

Slaves for Pleasure in Arabic Sex and Slave Purchase Manuals from the Tenth to the Twelfth Centuries

Pernilla Myrne

University of Gothenburg

pernilla.myrne@sprak.gu.se

Abstract

Women probably made up the majority of the slave population in the medieval Islamic world, most of them used for domestic service. As men were legally permitted to have sexual relations with their female slaves, enslaved women could be used for sexual service. Erotic compendia and sex manuals were popular literature in the premodern Islamic world, and are potentially rich sources for the history of sex slavery, especially when juxtaposed with legal writings. This article uses Arabic sex manuals and slave purchase manuals from the tenth to the twelfth century to investigate the attitudes toward sexual slavery during this period, as well as the changing ethnicities and origins of slaves, and the use of legal manipulations.

Keywords

sex slavery – Ibn Buṭlān – al-Samaw'al al-Maghribī – sex manuals – Islamic Law

1 Introduction

Women probably made up the majority of the slave population in the medieval Islamic world and their main occupation was domestic service.¹ As men were

1 Documents from the Cairo Geniza indicate that women constituted the majority of the slave population in early medieval Cairo; Cairo Goitein, “Slaves and Slavegirls in the Cairo Geniza Records,” *Arabica* 9, no. 1 (1962): 20. Yossef Rapaport estimates that the number of female slaves in elite Mamluk households were much higher than that of men, which makes Mamluk slavery “a primarily feminine phenomenon;” Yossef Rapaport, “Women and Gender in

permitted to have sexual relations with their female slaves, enslaved women owned by men could also be used for sexual service. Evidence from legal and literary sources indicates that slaves intended primarily for sexual service were singled out from those intended primarily for domestic service (*khidma*) at slave markets. The first group was referred to as slaves for pleasure (*muṭʿa*, *ladhdha* or another word for pleasure) or, bluntly, “slave-girls for sexual intercourse” (*jawārī al-waṭʿ*). Some of these slaves became their masters’ concubines and gave birth to their children, but others were probably used sexually for a period of time before being transferred to fulltime domestic service, which was facilitated by the permission to use contraceptive methods with slave women.² This article uses erotic compendia and slave purchase manuals from the tenth to twelfth centuries to investigate attitudes toward sexual slavery during this period, as well as changing ethnicities and origins of slaves, and the legal terminology used when trading in women intended for sexual service. Accounts of legal manipulation and violence in this literature reveal conditions that affected slave women’s lives, even when these accounts were intended to advise buyers and dealers. The main sources used for this study are two understudied erotic compendia from the tenth and twelfth centuries, *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* (*Jawāmiʿ al-Ladhdha*), by ʿAlī ibn Naṣr, and *Pleasure Park for Friends on Intimate Relations with Their Beloveds* (*Nuzhat al-Aṣḥāb fī muʿāsharat al-aḥbāb*), by the physician al-Samawʿal al-Maghribī (d 570/1175). *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* is a valuable source for the attitudes to sexual slavery in earlier centuries, as the author cites many lost sources, but it also gives information about the preferences and attitudes of an elite circle, probably in Baghdad during the Buyid rule. *Pleasure Park* provides valuable insight into the conditions of slave women at the time of the author, a time marked by war and conflicts between local warlords. In addition to these works, the article investigates slave ethnicities and sexual slavery in *General Treatise on the Skills Useful for Purchasing and Examining Slaves* (*Risāla Jāmiʿa li-Funūn Nāfiʿa fī Shirā*

Mamluk Society,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 11 (2007): 9. The numbers are difficult to assess, however, and although the majority of slaves in late Ottoman Istanbul and Cairo were women, the presupposition that women also constituted the majority in the earlier Ottoman era has been questioned; Madeleine Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190–197.

2 Men did not need slave concubines’ consent before using contraceptives, whereas most jurists concluded that free wives had to give their consent, as they had right to children. The main contraceptive method, referred to in juridical treatises, was coitus interruptus (*ʿazl*); see B.F. Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam: Birth Control before the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

al-Raqīq wa-Taqlīb al-'Abīd), a slave purchase manual from the eleventh century by the physician Ibn Buṭlān (d. 458/1066), who lived and travelled in Iraq, Cairo and Syria, and probably experienced the slave markets there.

2 The Authors and Their Texts

The first extant erotic compendium in Arabic, *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, which is still only available in full in manuscript form, combines medical themes with other scientific and literary discourses—physiognomy, philosophy, law and religious tradition, poetry, and erotology.³ Its author, 'Alī ibn Naṣr al-Kātib, is unknown and there are different suggestions as to his identity. It is possible that he was the late-tenth-century author mentioned in *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm, who died in Baghdad in 377/987 and whose father was a Christian physician.⁴ The titles of his books (all lost) reveal an interest in courtly etiquette and refinement, which is also a main theme in *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*. His own title, *kātib*, indicates that he was an official in the Buyid administration, the dynasty that rule Iraq at this time. The Buyids were Shiites, yet supported a Sunni caliph, and the intellectual environment during their rule of Baghdad (945–1055) is known for its libertinism and eclectic attitude toward religion.⁵ The combination of Shia and Sunni references is characteristic for *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*.

The book contains numerous citations attributed to earlier sources and authorities, Arab, Greek, Persian and Indian, including writings and sayings on slaves for pleasure. It is directed to the “refined” male elite (*al-ẓurafā'*), who should, the author states, use the knowledge and learning collected in the encyclopedia to distinguish themselves from common people and their brutish sexual behavior. Women's pleasure is given a special consideration; the reader of this manual should know how to please women. Mutual heterosexual pleasure is considered the highest goal and essential for matrimonial harmony, but the author does not want to prevent his readers from enjoying the sexual activities

3 For this book, see Everett Rowson, “Arabic: Middle Ages to Nineteenth Century,” in Gaétan Brulotte and John Phillips, eds., *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1:43–61; and Pernilla Myrne, “Pleasing the Beloved: Sex and True Love in a Medieval Arabic Erotic Compendium,” in Michael Beard, Alireza Korangy, and Hanadi al-Samman, eds., *Beloved: Love and Languishing in Middle Eastern Literatures* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), and the references given there. For this article, I rely on three manuscripts: MS Aya Sofya 3836 (copied 533/1139), MS Aya Sofya 3837 (634/1236), and MS Fatih 3729 (582/1186).

4 See Myrne, “Pleasing the Beloved,” 221–222.

5 Cf. Joel Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

of their choice. Much of the content is theoretical and many of the instructions seem impossible to execute. Therefore, it is probable that the content of the book is intended to provide exclusive knowledge for select readers rather than a manual for practical use. The fact that the book is not cited by contemporaries of Ibn Naṣr, as far as we know, and not often mentioned in later bibliographies, suggests that it was considered offensive by mainstream authors and not read by a wider audience. Yet, it was pivotal for the genre of sex manuals, and even authors who wrote for broader audiences cite at least some of its content.⁶ Most notably, the late Mamluk Islamic scholar al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) relied on Ibn Naṣr to a great extent in his marriage manual, *al-Wishāḥ fi Fawā'id al-Nikāḥ* (*The Sash, on the Merits of Sexual Intercourse/Marriage*⁷), but only the content that is in line with Sunni orthodoxy. Contrary to Ibn Naṣr, al-Suyūṭī condemns homosexuality and other illicit sexual relations.

We know more about the authors of the other texts examined in this article. Ibn Buṭlān and al-Samaw'al al-Maghribī were both distinguished physicians who worked for and dedicated their books to members of the ruling class and the elite. Their works likely reflect the tastes and needs of their wealthy patrons; but as physicians, they were probably also acquainted with the conditions of less wealthy people. Ibn Buṭlān was born in Baghdad when the Buyid dynasty was still in power. He was a Nestorian Christian and studied theology as well as medicine.⁸ He left Baghdad in 1049, six years before the Turkish Seljuks overthrew the Buyids in 1055. After he left his native town, he travelled and lived in some of the metropolises of the Islamic and eastern Mediterranean world: Cairo, Constantinople, and Aleppo, where he worked as a physician. Toward the end of his life, he spent some ten years in Syria. It was probably during this period that he concluded his slave purchase manual, *General Treatise on the Skills Useful for Purchasing and Examining Slaves*.⁹ Ibn Buṭlān was not the

6 *Jawāmi' al-Ladhdha* is cited by the twelve-century Syrian author al-Shayzarī; in both his medical sex manual *al-Īdāḥ fi Asrār al-Nikāḥ* and his book on love, *Rawḍat al-Qulūb*. The unknown author of the popular *Akhbār al-Nisā'* (often attributed to Ibn al-Jawzī, d. 597/1201 or Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, d. 751/1350) cites it extensively. Several Mamluk authors refer to it or cite it more or less extensively; for example Mughulṭay (d. 762/1361), in his book on love, *al-Wāḍiḥ al-Mubīn*, and Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d. 727/1327), on the physiognomy of female slaves; see Antonella Ghersetti, "Images of Slave Girls in a Physiognomic Text of the XIV c.," *Mamluk Studies Review* 21 (2018): 21–46. Al-Suyūṭī relies on it to a great extent in both *al-Wishāḥ* and the popular *Nawādir al-Ayk fi Ma'rifat al-Nayk*.

7 The word *nikāḥ* signifies both sexual intercourse and Islamic marriage.

8 J. Schacht, "Ibn Buṭlān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 13 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1954–2005), 3:740–742.

9 Ibn Buṭlān, "Risāla jāmi'a li-funūn nafi'ah fi shir'ah al-raqiq wa-taqlib al-'abid," in 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn, ed., *Nawādir al-makḥṭūṭāt* (Cairo: n.p., 1954), 383–420. An abridged translation into

first Arabic author to give advice about the purchase of slaves, but his treatise was the first monograph on the subject, and the most well-known.¹⁰ It is frequently quoted by later authors, often verbatim and without attribution.¹¹ The genre was apparently influenced by the Arabic version of a treatise by the Greek physician Rufus of Ephesus (around 100AD), which is not extant.¹² Although Ibn Buṭlān does not cite Rufus explicitly, it is probable that he relies on his slave purchase manual to a certain degree. *General Treatise* includes a chapter each on using physiognomy and the ethnological method to assess slaves' skills and health status, in addition to a chapter on clinical observations; methods that were known from Greek treatises.¹³ The general impression, however, is that Ibn Buṭlān had first-hand experience of slave markets and recognized fraud on the part of sellers, such as dying grey hair and concealing pregnancy. As stated by Simon Swain considering Ibn Buṭlān's reliance on earlier sources, "there is no doubt that the material has been entirely rewritten on the basis of Ibn Buṭlān's own experience and knowledge of the dealers."¹⁴

After *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, the genre of sex manuals thrived again in the twelfth century, and treatises with medical advice reached a new, broader audience. Whereas the content in *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* was mainly theoretical, targeting an elite readership wishing to distinguish themselves from common people, the sex manuals written in the twelfth century seem to be intended for

German of Ibn Buṭlān's manual is provided by Hans Müller, *Kunst des Sklavenkaufs nach arabischen, persischen und türkischen Ratgebern vom 10. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Klaus Schwarz Verlag: Freiburg, 1980), 46–47. It is also translated into Italian in Antonella Ghersetti, *Trattati generale sull'acquisto e l'esame degli schiavi* (Cantanzaro: Abramo, 2001), and partially translated into English by Simon Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam: A Critical Edition, English Translation and Study of Bryson's Management of the Estate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 270–279; and Bernard Lewis, *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople. Vol 2: Religion and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 245–251.

- 10 On the genre of slave purchase manuals, see Manfred Ullmann, *Die Medizin in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 192–193; and Müller, *Sklavenkaufs*; see this book for the whole genre up to the seventeenth century.
- 11 The treatise was copied and reworked in later books, particularly in the Mamluk era, see Müller, *Sklavenkauf*, and 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): 1–23, on Ibn al-Akfānī.
- 12 Ullmann, *Medizin*, 74.
- 13 Antonella Ghersetti, "A Science for Kings and Masters: *firāsa* at the Crossroad between Natural Sciences and Power Relationships in Arabic Sources," in Eva Orthmann and Nader El-Bizri, eds., *The Occult Sciences in Pre-modern Islamic Cultures* (Orient Institute Beirut, 2018).
- 14 Swain, *Economy*, 261.

practical use and responded to the needs of patients and patrons. Al-Samaw'al al-Maghribī was probably born in Baghdad in 520/1126, when the Seljuks' ruled Iraq. While Ibn Buṭlān witnessed the Seljuks' rise to power, al-Samaw'al witnessed the disintegration of the empire. His father was a rabbi, and after he had finished his education, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, he worked as a court physician for some of the dynasties that gained power as the Seljuk Empire collapsed. He first moved to Azerbaijan, a region marked by conflicts and power struggles, especially between independent *atabegs* (military guardians of Seljuk princes). There is almost no information about his life and whereabouts and only very few dates. According to the historian al-Qifṭī, who was born a few years before al-Samaw'al died, he had a family in Azerbaijan and raised several sons who also became physicians.¹⁵ He lived in the Azerbaijani town Marāgha, where the Ahmadili atabeg Nuṣrat al-Dīn Arslān Aba held his court. If we are to believe his own words, al-Samaw'al was a much-respected scholar and physician at that time.¹⁶ He converted to Islam in Marāgha in November 1163.¹⁷ After his conversion, al-Samaw'al wrote a polemic against the Jews, *Silencing the Jews* (*Ifḥām al-Yahūd*), which quickly became famous. Four years later, in 562/1167, he wrote a new edition, supplemented with a short autobiography about his early studies and later conversion.¹⁸ It was probably around this time that he wrote *Pleasure Park* during a stay in Diyār Bakr, a district in upper Mesopotamia, ruled by the Turkmen Artuqid dynasty, which held court in the town Ḥiṣn Kayfā, by the river Tigris. It was dedicated to the Artuqid amīr Nūr al-Dīn.¹⁹ Another treatise on sex with mainly pharmacological content by the famous Jewish physician and philosopher Maimonides (1135/38–1204) was written for al-Muẓaffar 'Umar ibn Nūr al-Dīn, the nephew of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and Ayyubid sultan of Hama 574–587/1179–1191.²⁰ These books, commissioned by rulers, were also intended for a broader audience. Al-Samaw'al states in the introduction to *Pleasure Park* that it addresses everyone from kings who

15 Ibn al-Qifṭī, *Ta'rikh al-ḥukamā'*, ed. Julius Lippert (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), 209.

16 Al-Samaw'al ibn Yaḥyā al-Maghribī. *Ifḥām al-yahūd: Silencing the Jews*, edited and translated by Moshe Perlmann (New York: American Academy for Jewish Studies, 1964), 85–86.

17 Al-Samaw'al, *ifḥām*, 85.

18 The new edition and the autobiography are translated by Moshe Perlmann.

19 It is dedicated to the Artuqid amīr according to Kucien Leclerc, *Histoire de la médecine arabe*, vol. 2 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1876), 15.

20 Moses Maimonides, *On sexual intercourse: Fi 'l-jima*, trans. and ed. Morris Gorlin (Brooklyn: Rambash Pub. Co., 1961).

hesitate to consult physicians to common people “obsessed with sex.”²¹ Compared with *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, *Pleasure Park* contains less adaptations from Persian and Greek sources, and more technical and medical advice on how to maintain sexual health and gratifying sexual relationships. Women’s sexual needs are acknowledged, but treated as secondary to men’s sexual fulfillment. In line with this, the author includes a chapter on slave purchase, with anecdotes and information relevant for buyers of slaves for sexual purposes. Although most of this chapter is a partially verbatim and partially abridged version of Ibn Buṭlān’s slave purchase manual, al-Samaw’al also adds some new information.

3 Female Slaves and Sexual Slavery

It is difficult to estimate the spread of slavery during the tenth to twelfth century and impossible to know the extent of sexual slavery. However, slave and sex manuals can tell us something about attitudes toward sexual relations with female slaves and add to our understanding of how female slaves were bought, sold, and treated during this period. The attitudes to sexual slavery differ somewhat in the two erotic compendia. Ibn Naṣr expects some doubts from his readers, whereas for al-Samaw’al, sexual slavery is an entirely reasonable instrument for preserving men’s health. The fact that the practice of sexual slavery is justified differently in *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* and *Pleasure Park* can point to changes in attitudes between the tenth and the twelfth century; although there were not necessarily a larger supply of slaves in the twelfth century, the practice of sexual slavery was normalized. It is also probable that the dissimilarities are due to the authors’ different backgrounds and audiences; Ibn Naṣr was interested in “refined” behavior, whereas al-Samaw’al was a physician who responded to the needs of his patients. Moreover, it is important to consider the generic differences between slave purchase manuals and sex manuals. The “sex manuals” are better described as erotic compendia written with several purposes; one aim is to guide the reader, but they are also entertaining. For the authors of the erotic compendia, sexual access to slaves is only one of many pleasures available to their readers, at least in theory, and one aspect of male sexual privilege. Conversely, for the author of the slave purchase manual, sexual access is only one aspect of slavery.

When ‘Alī ibn Naṣr wrote *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* in the tenth century, sexual access to female slaves was an established right for Muslim men and reg-

21 Al-Samaw’al, *Nuzhat al-aṣḥāb*, MS Gotha 2045, fol. 2^b.

ulated by Islamic law. The citations attributed to early authorities suggest that sexual slavery was seen as a matter of privilege; a male privilege as well as a privilege of the conqueror over a conquered people—which is demonstrated by an interest in slave ethnicities. According to contemporaneous Islamic legal writings, men had a number of privileges over women; sexual pleasure was one of them.²² They were allowed to have an unlimited number of slave concubines, as long as they could afford it. The warriors who took part in the early conquests were allotted captive women as reward; other men had to pay for female slaves. Prices and supply shifted, but slaves for pleasure were more expensive, and were probably always seen as a privilege for comparatively affluent men.²³ The ideas expressed by ‘Alī ibn Naṣr and his sources are paradoxical; while harmony and reciprocity between sexual partners is the ideal, the legal access for men to a variety of women is applauded. The author is aware of the discrepancies between the ideal of reciprocity, women’s satisfaction, and men’s right to multiple partners. He expects objections from his readers and attempts to explain why women are not allowed multiple partners as men are, which indicates that polygamy and slave concubinage were not necessarily acknowledged by all of his readers.²⁴ He also attempts to justify experimental sex with female slaves without alienating free wives. Arguing that enslaved women are more robust and prefer physically demanding positions, whereas free wives are more delicate and worthy of respect, he recommends men to use their female slaves when trying the many sex positions enumerated and described in the book.²⁵ These positions could make free women feel humiliated, as they indicate low esteem, boredom and lack of love on the part of the man. Thus Ibn Naṣr addresses the concerns of free women and ensures them that both God and husbands give preference to free wives.

22 The early Muslim jurists stipulated that the husband had almost unconditional right to sex and specified that they have right to pleasure, whereas they were hesitant to give wives sexual rights; see Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), ch. 3.

23 In the twelfth century the Hanafi jurist al-Kāsānī remarked, “Slave girls are normally not bought for pleasure, but for domestic service;” Abu Bakr ibn al-Mas‘ūd al-Kāsānī, *Kitāb al-Badā‘ī al-ṣanā‘ī fī tartīb al-sharā‘ī* (Cairo: n.p., 1910). See Yūsuf Rāḡib, *Actes de vente d’esclaves et d’animaux d’Égypte médiévale*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2006), 2:46. This does not mean that slaves other than those intended for pleasure were not used sexually.

24 For these explanations, see my forthcoming book, *Female Sexuality in the Early Medieval Islamic World*.

25 ‘Alī ibn Naṣr, *Jawāmi‘ al-Ladhdha*, MS Aya Sofya 3837, fol. 83^a; MS Fatih 3729, fol. 168^a.

Sexual slavery is a distinct, though not emphasised, category of slavery in *General Treatise* by Ibn Buṭlān. Already in the introduction, he suggests that providing sexual pleasure is one of two main tasks for female slaves; the other is domestic service.

The one who wishes [to buy a slave] will learn [from this manual] how to tell apart healthy body parts from infected and uncorrupted characters from bad; which female slaves (*imā'*) are suitable for domestic service (*khidma*) and which are for pleasure (*mut'a*); which species (*ajnās*) are obedient and loyal slaves and which are disrespectful, and, finally, which can only be managed with force and the cane, so that he will get what he wants and be able to choose the species that matches his purpose.²⁶

The sexual purpose is also explicit in the following advice: "A horny buyer should not have a slave-girl displayed to him."²⁷ The sexually aroused (*mun'iz*) has no judgment as he decides on first glance."²⁸ The section on general instructions in Ibn Buṭlān's treatise is followed by one on the medical inspection of slaves and another on physiognomy (*firāsa*), which had since long been considered a useful tool for evaluating slaves.²⁹ Ibn Buṭlān mentions the specific branch of physiognomy that appraises women's pleurability—the degree of sexual pleasure a man can obtain from them—called "the physiognomy of women" (*firāsāt al-nisā'*). He claims that this method is useful, but chooses not to dwell upon it, as it may be offensive.³⁰

Like the author of *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, al-Samaw'al emphasizes the importance of matrimonial harmony and instructs men to pay attention to women's comfort and desire. First and foremost, however, he addresses elite men's desires and devotes considerable space to methods for enhancing their potency. Men are masters over their own private lives and they are free to choose their sexual practice within legal bounds. They can live with one sin-

26 Ibn Buṭlān, "Risāla jāmi'a," 352.

27 لا يستعرض جارية شبق. A *musta'rid* is a potential buyer who asks for merchandise to be displayed to him. Due to the nature of the purchase situation, a *musta'rid* is often used for slave commerce, as is evident in Lane's example of *ista'raḍa*: "استعرض الجارية: He asked to show, or display, to him the girl on the occasion of sale," Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2 vols (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984), sv. 'rḍ.

28 Ibn Buṭlān, "Risāla jāmi'a," 354–355.

29 For physiognomy as a means to evaluate slaves according to al-Rāzī and other medieval Arabic authors, see Ghersetti, "A Science for Kings."

30 For the currency of this genre, see Ghersetti, "A Science for Kings."

gle wife if they want to, or they can buy as many slave concubines as they wish, provided they can afford to, which is taken for granted here. Al-Samaw'al compares man's life to the world of animals, concluding that it is a natural characteristic of man and animal alike to want a new partner. Consequently, even if a man has a beautiful woman in his house, he may wish to buy a new slave woman from time to time, only to experience the freshness of novelty, a phenomenon al-Samaw'al calls "renewal of the bed" (*tajdīd al-firāsh*).³¹ Since the ninth century, Arab physicians had discussed the benefits of sexual intercourse in line with humoral theory. Sexual intercourse was considered beneficial for a healthy balance of fluids and temperatures in the body, if practiced with moderation.³² According to al-Samaw'al, men's sexual inadequacy causes serious diseases—and even endangers the future of humanity. If men abstain from sexual intercourse, or are interrupted, the production of semen will decrease, as will the ability to procreate.³³ Therefore, men need to have an active sex life from puberty to old age and women's main role is to facilitate male sexual activity. Al-Samaw'al advises against having a single woman, even though he admits that some men prefer that if they are attached to a woman and get along well with her.³⁴ For the sake of their reproductive health, however, they should always have a young, fresh woman suitable for bearing their children, even if they still hold their old wife in high regard.³⁵ He argues that if a man has a single wife, he will have to endure periods of sexual abstinence when she menstruates or is pregnant or sick.³⁶ Moreover, when she gets older, she will not be able to bear children, nor will she stimulate his sexual desire enough to prevent impotence. The need for men to uphold the capacity to ejaculate and produce children thus furnishes a rational argument for polygamy and sex slavery; they are means to preserve men's reproductive capacity. Just like having several wives or changing wives from time to time, possessing slave concubines can help men maintain their sexual health. In his chapter on purchasing slaves, al-Samaw'al adds advice that implies exploitation of female slaves' sexual capacity, as for example: "Order a woman to raise the legs of the slave-girl when she is lying down on her back, until her knees reach her breast and her ankles reach her ears. Observe if she expresses pain or moans, or if she contracts

31 Al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, MS Gotha orient 2045 fol. 18^b. *firāsh* means bed, carpet, or mat, but has the additional meaning "wife;" Hava, *Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1951).

32 Ullmann, *Medizin*, 194–195.

33 I.e., al-Samaw'al, MS Gotha orient 2045, 16^{a-b}.

34 Al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, MS Gotha orient 2045 fol. 19^a.

35 Ibid., fols. 17^{a-b}.

36 Ibid., fol. 16.

her abdomen. Some of them suffer from intestinal pain or bladder wounds, and they are not able to raise their legs all the way.”³⁷

The idea that men should keep producing offspring into old age circulated in the twelfth century. The religious scholar Ibn al-Jawzī (510/1116–597/1201), for example, who lived in Baghdad at the same time as al-Samaw’al, had his first child when he was in his early twenties and his last child when he was almost seventy.³⁸ He was not alone; it seems to have been the norm for men in his religious circle in Baghdad to have many children and to continue producing children at an advanced age.³⁹ Obviously, in accordance with this ideal, men had to either change women at least once—probably several times during their life—or have several women at the same time, circumstances facilitated by legal polygyny and slave concubinage. Again, Ibn al-Jawzī is an example: the mother of his first child was a free wife, whereas the mother of the last child was a much younger slave concubine.⁴⁰

Elite marriages in the twelfth century were strategic, which enhanced the wives’ positions.⁴¹ Possibly, a wife preferred that her husband take a slave concubine rather than marry a new woman, as a co-wife probably was a bigger threat to her position. Possessing slaves was, after all, a status symbol for men as well as for women; the number of slaves a person possessed and the types of tasks they performed added to the owner’s social prestige. Elite men like al-Samaw’al’s patrons and patients were expected to have many slave concubines; it was perhaps more common than having multiple wives. Possessing multiple slave concubines was associated with the kind of sexual pleasures that were more or less reserved for elite men, not least rulers and their entourage. One of al-Samaw’al’s patients was an old man with deteriorating health, who refused to take medicine that could reduce his potency, as he had “ten slave-girls, beautiful as the moon” at home.⁴² Maimonides gives another example: Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s

37 Al-Samaw’al, *Nuzhat*, 98.

38 Vanessa Van Renterghem, “Ibn al-Ġawzī, ses filles et ses gendres: théorie et pratique de la vie familiale chez un Bagdadien du VI^e/XI^e siècle,” *Annales islamologiques* 47 (2013): 273, 263.

39 Ibid., 269.

40 Ibid., 263–264.

41 See van Renterghem, “Ibn al-Ġawzī,” for strategical marriages among religious scholars in Baghdad, contemporary with al-Samaw’al. See also, for example, the many marriage alliances mentioned in the history of the early Artuqids; Carole Hillenbrand, *A Muslim Principality in Crusader Times: The Early Artuqid State* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut Istanbul, 1990).

42 Al-Samaw’al, *Nuzhat*, MS orient Gotha, fol. 8^b. “Slave-girls” is a common translation of *jawārī*, and might be thought of as too derogatory. I choose to use this translation, however, as *jawārī* means “girl,” but is the most common word for female slaves in this context.

nephew ‘Umar ibn Nūr al-Dīn was an emaciated man and the physician advised him to reduce his sexual activity in order to improve his health. Instead of doing so, he urged Maimonides to compose a book about aphrodisiacs, so that he could enjoy his slave concubines.⁴³

4 Ethnicity and Slave Origins

The slave purchase and sex manuals contain lists of slave origins that reflect the influx of slaves into the medieval Islamic world. The origins and ethnic affiliations of slaves were associated with different qualities, which were assessed and evaluated differently in different periods and regions. According to jurists, an ethnicity appreciated locally was considered of good quality and therefore more expensive than one considered of bad quality, individual characteristics notwithstanding. The term “species” (*jins*, pl. *ajnās*) is used for the origin of slaves in the texts examined here, particularly their ethnic affiliations.⁴⁴ The importance of “species” is noticeable in slave purchase contracts, where it is often mentioned and probably connected to the price of the slave.⁴⁵ The eleventh-century Hanafi jurist Muḥammad Abū Bakr al-Sarakhsī noted that, where he lived, in Transoxiana, the slaves with the highest rank were Turkish and the lowest rank were Indian.⁴⁶ The twelfth-century Hanafi jurist al-Kāsānī, who came from Fergana, studied in Balkh and worked as a legal scholar in Aleppo, remarked that “the high-quality [slave] for them is Byzan-

43 Maimonides, *Sexual Intercourse*, 25.

44 As a legal term, *jins* is more correctly translated ‘genus’, which has higher taxonomic rank than ‘species’, although jurists often used *jins* for denoting species; Barber Johansen, “The valorization of the human body in Muslim Sunni law”, *Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 4 (1996), 82. In this case, jurists would classify ethnicities as species, according to Johansen, and the genus as female slaves. Earlier jurists had classified all human beings as one genus, but Hanafi jurists, at least from the eleventh century onwards, classified female slaves as a specific genus, separate from ‘male slaves’ who were instead classified as belonging to the genus of male humans, alongside free men (ibid., 82–83). This is because men, slave and free, “are used for the same purposes”, whereas female slaves are used for distinct purposes: sexual relations and producing children (ibid., 83). The ownership of a female slave includes both commercial rights—including exploitation of labour—and sexual rights (ibid., 84). In legal writings, relations with female slaves are treated in the sections on *nikāḥ*, whereas rules regarding selling and purchasing female slaves are treated in the sections on commerce.

45 See Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 2:30.

46 Muḥammad Abū Bakr al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūṭ* (Cairo, 1324H, reprint Beirut: Dār al-maʿrifa, 1978), 5:69.

tine, the medium is Sindhi and the low-grade is Indian. For us, the high-quality is Turkish; the medium is Byzantine, and the low-grade Indian.”⁴⁷ The culture of unattributed literary borrowing complicates historical analysis; yet, as I show here, when authors added new information about slave origins in addition to their literary borrowing, the lists of ethnicities in slave purchase and sex manuals become valuable sources for social history.⁴⁸ As for female slavery, some slave origins were considered more pleasurable and some were better for producing children. The authors of the manuals or the sources they rely on testify that there were local breeding of slaves in order to produce mixed ethnic combinations that were popular among buyers, in these cases as “slaves for pleasure.”

Encyclopaedia of Pleasure contains assessments of the attractiveness of women of different origins, attributed to early Muslim caliphs and scholars. Although the passages are probably misattributed, the lists of slave ethnicities reflect the influx of female captives from various regions during the Arab conquests and later expeditions against rebellions, as well as the growing slave trade. The author mentions a text by a Muḥammad ibn al-Kāmil al-Miṣrī about the “species of female slaves ... their dispositions and natures, who should be chosen for offspring (*wild*), and who should be chosen for pleasure (*mutʿa*).”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, ʿAlī ibn Naṣr does not cite Muḥammad ibn Kāmil’s text, which apparently was an early slave purchase manual devoted to female slaves intended for male buyers. Ibn Kāmil distinguishes between two types of female sex slaves: one for procreation and one for sexual pleasure. These types were often associated with different ethnicities, as in a common saying, here attributed to the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705), in *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*: “He who wants a slave girl for pleasure (*taladhdhdh*) should take a Berber. He who wants one for domestic service (*khidma*),

47 Al-Kāsānī, *Kitāb al-Badāʿī*, 2:283–284. It is not entirely clear who is “them” and “us” here; probably the first refer to Aleppo and the second to the regions of Balkh (Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 2:74). Elsewhere al-Kāsānī explains that female genital cutting is a tradition “in their regions”, and therefore lack of genital cutting is considered a defect in a homebred slave-girl there. It is not a tradition “in our districts”, and therefore not considered a defect there (Kāsānī, *Kitāb al-Badāʿī* 5:275). “Our districts” must refer to Central Asia, where genital cutting was not practiced (Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 2:74). “Their regions” could refer to Aleppo and the Levant.

48 This is not always the case, however. Al-Shayzarī borrows some of Ibn Naṣr’s lists of ethnicities without acknowledging his source and specifying that the women considered are slaves (*al-Īdāh fī Asrār al-Nikāh*, ed. Amdha, 17–18). He adds some comments about new groups of women, from Aleppo, Damascus and Baghdad, but he is probably not intending them to be slaves, but women in general.

49 ʿAlī ibn Naṣr, *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdha*, MS Aya Sofya 3836, fol. 53^b; MS Fatih 3729, fol. 54^a.

should take a Byzantine. He who wants one for begetting noble children should take a Persian.”⁵⁰ The attribution to ‘Abd al-Malik is likely false, but the saying reflects a reality, as Byzantine, Persian, and Berber women constituted three predominant groups of captives in the era of the Arab conquests. This particular saying was possibly intended to endorse Persians, or Arab men with Persian mothers, as Persian concubines were quite common among the elite when captive women from conflict areas ended up in the possession of Arab conquerors like ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān. Nevertheless, there was apparently a lively debate as to which slave ethnicity was the best for producing children.⁵¹

A somewhat later authority, the legendary eighth-century scholar Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, famous for his works on alchemy, was purportedly also an expert on female slaves. The authenticity of the numerous attributions to him was questioned already when *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* was written; nevertheless, his list of ethnicities reveals the diversity of slaves available at the markets.⁵² Since the early conquests, the number of slaves brought from regions outside the caliphate was increasing. Whereas the ethnicities mentioned in the saying attributed to ‘Abd al-Malik indicate that the women were captives of wars, some of the origins in Jābir’s list were those of slaves imported by slave traders, such as Turks, Slavs, and East Africans.

Jābir ibn Ḥayyān said: Byzantines have cleaner vaginas than other female slaves have. Andalusians [...] are the most beautiful, sweet-smelling and receptive to learning [...] Andalusians and Byzantines have the cleanest vaginas, whereas Alans (*Lāniyyāt*)⁵³ and Turks have unclean vaginas and get pregnant easier.⁵⁴ They have also the worst dispositions. Sindhis, Indians, and Slavs (*Ṣaqāliba*) and those similar to them are the most condemned. They have uglier faces, fouler odor, and are more spiteful. Besides, they are unintelligent and difficult to control, and have unclean

50 ‘Alī ibn Naṣr, *Jawāmi‘ al-ladhdha*, MS Aya Sofya, fol. 55 a; MS Fatih 3729, fol. 55 b.

51 In the same section, for example, Indian female slaves are recommended for men who want children; MS Aya Sofya, fol. 53 b.

52 For the discussions of the authenticity of attributions to Jābir, see Muhammad ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. by Ayman Fu‘ād Sayyid, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2014), 452. The tenth century author Ibn al-Nadīm had himself no doubts about the authenticity.

53 Alans were Iranian people in the Northern Caucasus.

54 MS Aya Sofya continues explaining, “they have a foul odor, and for that reason, they get pregnant more often.”

vaginas. East Africans (*Zanj*⁵⁵) are the most heedless and coarse. If one finds a beautiful, sound and graceful woman among them, however, no other species can match her. [...] Women from Mecca (*Makkiyāt*) are the most beautiful and pleasurable of all types.⁵⁶

After the conquest of North Africa, slaves from west and central Africa, *bilād al-sūdān* ("the regions of black people"), were imported to Iraq and the women among them were also used for sexual exploitation, as reflected in a statement attributed to the poet Khalaf al-Aḥmar (ca. 115–80/ 733–96):

How wonderful are the dissimilarities among black people (*sūdān*)! As to those who have curly hair, the women have protruding buttocks, small pubic area and rough labia [...]. As to those who have straight hair, the women have good-looking buttocks, large pubic area, appealing teeth,⁵⁷ good breasts, and good-looking belly.⁵⁸

In addition to the reviews of slaves of different origins, there are recommendations directed to slave buyers. "A skilled slave-girl dealer" shares his advice on the best clothes, jewellery, makeup and other adornment for slave-girls of different colors put up for sale.⁵⁹

As seen in the comments attributed to Jābir, species can refer to slaves' ethnicities or to their place of birth. The best species of female slaves according to Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, was the *Makkiyyāt*, slaves born and raised among the Arabs in Mecca, regardless of their parents' ethnicity. They were *muwalladāt*, who were particularly valued and expensive slaves, as they knew Arabic and were adapted to local customs. According to the lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311), a *jāriya muwallada* was a slave-girl "born among Arabs and brought up together with their children, given the same food to eat, and educated the same way as their children are."⁶⁰ Born slaves, they had been prepared since childhood and learned how to obey and please. Several authorities concur that the best slaves

55 The term *zanj* "is used specifically of the Bantu-speaking peoples in East Africa south of the Ethiopians and sometimes more loosely of black Africans in general." Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50.

56 'Alī ibn Naṣr, *Jawāmi' al-ladhdha*, MS Aya Sofya 3836, fol. 53^b; MS Fatih 3729, fol. 54^{a-b}. When the two MSS differ, I have followed Fatih for this passage.

57 Or rather, "gum."

58 MS Aya Sofya 3836, fols. 53^b–54^a; MS Fatih 3729, fol. 54^b.

59 MS Aya Sofya 3836 fol. 54^a; MS Fatih 3729, fol. 54^b.

60 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, 20 vols. (al-Maṭba'a al-Kubra al-Amirīya: Bulaq, 1883–1891), sv. *wld*.

were a particular branch of homebred slaves, namely those with mixed parentage. Evidently, slave traders experimented in human breeding and matched up pairs of different ethnicities, as in this example:

In Kufa there was an excellent brood (*nitāj karīm*) of male slaves from Khurasan and female slaves from India.⁶¹ The union between these two brought forth [slaves with] delicate brown complexion and beautiful stature. This went on for so long time that it became a reason behind common people's preference for slaves from Kufa over slaves from Basra. Nevertheless, the expensive and valuable slave women, who were the most outstanding and distinguished, were from Basra, not Kufa.⁶²

The account is supported by a statement attributed to the famous author al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868–869):

Abū al-Abbās, the husband of Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām's⁶³ sister, asked me: "Do you know which of all species is the most favorable for privacy with women?" I answered, "No, I do not know that." He continued, "Know that there is abundant happiness and complete pleasure only in the brood of two dissimilar kinds. The breeding between them is the elixir that leads to purity. Specifically, that is the mating of an Indian woman with a Khurasanian man; they will give birth to pure gold."⁶⁴

Breeding was legally permitted, as slave owners could impose marriage on their slaves and became the owner of their female slaves' children, even when the father was free.⁶⁵ Ibn Buṭlān, who indicates already in the introduction to his slave purchase manual that enslaved women's main tasks were domestic service and sexual pleasure, also recites sayings about different slave origins, obviously borrowed from the Abbasid tradition, although he does not specify his sources. He identifies more species, however, and his advice is not limited to

61 Both MS Aya Sofya 3836, fol. 54^a and MS Fatih 3729, fol. 55^a, have '*abīd Khurasān wa-abnā' al-hind*', which are (male) slaves from Khurasan and sons of India. We can assume that "the sons of India" were slaves. Probably "sons," أبناء, should be read "female slaves," اماء.

62 MS Aya Sofya 3836, fol. 54^a–54^b.

63 Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām, a famous Mu'tazilite theologian, was al-Jāhīz teacher. Silencing.

64 MS Aya Sofya 3836, fol. 54^a and MS Fatih 3729, fol. 55^a.

65 See Johansen, "Valorization," 91–92. According to some jurists, they could also sell their own children with slave mothers, as long as they did not explicitly recognize paternity; *ibid.* 90; see below, note 95.

sexual exploitation, as seen in a variant of the saying attributed to the Umayyad 'Abd al-Malik in *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*.

He who wants a slave-girl for pleasure (*ladhdha*) should take a Berber. He who wants a regardful slave-girl who keeps secrets should take a Byzantine. He who wants her for producing offspring should take a Persian. He who wants a wet-nurse should take a *zanjiyya*. He who wants a singer should take a slave-girl from Mecca.⁶⁶

Some of the ethnicities mentioned in *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure* were no longer imported to the Islamic world when Ibn Buṭlān wrote his treatise; for example Persians, Slavs and Andalusians. Free Persian women were taken captives in the early conquests, and are often referred to as concubines in earlier treatises. In Ibn Buṭlān's time, however, Persian as a slave species meant something different—it no longer referred to Persian captives, but to slaves born in the region of Fāris (Pars or Persia). "If you hear me say 'Fārisiyya' (Persian woman), know that she is born slave (*muwallada*) in Fāris. It might be that both her parents are Persians, if not, it is enough with her father."⁶⁷

Ibn Buṭlān adds instead a variety of African people; the Beja people in the Sudan, who had become a common target for Arab slave traders, Ethiopians, Nubians, and Zaghawa, an ethnic group in today's Chad and Sudan.⁶⁸ The Beja were also described as a source for slavery by the Persian traveler Nāsir-i Khusraw, a contemporary of Ibn Buṭlān.⁶⁹ Nubia was the main region for the slave trade to Egypt in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and, in the words of Craig Perry, "Upper Egypt served as a veritable hunting ground for kidnappers and raiders."⁷⁰ Ibn Buṭlān also adds slave origins from the East. He lived during the period of Seljuk expansions in the eastern part of the Islamic world, and at least two of the ethnic groups he mentions were particularly affected by war and raiding during this period: Daylamis and Armenians. He depicts both these groups in negative terms, especially Armenians, who, he asserts, are "the worst of the whites."⁷¹ Turkmen nomads raided Armenia in the second half of the eleventh century, and Armenians were also in conflict with the Byzantines.

66 Ibn Buṭlān "Risāla jāmi'a", 352.

67 Ibn Buṭlān, "Risāla jāmi'a", 371.

68 For Beja and other African people as slaves, see Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 50–53.

69 Craig Perry, "The Daily Life of Slaves and the Global Reach of Slavery in Medieval Egypt, 969–1250 CE" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2014), 34.

70 Ibid., 34, 35.

71 See the translation in Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 250–251.

Daylamis were from a mountainous region south of the Caspian Sea, which was occupied by the Seljuks. The most prominent of their members were the Buyids, whose territories were conquered by the Seljuks in the middle of the eleventh century.

Two groups of slaves mentioned by Ibn Buṭlān are more dubious, and he had probably not had any first-hand experience with them: the Qunduhāriyyāt, and the Zaranjiyyāt. The first group came from Qandahar in Sind, today's Kandahar in Afghanistan. The reference is dubious, however, as it may not have come from his own experience but rather from the ninth-century geographer Ibn Khurdādhbih, whose book Ibn Buṭlān had read, since the name Qandahār is rarely mentioned in sources from the tenth through the twelfth centuries.⁷² The second group came from Zarang in the province Sistān, a town also situated in present-day Afghanistan. It was conquered by the Seljuks in the mid-eleventh century, and as there were still many non-Muslims living there, the invasion may have led to increased slavery. It is again likely, however, that Ibn Buṭlān got his information from Ibn Khurdādhbih; he refers to him regarding the location of the town.⁷³

In the twelfth century, al-Samaw'al copies Ibn Buṭlān's list of ethnicities almost verbatim but without attribution, although the slave markets must have changed since the earlier physician wrote his treatise. In part, al-Samaw'al seems to have an ambition to entertain more than edify, as he mixes practical information with poems and anecdotes. Yet, al-Samaw'al has some new information about two groups of slaves in particular. The first is Ḥilliyāt, slaves from Ḥilla, a town in Iraq located on the Euphrates River between Kufa and Baghdad and founded in 495/1102. The Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr, who passed by the town in 1184, described it as "a big town" with "numerous markets."⁷⁴ Though it must have been known to anyone familiar with Iraq, such was apparently not the case for al-Samaw'al readers, whom he informs: "They are slaves from al-Ḥilla, which is positioned in Iraq."⁷⁵ Al-Samaw'al describes the slaves as *muwalladāt al-ʿarab* (female slaves brought up among Arabs), "delicious women for pleasure (*mutʿa*) and the most delightful to be alone with." Al-Ḥilla was apparently famous for its particular method of "breeding" slaves, just as

72 Minoru Inaba, "Kandahar: Early Islamic Period," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 15, fasc. 5, 477–478. A city in India is also referred to as Qandahār by geographers; *ibid*.

73 Ibn Buṭlān, "Risāla jāmiʿa," 374. For Zarang, see C.E. Bosworth, "Zarang," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, x:458–459.

74 Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, ed. William Wright and revised by M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1907), 213.

75 Al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, 130.

Kufa had once been, according to ‘Alī ibn Naṣr. The same must be said about slaves from Mecca, Medina, and Ta’if, all of whom Ibn Buṭlān and al-Samaw’al praise. The second group of slaves is Turkish, which were the most valued slaves in Transoxiana and Afghanistan, according to the jurists al-Sarakhsī and al-Kāsānī (see above). “Turkish” is a rather obscure term; according to Yūsuf Rāḡib it was used for enslaved people from the large territory stretching from Eastern Europe to China. In addition to Turkish people, they could be Slavs (Russians and Bulgarians), Caucasians (Georgians, Armenians, and Circassians), or members of Central Asian population groups (Mongols and Tartars).⁷⁶ Male Turkish slaves had been used as soldiers since the early ninth century, and the first dynasties established by Turkish military slaves had already emerged in the Eastern Islamic world. Some slave markets specialized in Turkish slaves in Samarkand and other cities in Central Asia; from there, slaves were transported to Iran, Iraq, the Levant, and Egypt.⁷⁷ Among them there were also women, occasionally referred to in the sources. It is possible that al-Samaw’al’s knowledge about Turkish slaves came from the slave markets in Azerbaijan, where slaves were brought in from Caucasus and the Western part of the Eurasian step. He possessed, he tells the reader, at least one Turkish slave-girl, who apparently was brought in from Central Asia north or east of the Islamic region called Khurasan. Among his contemporaries, the famous Islamic scholar Ibn al-Jawzī, who lived in Baghdad, had children with one slave concubine who might have been Turkish.⁷⁸ In Egypt, Turkish slaves might have been rarer. There are no Turkish female slaves mentioned in the Geniza documents explored by Perry; instead most of the domestic slaves owned by Jews in Cairo were of African origin.⁷⁹ African slaves were cheaper, as the trade distance was shorter, and Turks were perhaps reserved for the elite classes in this area.

5 Legal Terminology and Manipulation

Ibn Buṭlān and al-Samaw’al use juridical terms in their guidelines for slave buyers; obviously, their readers were supposed to have a basic knowledge of these terms. Islamic law regulated the commerce in slaves, and Islamic jurists and scholars discussed applications of its principles for several centuries. Interpretations varied somewhat between the different schools of law, and local tradi-

⁷⁶ Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 2:30.

⁷⁷ Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 11.

⁷⁸ Renterghem, “Ibn al-Ġawzī,” 264.

⁷⁹ Perry, *Daily Life*, 38–51.

tions (*urf*) and customs (*āda*) were also taken into account. In this section, I explore the legal terms used for sex slaves in the slave manuals and compare them with the legal compendia examined by Rāḡib.⁸⁰ Examples of legal manipulations are found in particular in al-Samaw'al's *Pleasure Park*. There are indications in the sources that the law was sometimes manipulated, perhaps regularly, as there seem to have been loopholes for buyers.

Ibn Buṭlān's first counsel concerning the purchase of female slaves (*imā'*)—which al-Samaw'al quotes as his ninth piece of advice—instructs buyers to “be careful to ensure that the slaves are not pregnant before you take possession of them,” as slaves use various “tricks” to conceal their pregnancies.⁸¹ The term used here is *istibrā'*, with the specification *istibrā' al-imā' min al-ḥabl*,⁸² which in lay terms means “making sure that the slaves are free from pregnancy.” This was a matter of particular concern for many slave buyers, bringing as it did unexpected costs of providing for a child, and potentially endangering the health of the slave. Moreover, when buyers bought the slave for pleasure, pregnancy certainly reduced her value. Most important, however, the buyer risked being obliged to assume paternity for a child that was not his and was then, according to many jurists, prohibited from selling the slaves (the mother and the child) as the mother would attain the status of *umm walad* (mother of child).⁸³

Pregnancy was indeed one of the defects (*uyūb*, s. *ayb*) that nullified the sale of a slave. Jurists discussed at length what should be considered a defect, the grounds for revoking a sale, and compensation for decreased value.⁸⁴ Firstly, a

80 Yūsuf Rāḡib, *Actes de vente d'esclaves et d'animaux d'Egypte médiévale*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2003).

81 Ibn Buṭlān, “Risāla jāmi'a”, 357; al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, 96.

82 See R. Brunschvig, “Abd,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition*, 1: 24–40, and “Barā'a,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 1: 1026–1028. *barā'a*, is translated by Lane as “A writing of ... immunity or exemption”; s.v. *br'*. Rāḡib translates it as “quittance,” *Actes de vente* 2:60, and “garantie,” *ibid.*, 86.

83 The *umm walad* was the mother of a free master's child, if he acknowledged paternity; see Marion H. Katz, “Concubinage, in Islamic Law,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, third edition. She remained enslaved, but the owner was prohibited from selling her and she was freed upon his death. The Schools of law did not agree in when a slave was entitled to this status. Many jurists (such as the Maliki School of law) concluded that a slave attains the status of *umm walad* automatically if she gives birth to her master's child, even if the master did not acknowledge paternity, whereas others (such as the Hanafi School of law) maintained that the owner had to explicitly acknowledge paternity; if not, the mother and the child would remain slaves; Jonathan Brockopp, *Early Mālikī Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 195–196; Johansen, “Valorization,” 90.

84 Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 2:70 ff.

defect was anything that reduced the value of the merchandise—in this case, a slave. As this varied locally, jurists recommended asking local slave merchants whether the defect reduced the price. Female slaves bought for sexual intercourse, *jawārī al-waṭʾ*⁸⁵ (“girls for sexual intercourse”), had specific conditions. Defects that reduced their beauty and pleasurability were grounds for revocation or compensation in proportion to the reduction in value. Such defects could be bad breath, loss of virginity, hair that turned out to be dyed, inclination to fornicate, and, most strikingly, defects in the sexual organ.⁸⁶ It is important to remember, however, that even when a slave was not bought for pleasure (*li-ghayr al-mutʿa*) but for domestic or other work, she could be used for sexual purposes by her male owner.⁸⁷

In Rāḡib’s collection of sale contracts the formula *lā ʿayb fī farj* (“no defect in the sexual organ”) is used in four contracts.⁸⁸ This number has no statistical relevance, but it is still interesting that three of the enslaved women whose genital organs were inspected were relatively cheap—far below medium price—and did not seem to be intended for sexual service primarily. In general, all young and healthy women were probably expected to provide sexual service, even though their main occupation was domestic work, if their owner was a man. The sales contracts of female slaves to female buyers do not include this formula.

The seller could inform the buyer about minor defects before the sale and get exemption from them, a strategy known as *barāʿa*.⁸⁹ If the buyer agreed, exemption was recorded on the sale contract and made annulment impossible. If the buyer found other defects, or the declared defects were more serious than initially divulged, he could cancel the purchase or receive compensation. One account by al-Samawʿal reveals that in practice, regulation was ambiguous and allowed manipulation. He warned sellers of slave-girls to make sure that they got exempted for minor defects; in this case, branding marks, or marks from cauterization (*kayy*), a common medical treatment.⁹⁰

Make every effort to be exempted from every defect on the slave-girl [...].
Do not neglect to write an exemption from burn marks on her body. Many

85 Ibid., 2:46.

86 Ibid., 2:72, 74–75, 77, 82.

87 Ibid., 2:42.

88 All four contracts are from the ninth century; Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 1:4, 7, 10, 14. See also *ibid.* 2:82.

89 See note 82.

90 Hanafī jurists accepted burn marks from cauterization as grounds for revocation of the sale as they can conceal spots from diseases such as leprosy; *ibid.*, 87.

groups of Turks cauterize the breasts of slave-girls to prevent them from sagging, but instead they droop very much. Some of them cauterize slave-girls on the tops of their head; others cauterize them on their vulvas. Other cauterize them on their bellies and their [...] ⁹¹ There are imaginary stories about the Turks on this subject, but verily, they do it with their own daughters. Islamic law makes it obligatory for the buyer to be allowed to return her, even after he had sexual intercourse with her, on the condition that she was not a virgin and he did not know about the burn mark or something that looks like it.

A merchant told me that he bought a Turkish slave-girl and when he got bored of her, he endeavored to return her. There was a small mark, the size of a lupine bean, on her genital area and so he could return her to her owner with a signed record (*maḥḍar*) from the judge (*al-qāḍī*).

A friend of mine told me that he had bought a beautiful Turkish slave-girl and had intercourse with her several days. One night when they woke up at sunrise after having slept together, he looked at her eyes and saw that an eyelash had grown inward and caused her eye to tear. Because of this defect, he returned the slave-girl to her owner.

As far as I know, the only people who are protected from this are Egyptians. When they sell a slave-girl, the buyer and the seller write a clause enumerating every single defect and illness. Then the seller is exempted from all of them, if the buyer agrees. If not, there is no sale. ⁹²

Islamic law protected slave women from being exposed to and exploited sexually by anyone other than their owners, but the examples above indicate that they were exposed to manipulations of the regulations that would afford them a modicum of protection. For al-Samaw'al, the abuses committed by the men in the examples were abuses against the seller, not against the women. In the case of sales transactions, jurists only discussed the rights of the sellers and the buyers, not that of the slaves. The exposure of female slaves on slave markets or other locations for the sale and examinations of possible "defects" must also have been an utterly humiliating situation, not the least for women who could potentially be sold for sexual purposes. ⁹³ Although many jurists decreed that

91 This sentence is not in the edition, and not in MS Escorial 830. It is written in the margin of MS Gotha orient 2045, fol. 60^a; the last word is unreadable.

92 Al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, 96–96; and MS Gotha 2045, fols. 59^b–60^a.

93 For the humiliating treatment of female slaves in the slave markets; see Yūsuf Rāḡib, "Les marches aux esclaves en terre d'islam," in *Mercati e Mercanti nell'Alto Medioevo l'Area Euroasiatica e l'Area Mediterranea* (Spoleto: Presso la Sede del Centro, 1993); esp. 736–742.

female slaves must be decently covered, which often meant the whole body except for the face and hands, this was not always the case in practice. The women's bodies were examined before the purchase and Hanafi jurists permitted male potential buyers of a female slave to "uncover her legs, her arms, her breast (*ṣadr*), and to touch her carefully."⁹⁴

6 The Fate of Slaves

Ibn Buṭlān's slave purchase manual is directed to buyers and al-Samaw'al also addresses sellers; none of them focuses on the slaves and their experiences. Nevertheless, authors occasionally take up slaves' experiences, although from the perspective of the owner.⁹⁵ In *Pleasure Park* in particular, we get a glimpse into the lived experience of slaves in advice to owners and sellers. Al-Samaw'al warns that, given an opportunity, slaves will try to run away. These were risky operations but some slaves managed to escape from their owners.⁹⁶ The inclination to run away (*ibāq*) was one of the most serious defects in slaves, according to jurists.⁹⁷ Al-Samaw'al warns slave owners of one possibility; namely when accompanying their owners on journeys slaves could simply claim that they were free.

The one who is travelling with slaves and slave-girls should as soon as he arrives in a town ask someone who is approved in testimony to attest that the slave or slave-girl is in his possession. He should try to have several people witnessing that the slave is in his company and possession. That is enough for guarding against disobedience on the part of the slave-boy or slave-girl, and his running away and claiming that he is free or the slave of a stranger.⁹⁸

Both female and male slaves were sometimes displayed half-naked or naked at the markets, according to eye-witnesses (*ibid.*, 736; Barker, "Purchasing a Slave", 3). For various locations for the sale; see Rāḡib, "Les Marchés," 724, 734.

94 Johansen, "Valorization," 80. For inspections of slaves and the use of physiognomy, see Ghersetti, "Images of Slave Girls."

95 Women's experiences are always difficult to obtain, but somewhat easier in early modern and modern time, with more documentary evidence and eyewitness accounts. See Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 54–80, for an account of the fate of one young slave woman in the middle of the nineteenth century, extracted from police investigation reports.

96 See Perry, *Daily Life*, 176–180.

97 Rāḡib, *Actes de vente*, 2:275.

98 Al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, 97.

Some slaves took more extreme measures when they were maltreated, as indicated in an anecdote told by al-Samaw'al meant to warn against fierce and rebellious Turkish slave women. Al-Samaw'al includes this narrative in his description of Turkish slaves, which initially copies that of Ibn Buṭlān, but then culminates in a terrifying story he heard from his own Turkish slave-girl. Beyond exaggerations and clarifications meant to edify and entertain the male reader, we can get a glimpse of the desperation induced by constraint, subjection, and humiliation of the slave concubine, not only by her owner but also by his wife. The first part is written by Ibn Buṭlān and copied by al-Samaw'al:

Turkish women combine beauty and whiteness and grace. Their faces tend to look sullen, but their eyes, though small, are sweet. They have a smooth brownness and their stature is between medium and short. There are very few tall ones among them. The beautiful ones are extremely beautiful and the ugly ones exceptions. They are treasure houses for children, gold mines for generations. It very rarely happens that their children are ugly or badly formed. They are clean and refined. ... Bad breath is never found among them, nor any with large buttocks, but they have some nasty characteristics and are of little loyalty.⁹⁹

Al-Samaw'al continues:

The beautiful ones, when imported (*julibat*) young and then educated, they have no faults. But those who are imported when mature are difficult, despite their beauty, and being alone with them is extremely dangerous for weak old men. A slave-girl belonging to me told me that the man who imported her stayed with her at an inn (*khān*) in one of the towns in Khurasān during a stop on their journey. In one of the rooms of the inn, a wealthy and elegant merchant stayed with his wife and several Turkish slave-girls. One of them was exceptionally beautiful. The merchant drank every evening with the town's governor; he returned when it was time to sleep, with people accompanying him to the inn. One evening, the governor tried to buy the beautiful slave-girl. The merchant declined, and did not agree to sell her even when the governor continued to implore and increase his offer. He went back to the inn when it was time to sleep. He

99 From Ibn Buṭlān's manual translated Lewis, Lewis, *Islam*, 250. The Arabic text in Ibn Buṭlān, "Risāla jāmi'a", 376–377, and al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, 135.

slept with that slave-girl in a room hidden in the room where his wife and slave-girls were sleeping. The slave-girl had heard about the governor's wish to buy her and that her owner did not allow him. She desired the governor and when her master was overcome by sleep and drunkenness, she bolted the door on them and locked it. She approached him and tied his arms with a rope that she had prepared. One of the other slave-girls took notice of her, she had become suspicious when she bolted the door and locked it. Now she was standing by the door and saw what the slave-girl did to their owner. She took out a knife from his belt (?) and cut him in his neck. The other slave-girl ran screaming to her master's wife,¹⁰⁰ who rose up together with the other slave-girls. They shouted at the slave-girl [in the inner room] and threatened her, but she did not stop before she had killed her master. The door was firm, it did not break easily, and they did not manage to break through until a while after he had passed away.

The slave-girl did not even pay attention to them when they entered, due to the strength of her soul, because she desired the town's governor. His wife threw herself upon her beating her with the help of the slave-girls and they tied her arms. The governor's companions and envoys came and negotiated with her about the slave-girl, and demanded her to let her go. However, the merchant's wife was a sharp-tongued woman and they were not able to rescue the slave-girl from her. She threatened them with a variety of atrocities and mutilations undertaken by herself if they took her. The Sultan gave her the right to punish the slave-girl. She cut her arms and legs and vulva, and tore out her eyes in front of a crowd of people. She left the slave-girl alive, and she stayed alive for seven days, begging people for food before she died.¹⁰¹

This gruesome warning eventually turns out to be a story of women's dangerous passion. The slave-girl kills her master, according to al-Samaw'al, because she passionately desires the governor, and the wife in turn tortures and kills the slave-girl in a most heinous way. If there is a kernel of truth in it, it may be in the setting; a merchant travelling with his wife and female slaves, of whom he has singled out the most beautiful and sleeps with her practically in the same room that his wife is staying in. The young, newly "imported" woman (al-Samaw'al's slave-girl) hears the tumultuous uproar when the merchant is killed by his slave

100 The Arabic phrase here is "her master's cousin." The fact that the wife was also her husband's cousin meant that she had a secured standing with him, even in the case that he had more wives and concubines.

101 Al-Samaw'al, *Nuzhat*, 135–136.

concubine; perhaps the slave defended herself against him. The sexual violence of this retribution underscores the sole purpose of the punished woman's slave life.

As stated by Orlando Patterson, "Throughout the ages of slavery, women were not only the main and preferred source of slaves in most slave-holding societies, but the condition of non-slave women provided the psychological, socio-economic, legal, and physical model of enslavement."¹⁰² He finds that the most influential factor on slavery was polygyny, especially in combination with "brideswealth," the custom that the groom or his family pays money or property to the family of the bride.¹⁰³ These factors coincide in the history of Islam; the legal requirement of the groom to pay a dowry to the bride and not to her family does not challenge Patterson's thesis—slave concubinage became an affordable alternative to marriage.

7 Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, erotic compendia are potentially rich sources for the history of female slavery in the Islamic world, especially when juxtaposed with legal writings and documentary sources. There are many potential sources to uncover in future research; sex manuals and erotic compendia are still mainly available in uncritical editions or manuscripts, and the manuscript traditions are not yet studied. Despite a significant growth in slavery scholarship in recent decades, there is still a noticeable lack of research on premodern domestic slavery, the main female occupation, and there is virtually no research on sexual slavery, except for the numerous studies on elite courtesans and concubines, whose lives are not representative for the slave conditions overall.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Orlando Patterson, "Trafficking, Gender and Slavery: Past and Present," in Jean Allain, ed., *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 325.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 338–339. See Ali for the long debate on whether marriage is a sale or not, *Marriage and Slavery*, esp. the section on dowries, 49–64.

¹⁰⁴ For the state of research on medieval Islamic slavery; see Craig Perry, "Historicizing Slavery in the Medieval Islamic World," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49 (2017): 133–138. Domestic slavery in Cairo during the Ayyubids is better explored thanks to Perry (see note 69), and of course Goitein and others who have uncovered valuable documentary material (mentioned in Perry, *ibid.*). There is considerable more research on domestic slavery in the late medieval and early modern eras. For a relatively early study on Mamluk domestic slavery, see S. Marmon, "Domestic Slavery in the Mamluk Empire: A Preliminary Sketch," in S. Marmon, ed., *Slavery in the Middle East*, (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1999), 1–24.

As stated in the beginning of this article, female slaves probably constituted the majority in the medieval Islamic world, yet male slaves were more valued and generally attained a higher standing.¹⁰⁵ Many traded women would eventually end up serving free women in a domestic setting, and there were many female slave owners. Whenever the slaves were on display on the market, however, they were selected and bought by men, even if the men acted as agents for female slave owners. Men were in almost all circumstances allowed sexual access to their own female slaves. For the slave, being singled out as her master's concubine usually reflected a higher standing, more security, and material advantages, at least temporarily. If she gave birth to her master's child and he acknowledged it, she attained the advantageous position as *umm walad*. In that case, her everyday life was probably not so different from that of the free wife, except that she had lower rank in the polygynous family. There are myriad examples of slave concubines with high standing and influence in Islamic history. Nevertheless, this status did not diminish the uncertainties and distress that were almost inevitable in the life-cycles of slaves; many were violently uprooted from the native homes, their family ties were cut off forever, and they were exposed at slave markets and subjected to humiliation, forced work, forced marriages, and sexual exploitation. Their voices were silenced, but it is possible to detect accounts of their experiences in narratives written to instruct buyers or entertain readers. It is probable that many slaves endured periods of anguish, not least when they first were enslaved, an often violent event. According to Perry, documentary and narrative sources suggest that the four main methods of enslavement between the ninth and thirteenth century were kidnapping, raiding, piracy, and material distress.¹⁰⁶ Islamic law protected slave women from being exposed to and sexually exploited by anyone other than their owners, who, in turn, were obliged to give them food, clothing, and shelter,

105 Goitein brought to light the fact that female domestic slavery dominated in the society reflected in the Geniza records; S.D. Goitein, "Slaves and Slavegirls in the Cairo Geniza Records," 20. Even so, Goitein, like most scholars, is much more interested in male slavery, and he even expresses some sympathy for the institution of sexual slavery, "In a polygamous society, it had certain advantages—for all parties concerned—over polygamy itself" (ibid., 6). He does not mention whether he considers the enslaved woman as one of "the parties concerned". Moreover, Goitein was "much impressed" when the nineteenth century historian al-Jabarti "praised his old mother for buying a beautiful slavegirl for his father" (ibid.). See also D.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*. Vol 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

106 Perry, *Daily Life*, 36–37. Perry has found thorough evidence that the slave trade in Eastern Africa was predominantly predatory, built on kidnapping and raiding; ibid., 33–37.

and refrain from excessive violence. Narratives about elite slave courtesans and concubines sometimes idealize the lives of these women. In practice, however, many slaves suffered abuse and exploitation, not only at the hands of aggressive owners, but also when transported from their place of origin, exposed on the slave markets, and passed on to new owners. The advice given in slave purchase and sex manuals reveals the precarious situation of enslaved women. They were not only bought and sold as chattel, but they were also exposed to manipulations of the regulations that were meant to afford them a modicum of protection. Meanwhile, elite men justified sexual slavery in terms of men's health and slave women's robust nature. They also endeavored to ensure that free women were not alienated by guaranteeing them a higher rank in female hierarchies.

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