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Eunuchs at the Service of Yemen's Rasūlid Dynasty (626–858/1229–1454)

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Abstract: The significant roles played by eunuchs (castrated slaves) in Rasūlid Yemen have thus far escaped scholarly scrutiny. A systematic study of the historiographic and biographical writings of ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-Khazrajī, chronicler of the Rasūlid court at the turn of the 9th/15th century, reveals that eunuchs figured prominently both in the highest ranks of the dynasty's political, administrative, and military hierarchy, as well as in the most intimate realms of royal households. The author, however, remains silent on the origins of these men and on the capture, castration, and deracination they suffered as young boys. In order to reconstruct the slave trading practices that supplied the Rasūlids with eunuchs, a late 7th/13th-century collection of administrative documents known as *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* shall be drawn upon. This source names an African export hub from which slaves were shipped across the Red Sea to Yemen, lists prices and taxes paid for eunuchs, and reveals that the Rasūlids actively interfered in the Yemeni slave trade in order to secure the most desirable eunuchs for themselves. Taken together, these narrative and administrative sources shed light on the eunuch institution in Rasūlid Yemen and on its role in sustaining the dynasty.

Keywords: Yemen, slavery, eunuchs, Rasūlid, medieval

While the roles played by eunuchs in premodern Islamic polities have received significant attention since the 1970s,¹ the eunuchs of Rasūlid Yemen have been overlooked both by researchers of slavery and by scholars of Yemen's medieval period. This paper argues that eunuchs were important players in the Rasūlid system of government. A reconstruction of the lives of Rasūlid eunuchs on the basis of administrative and narrative sources reveals that these men performed crucial tasks in the dynasty's military and political apparatus, as well as in royal households. After a short introductory section on the eunuch institution in the

¹ E.g., AYALON 1977, 1999; DE LA PUENTE 2003; EL CHEIKH 2005; MARMON 1995; TOLEDANO 1984, 379–390; TOLINO 2018.

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Islamic context, evidence for slave trading patterns that brought African eunuchs to Yemen in the late 7th/13th century will be discussed. The second half of this paper will examine the multiple roles performed by eunuchs at the Rasūlid court of Yemen: their political and military careers as exemplified by one remarkable biography, their responsibilities vis-à-vis Rasūlid women and children, as well as charitable and religious pursuits.

The emergence of the eunuch institution in the Islamic context

Eunuchs formed part of royal courts in a broad range of historical settings. In the Islamic context, the Qur'ān does not explicitly prohibit the castration of men, although verses 118 and 119 of the fourth *sūra* have been broadly interpreted as condemning any mutilation of God's creatures. Additionally, a *ḥadīth* relayed by al-Jāḥiẓ points towards an aversion of the Prophet Muḥammad to castration.² Although these sources were subject to diverging interpretations, Islamic law soon prohibited Muslims from castrating themselves or others. The possession of eunuchs remained permissible, however, since the Prophet himself had accepted as a gift the Coptic slave girl Maryam together with her eunuch guardian.³ The Islamic political and military establishment increasingly relied on eunuchs beginning in the 1st/7th century, when the first Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya (d. 60/680) charged them with the supervision of the court's female quarters.⁴ Their presence in the royal harem quickly won them the additional responsibility of educating royal children, which enabled them to form lasting bonds with future regents and at times to act as interim rulers on behalf of their underage protégés. The introduction of mamluks (slave soldiers)⁵ into the 'Abbāsīd military system further increased the eunuchs' reach and authority. Entrusted with supervising the training of young mamluks, eunuchs joined the 'Abbāsīd military elite, occupying the rank of commanders in large numbers. By the 3rd/9th century, eunuchs had thus become indispensable to three key institutions constituting Islamic polities: the royal household, the political administration, and the military. Throughout the

2 al-Jāḥiẓ 1930, 128–129.

3 HAIN 2017, 327.

4 AYALON 1999, 66.

5 In this article, slave soldiers will be referred to as *mamluks*, while the eponymous Sultanate (648–922/1250–1517) will be capitalized (*Mamluks*).

temporal and geographical breadth of the medieval Islamic world, eunuchs continued to be firmly established in these three spheres of influence, although each polity developed its own characteristic variation.

The trade of eunuchs to Yemen during the Rasūlid era

While narrative sources rarely mention the origins of Rasūlid eunuchs, a collection of administrative documents from the late 7th/13th century known as *Nūr al-ma'ārif fī nuẓum wa-qawānīn wa-a'rāf al-Yaman fī al-'ahd al-muẓaffarī al-wārif* offers important insights into the slave trade across the Red Sea to Yemen.⁶ This source consists of a wide range of administrative texts written by anonymous scribes in 690–695/1290–1295, the last years of the reign of sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf and the early rule of his son and successor al-Ashraf 'Umar.

Several lists and descriptions contained in *Nūr al-ma'ārif* prove that in the late 7th/13th century eunuchs were brought to Yemen from the port of Zayla' on the Horn of Africa,⁷ which is commonly identified with Saylac in today's Somaliland.⁸ This port had sustained trade relations with Arabia since at least the 3rd/9th century, as documented in al-Ya'qūbī's geographical work *Kitāb al-buldān*.⁹ Zayla' was a major entrepôt for trade with Aden and Zabīd throughout the medieval period,¹⁰ and several sources attest to slaves being shipped from there to Yemen.¹¹ By the late 7th/13th century, Zayla' was controlled by the Ethiopian sultanate of Afwāt (also known as Ifat), which was paramount among a number of Muslim polities linking the Red Sea coast to the Ethiopian hinterland.¹² The prominence of Zayla' as a slave trading hub seems to have been stable over a long time period. In the 10th/16th century, the Italian traveler Ludovico de Varthema visited the port and noted:

⁶ Anonymous 2003, *Nūr al-ma'ārif fī nuẓum wa-qawānīn wa-a'rāf al-Yaman fī al-'ahd al-muẓaffarī al-wārif* (*Lumière de la connaissance. Règles, lois et coutumes du Yémen sous le règne du sultan rasoulide al-Muẓaffar*), ed. by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Jāzim, Sana'a: Centre français d'archéologie et de sciences sociales.

⁷ Anonymous 2003, I, 360, 362–363, 365–366, 429, 471, 492–424.

⁸ POWER 2012, 185. Alternatively, the port has been associated with modern Zula in Eritrea.

⁹ FAUVELLE-AYMAR et al. 2017, 31.

¹⁰ LABĪB 1965.

¹¹ E.g., al-Khazrajī 2009, 2339; Anonymous 2003, I, 365, 403.

¹² FAUVELLE-AYMAR and HIRSCH 2004, 41.

Over there are also sold very large quantities of slaves, who are those of the Prester John [i. e., Ethiopians],¹³ which the Moors take in war. And from here they bring them to Persia, Arabia felix [Yemen], Mecca, Cairo and India.¹⁴

In *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, the eunuchs sold in Zayla' to Yemeni traders are categorized as *ḥabashī* and *zanjī*, pointing to two distinct regions of origin: today's Horn of Africa, as well as Somalia and coastal regions further south. These ethnonyms that are frequently found in medieval Arabic sources are however geographically vague. Furthermore, since information on medieval slave trading routes leading to the Red Sea coast is scarce, the exact origins of the Rasūlid eunuchs remain somewhat mysterious.¹⁵

Administrative texts reveal that Yemeni merchants bought eunuchs in Zayla' with the help of local middlemen (Ar. sg. *nazīl*) who facilitated the transaction. Prices paid for eunuchs considered to be "high-quality" were three to five times higher than those for female or uncastrated male slaves of the same perceived quality.¹⁶ Additionally, Yemeni traders had to remunerate the *nazīl*, cover transportation costs and travel provisions, and pay import taxes in Yemen. The following quote enumerates these extra costs with regards to eunuchs:

The additional expenses upon the eunuch are 21 dinars. From this, the tithes (*'ushūr*) in Zabid are five and a half, and the hire¹⁷ [of the boat] is two dinars or three. The rest are provisions, because he eats meat and butter and is sustained by it. The eunuch can be taxed a little more than that. The tithes in Aden on the eunuch are four and a half.¹⁸

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

14 De Varthema 1928, 158. "*Quivi anco se vende grandissima quantità de schiavi, li quali sonno de quelli del Prete Ianni, che li Mori li pigliano in guerra. E de qui se portano nella Persia, nella Arabia felice et alla Meca et al Cairo et in India,*" translation Magdalena Moorthy Kloss.

15 There has been a recent increase in scholarship on the history of slavery in Ethiopia. The *Journal of Northeast African Studies* published a special issue on slavery in Ethiopia in 2017. For an overview of the research field, see the introduction (BONACCI and MECKELBURG, 2017, 5–30).

16 Anonymous 2003, I, 362.

17 *Kirā'* – the term's basic meaning is "hire, rental," but in the context of *Nūr al-ma'ārif* it usually denotes charges paid for transporting merchandise, usually by boat. The collection includes a number of documents specifying amounts to be paid for transportation from various foreign ports and cities to destinations in Yemen (e. g., Anonymous 2003, I, 107–115, 365–366).

18 Anonymous 2003, I, 363.

This passage and others specifically mention Zabīd and Aden as destinations for slaves shipped out of Zayla'. The Indian Ocean port city of Aden at the southern tip of Yemen was predominant for Rasūlid commerce, while ports connecting to Zabīd, one of the two capitals of the Rasūlid state, shifted every few centuries due to a changing shoreline.¹⁹ Travel provisions for eunuchs were about four times more expensive than those for other slaves, underlining their value as luxury possessions and prompting the scribe's laconic remark that the eunuch "...eats meat and butter and is sustained by it."²⁰ It appears that the eunuchs of Rasūlid Yemen were castrated in specialized centers in Africa, whose existence is documented by medieval Arabic sources.²¹ Those who survived this mutilation then faced a taxing and dangerous journey over land and sea. The trade in eunuchs was thus a high-investment, high-risk business that could potentially yield sizeable returns. As will be shown, a stout physique was considered desirable in eunuchs, explaining why such lavish provisions were allocated to them.

The arrival of slave shipments on Yemeni soil was meticulously monitored by Rasūlid state officials, as the following passage reveals. The quote is preceded by a gap in the manuscript and therefore begins abruptly:

...that every boat arrives. The import of slaves²² is displayed, and the good eunuchs (*khuddām*)²³ are chosen from it, all of them stout.²⁴ And the good slave girls (*jawārī*),²⁵ if they are

19 KEALL 2008.

20 Anonymous 2003, I, 362.

21 For example, the Mamluk historian al-'Umarī (d. 749/1349) describes how slave traders brought their slaves to an Ethiopian town called Washalaw in order to have them castrated and thus raise their price (Ibid. 2010, 37–38).

22 Instead of "*al-jalb al-raqīq*," I chose to read the correct genitive construction "*jalb al-raqīq*," meaning "the import of slaves." *Raqīq* is generally a collective term for slaves, but can also be an adjective which, referring to humans, signifies "weak, abject, mean, paltry, contemptible, soft" (LANE 1992, 1131). The literal translation would thus be "the abject import," but despite the grammatical inaccuracy, the basic meaning of *raqīq* here seems more plausible.

23 The overwhelming majority of eunuchs found in Rasūlid sources were designated as *khādim* (pl. *khuddām*, collective *khadam*). This word originally means domestic servant, help, or attendant, but became a common euphemism for eunuchs from at least the 3rd/9th century onwards (AYALON 1999, 6; Ibn Manẓūr 1981, 1115; see also the entry for *al-khadam* in Ibn Sida's 5th/11th century dictionary *al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ*, n.d., 140). Despite the term's original ambiguity – designating both servant and eunuch – it was consistently and exclusively used for castrated slaves in Rasūlid sources.

24 "*Kull ghalīẓ al-qīṭ'a*."

25 *Jāriya* (pl. *jawārī*) principally means young girl but is also a euphemism for a female slave (al-Ḥimyarī 1999, 1048). The word shares a root with the Arabic word for neighbor (*jār/jirān*), which in the Yemeni context also designates a person not belonging to, but living under the protection of a tribe.

needed. Concerning the eunuchs, from them is chosen what is suitable without hesitation, and they are bought for the civil service (*dīwān*),²⁶ dressed, and handed over to the commanding eunuch.²⁷

As this passage shows, the Rasūlid administration reserved for itself the right to preselect the most desirable eunuchs and female slaves brought to Yemen by independent traders. Other evidence from *Nūr al-ma'ārif* and from a Rasūlid administrative treaty written in the early 9th/15th century also attests to the state's active control of slave imports.²⁸ Slaves could only be sold on the public market after a royal order had exempted them from government service. The administration also kept an eye on eunuchs who became available at a later stage because they were in conflict with their masters, were sold, or wished to change owners. This evidence is consistent with anecdotes related by al-Khazraji in which slaves abandoned their masters and joined the service of the Rasūlid court, and speaks to a certain degree of autonomy possessed by these individuals.²⁹ Taken together, these strategies suggest that in the Rasūlid era, the government was the main owner of eunuchs in Yemen. Unlike the Mamluks, who commissioned slave trading agents with funds from the state treasury,³⁰ the Rasūlid state was not directly involved in the slave trade but benefitted from it both by laying claim on the most suitable individuals and by exacting taxes on slave imports.

Eunuchs in the Rasūlid military and political administration

In the year 787/1385, the Yemeni historian 'Alī b. Ḥasan al-Khazraji reported the death of a man whose name bore testimony to his particular position at the very heart of the Rasūlid court. Abū al-Hāzim Ahyaf b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ashrafī al-Afḍalī al-Mujāhidī al-Mu'ayyadī, also known as Amīn al-Dīn, was the best-known eunuch of the Rasūlid era.³¹ His fourfold name suffix (*nisba*) demonstrates that

²⁶ *Dīwān* usually designates a specific government bureau, but can also, as is the case here, stand for the Rasūlid civil service as a whole (cf. SMITH 2005, 230).

²⁷ Anonymous 2003, I, 494.

²⁸ Anonymous 2003, I, 514; SMITH 2006, 65.

²⁹ al-Khazraji 1906, II, 205, 238.

³⁰ BARKER 2014, 243 ff.

³¹ In addition to the sources below, Ahyaf's biography is also included in al-Khazraji, MS 446, and in Bā Makhrama 2008, VI, 335.

he was successively owned by four Rasūlid sultans: al-Mū'ayyad Dawūd,³² al-Mujāhid 'Alī,³³ al-Afḍal al-'Abbās,³⁴ and al-Ashraf Ismā'īl.³⁵ Although Ahyaf's date of birth is unknown, this information allows the conclusion that he served the Rasūlid dynasty for a remarkable minimum of 66 years. This fact not only proves that the eunuch was highly valued by his successive owners, but also means that he was able to shape Rasūlid rule in Yemen for a much longer timespan than the sultans he served, albeit on a limited scale.

Ahyaf is the figurehead among a number of influential eunuchs who rose through the ranks of the Rasūlid political and military apparatus. Half of the 30 eunuchs recorded by name in al-Khazrajī's works occupied high positions in the Rasūlid military and/or political administration. They were frequently deployed on military missions and put in charge of the sultan's mamluk troops. Four Rasūlid eunuchs, among them Ahyaf, are known to have borne the title of *amīr*, the highest military rank in Rasūlid Yemen. Chief eunuchs (Ar. sg. *ṭawāshī*)³⁶ were frequently instated as governors (Ar. sg. *wālī*) of cities, fortresses, and administrative regions. A few eunuchs were deployed as envoys (Ar. sg. *safīr*) accompanying diplomatic gifts that the Rasūlid dynasty regularly sent to the Mamluk rulers of Egypt.³⁷

A detailed reconstruction of Ahyaf's career, based on scattered evidence from al-Khazrajī's major Rasūlid chronicle *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lu'iyya fī tāriḫ al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*³⁸ and his biographical dictionary *Al-'Iqd al-fākhīr al-ḥasan fī ṭabaqāt akābir ahl al-Yaman*,³⁹ vividly illustrates the crucial roles assigned to eunuchs in the Rasūlid military and political administration. Although nothing is known about Ahyaf's origins and early life, it is likely that he was among the *ḥabashī* or

32 R. 696–721/1297–1322.

33 R. 721–764/1322–1363.

34 R. 764–778/1363–1376.

35 R. 778–803/1376–1400.

36 The Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) contends that *ṭawāshī* stems from the Turkish *ṭābūshī*, meaning servant (PELLAT and ORHONLU 2012). In the Mamluk context, Shaun MARMON has translated the term as “high-ranking eunuch” (Ibid. 1995, 16). Similarly, the term is used in medieval Yemeni sources to denote a eunuch of superior rank.

37 al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 93, 101; al-Khazrajī 2009, 2203; Ibn Iyās 1974, 487. This present included ten chief eunuchs (*khuddām ṭawāshīya*), four slaves (*'abīd*), and six female slaves (*jawārī*).

38 This chronicle of the Rasūlid era until the turn of the 9th/15th century had originally been part of a larger historiographical work by al-Khazrajī that circulated in various formats. The first edited and translated version of a manuscript found in India was published in 1906 (India Office MS 710, al-Khazrajī 1906). Despite containing errors, this version remains widely used. In 2009, 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Ḥībshī published a new edition.

39 al-Khazrajī 2009. This work is also known as *Ṭirāz a'lām al-zaman fī ṭabaqāt a'yān al-Yaman*.

zanji eunuchs brought to Yemen at a young age. Having been selected by Rasūlid officials, he would have been introduced into the royal court and placed under the tutelage of an adult eunuch.⁴⁰ There, he must have quickly adapted to an unfamiliar language and environment, carrying out the tasks assigned to him and gaining the appreciation of his masters. Ahyaf's entry in al-Khazraji's biographical dictionary opens with the following remarkable characterization:

He was a eunuch (*khādim*) of sound judgement, a horseman, energetic, brave, audacious, a shedder of blood, cultured and solemn. He was one of the senior amirs, highly determined, of great spirit, severe in attack and of honest resolve. [...] He was the only one to advise the sultans, managing and controlling fully the matters he had been entrusted with. He did not know partiality in his words or deeds. He was the first whom the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid promoted. He entrusted him with the fortresses, charged him with the matters of the missions, and appointed him over the soldiers. He was hardheaded and did not turn away from his determined goal. [...] He was severe in punishment, reckless with the sword. He did not know forgiveness for anyone. [...] He killed many of the people of Ta'izz and others.⁴¹

Far from a formulaic biographical description, al-Khazraji here paints the picture of a complex character. Since the writer and the eunuch were contemporaries, it is quite possible that they knew each other. Al-Khazraji's writings enable us to trace the steps of Ahyaf's stellar career in some detail. In 729/1328-9, the eunuch took possession of the city of Maṣūra⁴² in the aftermath of an insurgency, proving his stature as military leader.⁴³ For the following two decades, the eunuch disappears from the historical record, re-emerging in 751/1350 when the sultan al-Malik al-Mujāhid appoints him as commander (*muqaddam*)⁴⁴ and paymaster (*shaddā*)⁴⁵ in the fortress of Ta'izz, the second Rasūlid capital besides Zabīd, before leaving on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The sultan's *hajj* proved fateful,

⁴⁰ *Nūr al-ma'ārif* mentions a "tutor of the eunuchs" among the state officials remunerated in late 7th/13th-century Ta'izz, thus providing further evidence that many eunuchs who later became influential figures at the medieval courts of Yemen were educated within the palace walls (Anonymous 2003, I, 550). Al-Khazraji's biography of the influential eunuch Amīn al-Dīn Ahyaf mentions in passing that he had raised Jamāl al-Dīn Bārī', the very eunuch he later sent to the gallows (al-Khazraji 2009, 560).

⁴¹ al-Khazraji 2009, 559.

⁴² A city at the south foot of the Dumlūwa mountains. Cf. Redhouse's note in al-Khazraji 1906, III, 178.

⁴³ al-Khazraji 1906, II, 52.

⁴⁴ My translation of *muqaddam* as commander follows AYALON 1953b, 206.

⁴⁵ Redhouse translates this obscure term as "paymaster." VALLET only mentions the function of *shadd* and translates it as "inspecteur" (Ibid. 669).

as he was captured by Mamluk troops and deported to Egypt.⁴⁶ In the ensuing political crisis, Ahyaf acted decisively and autonomously. He executed a eunuch and a judge whom he both suspected of a conspiracy⁴⁷ and subsequently filled their vacant positions, even though such high-level appointments were usually made by the sultan himself. In the absence of both the sultan and his powerful mother Jihat Ṣalāḥ (the latter being on her return journey from Mecca), Ahyaf acted as the highest representative of Rasūlid power in Yemen and went against anyone who challenged the established political order. Upon the queen mother's return to Ta'izz, Ahyaf immediately yielded the supreme command to her. When the sultan finally returned from Egypt fourteen months after his capture, he rewarded Ahyaf's loyalty and ensured the continuation of his remarkable career.

In 753/1352, Ahyaf and two judges were placed at the head of a military campaign tasked with quelling a rebellion in Ba'dān,⁴⁸ a notoriously unruly mountain region north of Ibb. Rasūlid troops had already failed to subdue the people of Ba'dān in 727/1326-7,⁴⁹ and Ahyaf's attempt was equally unsuccessful. Nevertheless, his military career continued to flourish. After almost two decades of silence, our sources mention Ahyaf again in 771/1369. Al-Afḍal al-'Abbās had meanwhile succeeded his father as sultan and tasked the eunuch with taking over Zabīd, which had been witness both to a revolt by the 'Awārīn,⁵⁰ a group of tribesmen in the Rasūlid service, and an attempted takeover by troops of the Zaydī imam

46 al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 84. al-Khazrajī writes that the sultan al-Mujāhid 'Alī "...entrusted him with the fortress of Ta'izz more than once, and the days of his rule were the best days, when he surrounded the people with complete safety and justice in the laws. The strong and the weak, the lowly and the honourable were on one level." (Ibid. 2009, 559).

47 The eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Bārī' and the judge Muwaffaq al-Dīn, al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 85 ff.

48 "(A) well-known range of difficult hills in about lat. 14° N., long. 44°30' E., north of 'Ibb and Ḥabb, and east of Saḥūl, mentioned in every one of the authorities, and marked on all maps as 'Baadan'." (Redhouse's note in al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 178). The sultan's military commanders had unsuccessfully attempted to conquer this mountain region already in 727/1326-7 (al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 36.) In 752/1351-2, the people of Ba'dān rebelled, and a year later the sultan sent a force against them, placing at its head two judges and the eunuch Ahyaf. Their operation failed. In 754/1353, finally, the conquest of the Ba'dān mountains was again attempted, this time through an extraordinary show of force from the Rasūlid military. Led by the eunuch Safī al-Dīn Abū Mal'aq and other top military officials, 550 horsemen and 12,000 foot soldiers surrounded the mountains (al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 80.) However, the leader of Ba'dān devised a stratagem that led to the sultan's troops falling apart and fleeing. In 775/1373-4, the leader of Ba'dān was murdered in a plot, and his head sent to the sultan. Even after this incident, the Rasūlids' relationship with the people of Ba'dān remained contentious.

49 al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 36.

50 al-Khazrajī 1906, III, 177.

who controlled Northern Yemen.⁵¹ Through artful military strategy, the eunuch was able to storm Zabīd, punishing the insurgents severely. This success won him the post of governor (*wāli*) of the city, which he maintained until his death.⁵² Ahyaf ruled Zabīd with an iron hand, as the following anecdote from 777/1375 illustrates. At the time, the Zaydī imam al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn⁵³ had ventured into the Tihāma plain, causing the governors of its smaller towns to seek shelter in Zabīd. Facing no opposition, the imam and his troops advanced swiftly and beleaguered the city. Al-Khazraji, who was in Zabīd at the time, describes the following events:

The eunuch Ahyaf was in those days the *amir* in the city. He had requested the sheikhs of the villages and commanded them to gather their men and have them in readiness until they receive his news, and that none of them should delay, lest they face the most severe punishment. He was determined to attack the [imam's] camp on one of those nights, with the soldiers who were in Zabīd and all the villagers. The news reached [the imam] from one of the villagers, and he hastened to turn back. He did not stay longer than three days and set out to return on the fourth.⁵⁴

This passage demonstrates that Ahyaf was able to exert authority not only over the soldiers stationed in Zabīd but also over the tribal sheikhs and their men who had flocked to the city from surrounding areas. The threat of an imminent attack by the eunuch and his followers sufficed to put the imam to flight. Such anecdotes portray Ahyaf as a skilled and widely feared military commander. His uncompromising character, already palpable in the preceding events, is even more starkly on display in two instances. In 783/1381, the sultan discharged a judge who had mistreated the people in the region of Sihām and assigned him to Ahyaf, whose brutal treatment led to his death.⁵⁵ Two years later, he pressed his own scribe (*kātib*) until he died and confiscated his property.⁵⁶

Ahyaf himself died in 787/1385.⁵⁷ Combined evidence from chronicles and biographical sources has enabled us to reconstruct a life spent at the very heart of the Rasūlid state apparatus. His unforgiving and belligerent style made him a celebrated military figure, but also tainted his reputation. The closing sentences

51 al-Khazraji 1906, II, 141 ff.

52 al-Khazraji 1906, II, 548.

53 R. 773–793/1371–1390.

54 al-Khazraji 1906, II, 154–155.

55 al-Khazraji 1906, II, 172.

56 In 785/1383, al-Khazraji 1906, II, 176.

57 al-Khazraji 2009, 559.

of al-Khazraji's obituary yet again hover between admiration and reproach for this complex individual:

He honoured the learned and paid them respect. He possessed noble traits, morals, and honest principles. He continued to be governor in Zabīd for just a few days less than 15 years. He had little greed for the people's money. He was religious in his soul and always remained in complete purity. He knew nothing of hypocrisy but was reckless with the sword. He destroyed many people, rightfully and without reason. May God, who is to be exalted, forgive him.⁵⁸

Ahyaf's biography, while being exceptional, vividly illustrates how Rasūlid sultans placed great trust in castrated slaves, deploying them as executors of their will. The particular relationship that eunuchs had to their royal masters also manifests itself in the duties they were given in connection with Rasūlid noblewomen.

Eunuchs and Rasūlid women

The presence of eunuchs at Islamic courts has often been explained as a necessary by-product of the seclusion of Muslim elite women from the public. Harem culture, the argument went, necessitated the employment of large numbers of eunuchs to enforce the quasi-total separation of women from the male sphere of the palace and the outside world. As such, the eunuch's role was long interpreted against the backdrop of a widely misunderstood institution that had become a popular trope in Western literature and scholarship.⁵⁹ Only recently have common perceptions of the harem and the historical seclusion of Muslim women received the necessary critical scrutiny.⁶⁰ Scholarly portrayals of eunuchs in Islamic societies are still too often fitted to stereotypical images of the harem, but some research has challenged these views, suggesting that royal women may have used eunuchs to increase their political clout.⁶¹

At the heart of interactions between eunuchs and royal women lies a paradox: eunuchs were often portrayed as supervisors of princesses and queens, who however were their superiors in rank and often their owners. Who, then, supervised whom? Rasūlid sources paint a complex picture. First of all, the

⁵⁸ al-Khazraji 1906, II, 183.

⁵⁹ Cf. LEWIS 2004, 183.

⁶⁰ E.g., BRAY 2004; EL CHEIKH 2005; LEWIS 2004; PEIRCE 1993.

⁶¹ E.g., DE LA PUENTE 2003, 172; TOLEDANO 1984, 382.

dynasty's women were frequently referred to by the name of their eunuch administrator (*zimām*). This naming convention utilized the Arabic noun *jīha*, a term generally denoting a place or direction.⁶² The wife of sultan al-Ashraf Ismā'īl, for instance, was known as Jihat Mu'tib, named after her *zimām* Jamāl al-Dīn Mu'tib al-Ashrafī.⁶³ Scholars of Mamluk Egypt have translated *zimām* as guardian or supervisor,⁶⁴ terms that do not accurately reflect the nature of such relationships in the Rasūlid context. Instead, I propose to render the title *zimām* as “administrator.”

The close relationship between royal women and their eunuchs is strongly on display in *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, particularly in long lists of gifts handed out during religious celebrations,⁶⁵ and in lists of supplies allocated to members of the royal family.⁶⁶ These documents clearly identify eunuch administrators as the highest-ranking officials in the households of Rasūlid women. In addition, these households comprised a number of other eunuchs of different rank. For example, supply lists concerning the lady of the chief eunuch Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr specify clothing allowances for “senior” and “junior eunuchs” (*al-khuddām al-kibār / al-khuddām al-sighār*), who were given widely unequal salaries and allowances.⁶⁷ The chief eunuch Raḍī al-Dīn Fakhr received a monthly salary of 20 dinars while the other eunuchs in his lady's household obtained between five and two dinars.⁶⁸ The sheer number of eunuchs working in the households of Rasūlid women is remarkable. The smallest female household recorded in *Nūr al-ma'ārif* was administered by the chief eunuch Shāfī' al-Dumlūwī and included nine additional eunuchs of lower rank.⁶⁹ The largest known household belonged to

⁶² The related verb *w-j-h* signifies “to face” (verb form III), in the double sense of “to confront” and “to turn towards” familiar from the English language, as well as “to surpass in dignity and rank” (verb form I, LANE 1992, supplement 3049; STEINGASS 1884, 1200). This latter meaning explains why *jīha* was first used in Mamluk sources as a honorific title for courtly women, and then acquired a similar meaning in Yemen (Anonymous 2003, I, 525; SADEK 1989, 121).

⁶³ al-Khazraji 1906, II, 180, 227–228.

⁶⁴ MARMON 1995, 8.

⁶⁵ Anonymous 2003, II, 119–141, 143–149.

⁶⁶ Anonymous 2003, I, 525–533: presents and pensions given by the sultan; 534–539: supply of the palace during times excluding Ramaḍān; 533–547: supply to royal women; 554–559: pensions given to the sultan's nephews; 580–581: presents and pensions given by the sultan; II, 88–90: supplies during Ramaḍān; 119–130: distribution of sweets during the mid-*Sha'bān* festival; 132–133: gifts given to royal women during 'īd; 145–150: sweets distributed during 'īd. For an analysis of the network furnishing supplies to Rasūlid households, see VALLET 2006, 309–14.

⁶⁷ Anonymous 2003, I, 525–526.

⁶⁸ Anonymous 2003.

⁶⁹ Anonymous 2003.

Jihat ‘Anbar, who employed as many as 63 eunuchs whose names are consistently repeated in several documents.⁷⁰ This noblewoman is furthermore the only one among her peers who had not one, but three chief eunuchs at her service. The large numbers of eunuchs serving in the households of Rasūlid women seem to point towards the breadth of roles performed by eunuchs in these settings: their responsibility of safeguarding the women’s quarters were complemented by personal service for and public representation of their mistresses, supervisory and other roles in sultanic kitchens and storehouses,⁷¹ the education of royal offspring (see below), and likely the training and supervision of female slaves serving in these households.

A careful perusal of al-Khazraji’s works produced several instances of royal women giving orders to eunuchs but no evidence for a eunuch commanding over a Rasūlid woman.⁷² Even though a woman’s *zimām* was usually chosen by a male relative, no anecdotes concerning a eunuch controlling a Rasūlid woman on behalf of her father, brother, or any other male figure has surfaced. While this material is certainly not representative of interactions between eunuchs and elite women in the medieval Islamic world in general, it does call into question commonly held assumptions about these relationships that are often perpetuated by standard translations of Arabic terms, such as the conventional rendition of *zimām* as “guardian” or “supervisor.” The wives, mothers, and sisters of sultans described by al-Khazraji demonstrably made use of eunuchs in order to carry out their political projects. High-ranking eunuchs in Rasūlid Yemen had the ear of the sultan and his family, exercised authority over soldiers, and influenced

⁷⁰ Anonymous 2003, I, 546–547.

⁷¹ A list of monthly salaries disbursed to Rasūlid mamluks, slaves, and retainers in 693/1294 as well as three different lists of sweets distributed during the festival of mid-Sha‘abān show that eunuchs also worked in the sultanic kitchens, including in positions that, judging from their modest salary, were of lower prestige (Anonymous 2003, I, 566; II, 123, 133, 128). The functions of a treasurer eunuch (*al-khādīm al-khāzin*) working in the storage for the sultanic kitchens (*al-ḥawā’ij khānā*) are described in detail (Anonymous 2003, II, 115). Within the lists of sweets distributed on the occasion of the festival of mid-Sha‘abān in 693/1294, we find “the head eunuch Zakī al-Dīn Dakwān, lord [*ṣāhib*] of the *sharbakhāna*” (the storage for drinks and glassware; Anonymous 2003, II, 128).

⁷² The best-documented interactions in this respect are between Jihat Ṣalāḥ, wife of the fourth Rasūlid sultan al-Mu‘ayyad Dāwūd (r. 696–721/1297–1322) and mother of his successor al-Mujāhid ‘Alī (r. 721–764/1322–1363), and several chief eunuchs (al-Khazraji 1906, II, 85–88, 101. *Al-‘Iqd al-fākhir* mentions in passing that during the Zuray‘id period a eunuch named Jawhar al-Mu‘azzamī “was governor (*wāli*) in *al-Dumliwa* fortress on the part of the lady of Muḥammad b. Sabā’.” Muḥammad b. Sabā’ b. Abū al-Sa‘ūd b. Zarī’ b. al-‘Abbās b. al-Mukarram al-Hamdānī was the sixth Zuray‘id ruler of Aden. al-Khazraji 2009, 633.

administrative and political processes.⁷³ As such, they could be invaluable representatives on behalf of their royal mistresses in domains that were not directly accessible to them.

Eunuchs as educators of royal children

Since their physical limitations allowed eunuchs to serve in the women's quarters, they were also entrusted with the education of royal offspring. Information on the role of eunuchs vis-à-vis sultanic offspring in the Rasūlid era has survived in obituaries and biographical entries. A telling example can be found in al-Khazraji's obituary of the eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ (d. 666/1267):

He was the freed slave (*mawlā*)⁷⁴ of Ghazī b. Jibr'īl who has been mentioned. Then he served the sultan Nūr al-Dīn who made him educator (*atābak*)⁷⁵ of his son al-Muẓaffar. He improved his education and courtesy, and [al-Muẓaffar] became an example of courtesy in Yemen. And it is said: the courtesy of Mukhtaṣṣ.⁷⁶

This passage perfectly illustrates the vital role played by Mukhtaṣṣ in the upbringing and formation of character of the heir to the throne al-Muẓaffar. The eunuch's courtesy was such that it became proverbial in the country, attesting to the respect conferred upon him. Rasūlid sultans often appointed their former educators and tutors as administrators of their wives' households. For instance, the eunuch Shihāb al-Dīn Ṣalāḥ (d. 723/1323) "was the administrator of al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad, and then was made administrator of the mother of his son, al-Malik-al-Mujāhid."⁷⁷ The eunuch had thus been assigned over al-Mu'ayyad while he was a child; upon

73 It appears that many eunuchs were both entrusted with the administration of royal residences – including the households or royal women – and pursued military careers. For example, the eunuch Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ is first mentioned as administrator of Bint Hawza, wife of sultan al-Manṣūr 'Umar (al-Khazraji 1906, I, 47), and thirty years later features as the leader of several military expeditions (al-Khazraji 1906, I, 132).

74 Among other meanings, the term *mawlā* (pl. *mawālī*) describes both parties to the clientage relationship established after a master had freed a slave.

75 The title *atābak*, a Turkish composite from the Saljūq period (5th–6th/11th–12th century), travelled to Yemen with the Ayyubids and survived into the Rasūlid period. While in Rasūlid Yemen, the title clearly retained its traditional significance of guardian or educator of royal offspring, in Mamluk Egypt its meaning shifted from educator of royal sons to army commander (AYALON 1953a, 463; LEVANONI 2010).

76 al-Khazraji 2009, 2100.

77 al-Khazraji 1906, II, 17.

reaching adulthood and ascending to the throne, al-Mu'ayyad in turn appointed him as his wife's administrator. In this way, the eunuch remained a stable companion to his master throughout his life.

Other roles played by Rasūlid eunuchs

Besides their multiple responsibilities at the service of the ruling family, some eunuchs also pursued charitable and intellectual interests. This fact is reminiscent of Mamluk Egypt, where some eunuchs achieved scholarly fame.⁷⁸ For example, al-Khazrajī notes that the influential eunuch Tāj al-Dīn Badr b. 'Abd Allāh al-Muẓaffarī (d. 654/1256) “loved knowledge and the learned.”⁷⁹ Similarly, Yāqūt b. 'Abd Allāh al-Muẓaffarī (d. 687/1288), governor of the fortress of al-Dum-lūwa, “was very generous honouring the learned and the religious.”⁸⁰ Eunuchs who reached high positions in the Rasūlid government and army also made lasting contributions to Yemen's architectural heritage through the *waqf* system, in which a patron financed the construction of a religious or public monument and endowed it with an agricultural land or business to maintain the monument in the future. Among the Rasūlid patrons were male and female members of the ruling family, high officials, scholars, and religious figures.⁸¹ Nine of the sixteen eunuchs whose biographies and obituaries figure in al-Khazrajī's works are described as patrons of religious endowments.⁸² Collectively, they sponsored twelve schools, ten mosques, one guesthouse (Ar. sg. *dār maḍīf*) and one public fountain (Ar. sg. *sabīl*).⁸³ The fact that most of the prominent Rasūlid eunuchs sponsored religious endowments shows that these men must have accumulated significant wealth.

⁷⁸ PETRY 1994, 62.

⁷⁹ al-Khazrajī 2009, 572–573.

⁸⁰ al-Khazrajī 2009, 2242.

⁸¹ SADEK 1989, 121.

⁸² Tāj al-Dīn Badr (al-Khazrajī 2009, 572–575; al-Khazrajī 1906, I,120–121); Mujīr al-Dīn Kāfūr (al-Khazrajī 2009, 1745); Shibl al-Dawla Kāfūr (al-Khazrajī 2009, 1745); Niẓām al-Dīn Mukhtaṣṣ (al-Khazrajī 2009, 2100–2101; al-Khazrajī 1906, II,169–170); Jawhar al-Mu'azzamī (al-Khazrajī 2009, 632–635); Ṣafī al-Dīn Jawhar al-Riḍwānī (al-Khazrajī 2009, 628–630; al-Khazrajī 1906, II,476); Yāqūt al-Muẓaffarī (al-Khazrajī 2009, 2242; al-Khazrajī 1906, I, 249–250); Fā'iz b. 'Abd Allāh (al-Khazrajī 2009, 1697); Kamāl al-Dīn Fātin (al-Khazrajī 1906, II, 239). Furthermore, al-Khazrajī mentions that in 792/1390, renovations of “the mosque of the eunuch Fākhīr” were undertaken (al-Khazrajī 1906, II.188).

⁸³ In comparison, SADEK has ascertained that 19 Rasūlid women sponsored 42 religious monuments, of which 32 were schools, 6 mosques, 2 public fountains and 1 a Sufi hostel (SADEK 1989, 124).

For eunuchs who had no heirs to bequeath their wealth to, patronage also constituted a rare opportunity to perpetuate their name and memory.⁸⁴

Conclusions

Evidence from narrative and administrative sources has shown that the eunuch institution was an integral part of the Rasūlid system of government. During this era, the majority of eunuchs were traded from East Africa across the Red Sea to Yemen. Upon arrival, the most promising among them were selected by Rasūlid officials and incorporated into royal residences, where they were trained by senior eunuchs for a life of service. Many court eunuchs rose to the highest echelons of the Rasūlid army and government. Having been raised in the palace from a young age, they often gained the intimate trust of their royal owners who charged them with important political missions and military campaigns. A number of high-ranking eunuchs served several sultans consecutively, thereby shaping Rasūlid history for long timespans. The sources also amply attest to the many roles performed by eunuchs vis-à-vis Rasūlid noblewomen. Far from simply confining these women to the female quarters of sultanic residences, eunuch administrators expanded the political reach of their mistresses by representing them in male-dominated spheres. Additionally, lower-status eunuchs performed a variety of services in the households of Rasūlid women, including overseeing kitchens and storehouses. Their presence in the female living quarters also meant that eunuchs were ideally suited to work as tutors and educators of royal offspring. This role enabled them to exert significant influence over young heirs to the throne. Eunuchs also contributed to the public good by sponsoring mosques and schools, which would stand as symbols of their prestige and success for generations to come.

A point frequently made in scholarly literature on eunuchs concerns their role as mediators of boundaries. According to Nadia Maria EL-CHEIKH, the presence of eunuchs at the 'Abbāsīd and Ottoman courts was necessitated by the fact that the ruler became increasingly secluded behind an elaborate court ceremonial.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Carl F. PETRY made this point in reference to the Mamluk eunuchs of Egypt (Ibid. 1994, 63 ff.). Jane HATHAWAY has argued that Ottoman chief eunuchs were not only key to dynastic reproduction through their roles in the harem. By sponsoring religious schools and monuments, they also “*achieved intellectual and religious reproduction by shaping a new generation of Sunni Muslims.*” (Ibid. 2018, 277)

⁸⁵ EL CHEIKH 2010, 332; TOLEDANO 1984, 388.

In settings where a person's authority was not measured by their rank but by their ability to gain access to the ruler, eunuchs acted as gatekeepers, both literally and figuratively. The Rasūlid sultans, however, did not express their sovereignty by separating themselves from the public and cultivating a court ceremonial to that extent. Rather, similar to Mamluk sultans, they participated in military expeditions and travelled their territory extensively, which made the need for trusted officials all the more urgent. They projected their power through pompous processions held in capital cities after longer absences,⁸⁶ and sponsored lavish public festivities on occasions such as religious festivals or the circumcisions of their sons.⁸⁷ The figure of the Rasūlid sultan was therefore very much a public one. Nevertheless, the royal court was the main locus of political decision-making, and only high-ranking eunuchs had full access to all its domains. They were the only subordinates with close connections to the royal family including women and children, top government officials, the military, and the servants and slaves sustaining the palace economy at the lowest levels. Therefore, they were uniquely positioned both to serve their masters as intermediaries and messengers, and to influence decision-making on all levels.

It has often been argued that the eunuchs' position as outsiders ensured their absolute loyalty to their masters.⁸⁸ Not only were they subjected to enslavement and deracination at an early age, they were also physically unable to found their own families later in life. In the eyes of their masters, their inability to procreate rendered eunuchs more trustworthy, as their loyalty was presumably undivided and they could not establish rival dynasties. Evidence from Yemen does indeed confirm that the early deracination of eunuchs and their subsequent upbringing at court led to close ties to their royal owners. Unable to procreate and unmarried, eunuchs could only become part of Yemeni society by tying themselves as closely as possible to their owners. Loyalty was thus simply a matter of survival. Nevertheless, this loyalty of eunuchs vis-à-vis their masters could not always be taken for granted, as the fate of the eunuch Jamāl al-Dīn Bāri' proves, who was executed for treachery.⁸⁹ On a more subtle level, it is conceivable that a eunuch who had been the sultan's educator during childhood might have retained a certain authority over him later in life. Rather than being the mere executor of his master's commands, then, such a eunuch could have also influenced the sultan's decisions and thereby the political developments of his time.

⁸⁶ E.g., al-Khazraji 1906, I, 232–238.

⁸⁷ E.g., al-Khazraji 1906, II, 232–238.

⁸⁸ Lewis A. COSER was an early proponent of this theory (Ibid. 1964, 881).

⁸⁹ al-Khazraji 1906, I, 86.

Rasūlid sources bear testimony both to the ordeal of enslavement, castration, and deracination that eunuchs had to endure, and to the remarkable positions of influence and strength that some of them commanded in Yemen. This apparent contradiction of subordination and authority in eunuchs' experiences lends itself to a reappraisal of Claude MEILLASSOUX's distinction between the unchangeable *state* of slaves as "unfree aliens," and their *condition* which was determined by the roles and positions assigned to them.⁹⁰ MEILLASSOUX has argued that the slaves' fundamental powerlessness was not a hindrance to their political careers, but in fact a precondition for it.⁹¹ This observation certainly resonates with Rasūlid evidence. However, a eunuch's state as slave could change drastically through manumission. Evidence to this effect is nearly non-existent in the Rasūlid context, which however does not mean that manumissions of eunuchs did not occur. At any rate, characterizing the eunuchs of Rasūlid Yemen merely as "unfree aliens" would be a misrepresentation. Alienness was indeed a precondition for their enslavement, but they could only be useful to their masters by becoming fully versed in the cultural context they had entered as slaves. In fact, Rasūlid sultans encouraged this process by raising young eunuchs in the palace, which allowed them to navigate elite circles and pursue elite habits such as patronage as adults. Eunuchs were therefore required to be both "unfree aliens," entirely dependent on their masters and denied full membership in local lineages and elites, and cultural insiders able to serve in the highest echelons of the Rasūlid state. Biographical evidence demonstrates that the eunuchs of Rasūlid Yemen sought to carve out lives of their own within the constraints imposed on them and the opportunities awarded them.

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⁹⁰ "C'est par cette double insertion économique et sociale que le capturé devient esclave à proprement parler, et acquiert une *condition* qui peut être aussi variée que les fonctions qui lui sont confiées, sans que pour autant son *état* ne se transforme." (MEILLASSOUX 1975, 35, emphasis added).

⁹¹ MEILLASSOUX 1991, 139.

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