects, focusing on Christian concubinage illustrates both the internal stratification of Christian communities and social solidarities that stretched beyond them. It reminds us that social identity was

not simply a function of professing adherence to one religion over another; for the courtiers in question, being Christian was an ongoing, practical mediation between the dictates of ecclesiastics and the expectations of courtly society. Bringing slavery into the analytical picture allows these contours of non-Muslim social history to come to the fore.

The Christian legal sources' concern to disinherit the offspring of elite Christian men and their concubines is similarly instructive. This position directly contradicts Islamic law, according to which children of concubines inherit free status and filial property rights from their fathers. The Christian sources thus promote a distinctive perspective on the role of slaves and slave reproductive labor in the household: ecclesiastics wanted to prohibit lay elites from using concubinage as a strategy of social reproduction in the manner associated with Islamic law and elite Muslim society.⁹ How successful they were in getting laymen to listen to them is difficult to tell given our sources. But at the very least, these rulings on Christians' concubines suggest the possibility of different household forms and patterns of domestic labor between Christians and Muslims.¹⁰ This is an observation of religious difference, but one attendant to the practices and institutions that structure social relations rather than the doctrinal side of religious identity.

Thus, crucial facets of non-Muslim social history only come into focus when we take seriously the conjunction of religious affiliation with other analytical categories, such as slavery, that have been much neglected in recent historiography. As the examples above have demonstrated, moving our attention away from religious identity and refocusing it on foundational societal institutions can help us write more fully textured narratives of the non-Muslim communities so central to the making of the Middle East's history.

NOTES

¹See, for example, Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. chap. 5.

²See, for example, Bas ter Haar Romeny, ed., *Religious Origins of Nations? The Christian Communities of the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); and Michael P. Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

³Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) remains a landmark.

⁴In addition to the foundational works of S. D. Goitein (in general) and Mordechai A. Friedman (on the family), see recently Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Eve Krakowski, "Female Adolescence in the Cairo Geniza Documents" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012); Craig A. Perry, "The Daily Life of Slaves and the Global Reach of Slavery in Medieval Egypt, 969–1250 CE" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2014); and Oded Zinger, "Women, Gender and Law: Marital Disputes according to Documents from the Cairo Geniza" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014). One of the few studies of a class subsection of medieval Middle Eastern Christians is Cécile Cabrol, *Les Secrétaires nestoriens à Bagdad (762–1258 AD)* (Beirut: CERPOC-FSR-USJ, 2012).

⁵Perry, "Daily Lives of Slaves," esp. chaps. 2–4.

⁶Julia 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), 121–46; Kristina Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyān*) of the 'Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, ed. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2009), 105–18.

⁷See, for example, Enrico Gismondi, trans. and ed., *Akhbar Fatarikat Kursi al-Mashriq min Kitab al-Majdal*, 2 vols. (Rome: C. de Luigi, 1896–99), 1:74, 79; and Ali ibn Yusuf al-Qifti, *Kitab Ikhbar al-'Ulama' bi-Akhbar al-Hukama'*, ed. Muhammad Amin al-Khanji (Muhafazat Misr: Matba'at al-Sa'ada, 1908), 253.

⁸See, for example, Eduard Sachau, trans. and ed., *Syrische Rechtsbücher*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1907–14), 2:104, 160–62 (rulings §§70, 100, 101); and 3:114–16 (ruling §IV.iv.6).

⁹For a full analysis, see Lev Weitz, “Polygyny and East Syrian Law: Local Practices and Ecclesiastical Tradition,” in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 2015), 157–91.

¹⁰Compare in this vein Perry, “Daily Lives of Slaves,” chap. 3.