

SERVANTS AT THE GATE: EUNUCHS AT THE COURT OF AL-MUQTADIR

BY

NADIA MARIA EL-CHEIKH*

Abstract

This paper investigates the eunuch's institution in the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir and seeks, first, to delineate the variety of functions that the eunuchs held in the early fourth/tenth century Abbasid court both in the harem and in ceremonial; second, it investigates the careers of the eunuchs Šāfi al-Ḥurāmī and Muflīḥ al-Khādim al-Aswad, exploring their sources of authority and their various networks which allowed them to exercise a high degree of political influence.

Le but de ce travail est d'étudier l'institution "Eunuque" au coeur de la cour Abbaside du calife al-Muqtadir. En premier lieu nous soulignons les fonctions multiples que les eunuques performaient dans la cour abbaside (début 4/10^{ème} siècle) tant au sein du harem pendant le cerimonial royal. En second lieu nous explorons plus en détail les carrières des eunuques Šāfi al-Ḥurāmī et Muflīḥ al-Khādim al-Aswad, identifiant les sources de leur pouvoir et les réseaux differents qui leur permirent d'exercer une veritable influence politique.

Keywords: eunuchs, court, al-Muqtadir, harem, ceremonial

INTRODUCTION

In his recent comprehensive work on eunuchs in Islam, David Ayalon tried to show "how the eunuch institution functioned in fact." He acknowledges that his study can "at best be considered as a skeleton with many bones missing, and others only partly restored."¹ This paper seeks to restore more bone to the skeleton by investigating eunuchs in the early fourth/tenth century, focusing on the nature of their presence and the extent of their power in the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-932).

The death of the Abbasid caliph al-Muktafi in 295/908 led to a period of crisis especially since he had made no provisions for the succession. It was Ja'far

* Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, Department of History and Archaeology, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon, nmcheikh@aub.edu.lb

¹ David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: the Magnes Press, 1999), 4-5.

[al-Muqtadir], the thirteen year-old brother of al-Muktafi, who was proclaimed caliph despite objections raised on account of his age. His caliphate, a period of unstable government, started out with the appointment of a sort of regency council composed of his mother Shaghab, his maternal uncle Gharib, Mu'nis the treasurer, Mu'nis al-Muzaffar, leader of the Baghdad forces, Şafi the chief of Eunuchs and the chamberlain Sawsan. This situation allowed members of the administration, servants in the palace, viziers and relatives of the caliph to negotiate the realities of political power among themselves. It was the power struggle between these various factions that allowed the court retinue, including a number of eunuchs, significant involvement in palace and government matters.

This paper investigates the eunuch's institution in the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir and seeks, first, to delineate the variety of functions that the eunuchs held in the early fourth/tenth century-Abbasid court both in the harem and in ceremonial; second, it investigates the careers of the eunuchs Şafi al-Hurami and Muflih al-Khadim al-Aswad. The narratives pertaining to the reign of al-Muqtadir are particularly rich for such an investigation because the intrigues at the court found their way to the historical annals and other literary texts that refer to this period.

By studying the roles, the position and the power attained by eunuchs, this investigation will be contributing to our knowledge of the functioning of particular court institutions in the early fourth/tenth century. The court enclosed the caliph by limiting access to him to a select and favored entourage. Everything to and from the caliph had to pass through the filter of the court before it could reach him. The caliph could exert influence only through the mediation of the people closest to him. Ultimately, access to the caliph was what mattered. What were the rewards of access? How influential were the personal courtiers? What part did they play in the factional struggles to place men and dictate politics? An investigation of the eunuchs at the court of al-Muqtadir can help in answering these questions, showing the extent of their influence, the significant political role that they managed to play and the wealth that they managed to accumulate.

THE HAREM

One of the major factors that shaped the eunuch institution in Islam was the harem. *Harim* is "a term applied to those parts of the house to which access is forbidden, and hence more particularly to the women's quarters."² The private

² Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

quarters in a domestic residence and by extension its female residents are referred to as a “harem.” It was the Muslim women’s unique seclusion which made the employment of eunuchs inevitable. Accepted as a functionally legitimate group, this distinctive gender group flourished in spite of the fact that Islamic law prohibited the making of eunuchs within the lands of Islam.³

The Abbasid harem had a highly articulated structure. It consisted of family members and of an administrative/service hierarchy. The former included the queen mother, the wives of the caliph, his concubines, the children, the unmarried, widowed or divorced sisters and aunts. The administrative hierarchy included the high-ranking administrative officers of the harem, the female servants who performed the housekeeping tasks of the harem, female slaves, who might be the personal property of the women, and the eunuchs. Thus, a diverse community, numbering in the thousands, populated the harems of the Abbasid caliphs. Caring for them and guarding them required large numbers of slaves and eunuchs. Eunuchs played an important role as servants and guardians within the caliph’s women’s quarters. The large number of eunuchs at the court of al-Muqtadir is signaled in a number of sources. Hilāl al-Ṣābi’ states that:

It is generally believed that in the days of al-Muqtadir bi-allāh . . . the residence contained 11,000 eunuchs (*khādim*)—7,000 blacks and 4,000 white Slavs—4,000 free and slave girls and thousands of chamber servants.⁴

The large number of eunuchs and the disproportion in the figures, indicating that there were perhaps as many as three eunuchs per woman has been explained by an important consideration, namely, the need to keep an eye on women for twenty-four hours a day which implied the existence of shifts. Moreover, the duties of the eunuchs embraced the whole compound of the court and not only the harem since the eunuchs formed a prominent element in the court’s audiences and parades.⁵ In any event, the great number of eunuchs meant that they could form a pressure group at court.

A glimpse at the presence of eunuchs in the harem is provided by a rare description of the interior of the palace of al-Muqtadir in the fourth/tenth century-*adab* work, *al-Faraj ba’da al-shidda*. A young cloth merchant was sneaked inside al-Muqtadir’s palace for an interview with the caliph’s mother, one of whose *qahramānas*, stewardesses, he wished to marry. The merchant was concealed

³ See Cristina de la Puente, “Sin linaje, sin alcurnia, sin hogar: eunucos en el Andalus en época Omeya,” in *Identidades Marginales* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2003), 147-193.

⁴ Hilāl al-Ṣābi’, *Rusūm dār al-khilāfa*, ed. Mikhā’il ‘Awwād (Baghdad: Maṭba‘at al-‘Āni, 1964), 8.

⁵ Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 16-17.

inside a box and shipped inside the palace along with other boxes in which the *qahramāna* pretended to be bringing clothes and other effects to al-Muqtadir's mother. The *qahramāna* had to pass through groups of eunuchs in charge of the doors of the various apartments in the harem; they all demanded to inspect the boxes. She yelled at some and cajoled others until she reached the chief eunuch who insisted on inspecting the content of the boxes. A dialogue ensued with the chief eunuch whom the *qahramāna* addressed as *ustādh* and, once again, her cunning saved her and she managed to pass through.⁶ This report contains information about the harem section of the palace, the hallways and gateways, all supervised by the eunuch guardians. Eunuchs were, thus, in the heart of the harem monitoring access and partaking in all the informal politics that took place in it.

The eunuch servants are referred to in the sources as *khādim*. David Ayalon proved that in the writings of al-Jāḥiz, the term *khādim* was synonymous to eunuch.⁷ Eunuch servants were permitted to move freely in all parts of the building or complex. Their duties embraced the whole compound of the court, serving as intermediaries between their master and their wives, concubines and female relatives. These circumstances gave eunuchs direct access to the person of the ruler whose living quarters were connected to the harem by an exclusive entrance used only by women and eunuchs.⁸ Access to women gave eunuchs opportunities to influence men in high positions by means of their feminine connections within the harem. This connection was particularly important during the reign of al-Muqtadir since his mother Shaghab figures prominently in the annals of this period through her political advice to her son, her financial contributions to the reign and her wide-ranging philanthropic activities.⁹

⁶ Al-Tanūkhī, *Kitāb al-faraj ba'da al-shidda*, ed. 'Abbūd al-Shalji (Beirut: Dār Ṣāḍir, 1978), 4: 362-368. On this anecdote, see Muhsin Mahdi, "From History to Fiction: The Tale Told by the King's Steward in the Thousand and One Night," in *The Thousand and One Night in Arabic Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 78-105 and Michael Cooperson, "Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative," *Muqarnas* 13 (1996): 99-113. One designation for eunuchs is *ustādh* in the sense of teacher, educator, upbringing because some eunuchs educated the youngsters.

⁷ David Ayalon, "On the term *Khādim* in the Sense of Eunuch in the Early Islamic Sources," *Arabica* 32 (1985): 289-308. He was responding to A. Cheikh Mousa's "Gāḥiz et les eunuques ou la confusion du même et de l'autre," *Arabica* 29 (1982): 184-214.

⁸ David Ayalon, "On the Eunuchs in Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 1 (1979): 67-124; reprinted in *Outsiders in the Lands of Islam: Mamluks, Mongols and Eunuchs* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988).

⁹ Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Gender and Politics: The Harem of al-Muqtadir," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, eds. L. Brubaker and Julia Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 147-161.

This freedom of movement permitted a number of eunuchs to participate in the political life of the state. Indeed, eunuchs acquired roles far beyond their basic functions as guardians of the harem as they managed to infiltrate posts and positions of vital importance. While in the Byzantine empire, certain functions at the court were especially reserved for eunuchs,¹⁰ such well defined functions do not seem to have existed in the Abbasid caliphate, where there seems to have been no distinction between eunuchs serving the harem and eunuchs fulfilling administrative and military duties. The same eunuchs could have connections and influence in both camps.¹¹

During the caliphate of al-Muqtadir, eunuchs became trusted political advisers and powerful administrators. Court eunuchs also appeared in important positions in the army and police. Their success has to be explained with reference to their distinctive gender and to the fact that they were cut off from their original environment with no family or tribe, a situation that made them safer, dependent and loyal. In the words of D. Ayalon, “the formidable combination of the eunuch’s exclusive free access to the person of the patron in his private quarters on the one hand, and the fact that there was little to divert the eunuch from devotedly serving his patron, on the other, created between the two relations of loyalty and trust, which were unique in their strength and intensity.”¹² Existing outside of the dominant social values and institutions of family, offspring and procreation, eunuchs were ideally suited to serve as servants, agents and proxies for their masters. An important part of their gender construct was grounded on their perceived loyalty and trustworthiness.¹³ In a recent study on eunuchs in al-Andalus, Cristina de la Puente underlined this aspect, emphasizing the loyalty of these servants who were assigned with delicate missions, functioning as messengers and as spies and informants in the Umayyad court of al-Andalus. Moreover, she posited that eunuchs may have allowed themselves to transgress the limits of social conventions not only because of their proximity

¹⁰ Rodolphe Guiland listed ten such duties, the highest being that of the *Parakoimomenos* who slept in the bed chamber of the emperor to ensure the latter’s safety. In “Fonctions et dignités des eunuques,” *Etudes byzantines* 2 (1944): 185-225 and 3 (1945): 179-214.

¹¹ Ayalon, “On the Eunuchs in Islam,” and *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 197. In the later Mamluk period eunuchs seem to have served in more specific capacities in the citadel: the eunuchs of the portals, the eunuchs of the Gate of the Veil, the eunuchs of the barracks, eunuchs cup-bearers, eunuchs of the royal wardrobe, eunuchs of the royal treasury, the eunuch *zimāmdār* who supervised the sultan’s intimate family and other eunuchs with various duties. See Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, 5.

¹² Ayalon, “On the Eunuchs in Islam.”

¹³ Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5, 85.

to powerful people, but because their own mutilation made them comparable to figures who were patiently tolerated, namely the buffoons, the drunkards, and the insane.¹⁴

THE CALIPH'S SECLUSION AND CEREMONIAL

By the early fourth/tenth century, caliphs were surrounding themselves with the most impenetrable barriers to their presence. The ritual of the caliph's audience had, indeed, become elaborate. Forms of visual and aural display, including specific manners and colors of dress, a particular etiquette, specific spatial and temporal disposition of bodies, all were deployed in the enunciation of royal power. They served to dramatize the locus of power and to amplify absolutism.¹⁵ The sources have left us a description of the reception granted to the Byzantine ambassadors who visited al-Muqtadir in 305/917. Before being introduced to the presence of the caliph who received them in the palace of al-Tāj, the envoys were shown over the various buildings within the precincts, and these are said to have numbered twenty-three separate palaces. They were taken to the palace known as Khān al-Khayl and proceeded next to the New Kiosk, to Dār al-Shajarah, to Qaṣr al-Firdaws and on and on until they were finally brought before al-Muqtadir in the palace of al-Tāj. Miskawayh has the following description of the Tāj proper:

When they reached the Palace they were taken into a corridor which led into one of the quadrangles, then they turned into another corridor which led to a quadrangle wider than the first, and the chamberlains kept conducting them through corridors and quadrangles until they were weary with tramping and bewildered. These corridors and quadrangles were all crowded with *ghulmān* and *khadam*. Finally they approached the *majlis* in which al-Muqtadir was to be found.¹⁶

This account points clearly to the massive effort made to create an environment which would overwhelm the visitor. The visitors were confused by its complexity and astounded by its magnificence. Distance from the caliph was expressed in the distances traversed before entry to the palace gate itself and in temporal terms with periods of extended sequestration and waiting.¹⁷ The description

¹⁴ De la Puente, "Sin linaje, sin alcurnia, sin hogar . . ."

¹⁵ Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), 131.

¹⁶ Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, ed. H. F. Amedroz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), 1: 55; trans. by D. S. Margoliouth, *The Eclipse of the 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1921), 1: 59. Account in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād* (Beirut: Dār al-Maṭba'at al-Ilmiyya, n.d.) 1: 101-105.

¹⁷ Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 146.

reveals the highly complex subdivision of spaces consisting of increasingly secluded courts in which authority and inaccessibility increased the more deeply one penetrated into the heart of the palace. This highly official ceremony underscores the notion of princely isolation and separateness. The passage from one court to another served to establish a narrative which culminated in the audience with the caliph himself.¹⁸

Eunuchs played a crucial role in these ceremonials. The internal spaces of the caliphal palace were filled with eunuchs. In his description of this reception, Hilāl al-Ṣābiʿ, like Miskawayh, mentions that the Byzantine visitors passed through courtyards and corridors in the palace which were filled with guards, servants and eunuchs.¹⁹ Al-Ṣābiʿ also mentions that during formal receptions the eunuchs stand behind the caliph's throne.²⁰ We know from Fatimid ceremonial that the caliph's eunuchs were closely associated with him and that they had as much stake in the observance of these ceremonies as the caliph himself. Although these remarks concern Fatimid ceremonial, the protocol of the Fatimid court was, according to Paula Sanders, much like that of contemporary dynasties, especially, that of the Abbasid caliphs.²¹ The eunuchs regulated court ceremonial and controlled a complex structure of spatial sanctity that by the fourth/tenth century had come to surround the Abbasid caliph.

The whole aspect of caliphal appearance bespoke distance. Abbasid caliphs from the Samarrāʿ period onwards almost never appeared in public. The sight of the caliph had become an exceptionally rare and controlled event. Al-Muqtadir rarely left the palace. He did not lead military campaigns, did not lead public prayers, did not attend important funerals, did not preside over the *mazālim* court.²² His public appearances were so rare that the sources record them. By keeping to himself the caliph gained in prestige but lost in contacts with his subjects.

One major consequence of the caliphs' remoteness was that potential power lay in the hands of those who were intermediaries, formal or informal, between them and those who governed in their name on the outside. The chief cham-

¹⁸ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 164; Marcus Milwright, "Fixtures and Fittings. The Role of Decoration in Abbasid Palace Design," in *A Medieval Islamic City Reconsidered: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Samarra'*, ed. Chase Robindon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 79-109.

¹⁹ Al-Ṣābiʿ, *Rusūm*, 12.

²⁰ Al-Ṣābiʿ, *Rusūm*, 91.

²¹ Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 15-37.

²² David Bruce Jay Marmer, *The Political Culture of the Abbasid Court, 279-324 (A. H.)*, Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1994, 70-1.

berlain and the leading eunuch seem to have had joint control over the space inside the palace, and were the human barriers between the outside world and the caliph.²³ The seclusion of the Abbasid caliphs, thus, opened the door to the unwarranted influence of the eunuchs. Eunuchs met a distinct need, the need of the absolutely isolated caliph for information and human contact.²⁴ Serving the caliph, they would not only act as liaisons between him and his subjects but would also gather for him vital information. From being a mere channel of information, and through the exploitation of informal influence, eunuchs expanded their powers.

The fact that the palace complex functioned simultaneously as a stage set for the representation of caliphal power, as the administrative center of a vast empire, and as a residence for the caliphal family had important implications. First, since government was conducted near the caliph's residence, access to the center of government was highly restricted. As a result, access became power, and the space within the palace that divided residence from government was a center for competition and intrigue. Eunuchs and chamberlains controlled this space. Moreover, distances, both physical and metaphorical, meant that people often communicated by letter or through verbal messages transmitted by proxies. The messengers were usually eunuchs because they could enter any gendered space forbidden to other men.²⁵

ŞĀFĪ AL-ḤURAMĪ AND AL-MUQTADIR'S EARLY YEARS

The Abbasid court contained a large matrix of relations, political and economic, religious and cultural, that converged in the caliph's residence. For the general subject the caliph was in practice not easy of access. He was always surrounded by those 'known at court.'²⁶ Proximity had real advantages. Those 'known at court' had the privilege of presenting petitions to the caliph, for introducing someone to the caliph or to an influential personality at the court. The personal attendants were feared as men close to the caliph, men who could exercise profound influence over him. They deployed the power of intimacy or the politics of intimacy on the public stage at the same time as the caliph found himself enmeshed in specific networks of interdependence.

²³ Marmer, *The Political Culture*, 184.

²⁴ Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 186-7.

²⁵ Marmer, *The Political Culture*, 15-16.

²⁶ Ragnhild Hatton, "Louis XIV: At the Court of the Sun King," *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage and Royalty, 1400-1800*, ed. A. G. Dickens (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 233-261.

The eunuch Ṣāfi al-Ḥuramī²⁷ played a consequential role at court, during the reigns of three consecutive caliphs. Ṣāfi reports an anecdote in which he appears inside the harem alongside the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (279-289/892-902): Walking with Ṣāfi through the women's quarters to the apartments of his concubine Shaghab, the caliph spied through the curtains on his five year old son Jaʿfar. Displeased with the way Jaʿfar was sharing his grapes with his friends, al-Muʿtaḍid sadly predicted that Jaʿfar [al-Muqtadir] would squander his fortune.²⁸ Ṣāfi was also near al Muʿtaḍid on his deathbed. Al-Ṭabarī reports that as he could no longer speak, al-Muʿtaḍid communicated with Ṣāfi, through signs and gestures.²⁹

Ṣāfi is also seen by the deathbed of the succeeding caliph al-Muktafi, who in Dhū al-Qiʿda 295/September 908, succumbed at the age of 32 to a sickness and became immobile. Starting with the month of Shaʿbān, the caliph had started losing his mind, and Ṣāfi gave his personal seal to the vizier. During a temporary recovery, Ṣāfi informed the caliph that two Abbasid princes seem to be mobilizing support, prompting the caliph to ensure the succession of the young Jaʿfar [al-Muqtadir].³⁰ Ṣāfi had influence because of his proximity to the dying caliph who would have been in his private chambers. Ṣāfi's prominence resulted specifically from his status as a eunuch, in other words, from his gender which gave him the privilege of accompanying the caliph into the harem.

When al-Muktafi died in 295/908, the vizier ʿAbbās appointed the young Jaʿfar [al-Muqtadir] to the caliphate. Fearing the people's probable objection to al-Muqtadir on account of his youth, it was Ṣāfi al-Ḥuramī who was entrusted with the delicate task of escorting the young Jaʿfar secretly to the palace, a testimony to his perceived loyalty and trustworthiness. The sources relate that Ṣāfi went to bring him down the river from Ibn Tāhir's palace; when the riverboat in which he was brought came on its way to the palace of the vizier Abbās,

²⁷ Certain eunuchs carried the titled *al-ḥuramī*. i.e., a person who is connected with the harem. According to David Ayalon, it is not clear why certain eunuchs were so called, whereas most of them were not, for very many of them did serve in the harem. See his "On the Eunuchs in Islam." Harlod Bowen takes *al-ḥuramī* to mean Chief Eunuch and Keeper of the Harem. In *The life and Times of ʿAlī ibn ʿIsa 'the Good Vizier'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 88.

²⁸ Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa akhbār al-mudhākara*, ed. ʿAbbūd al-Shalji (Beirut: no publisher, 1971), 1: 287-90.

²⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879-1901), Tertia Series, 4: 2208.

³⁰ ʿArīb, *Ṣilat tārikh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1897), 19-21. Ayalon has pointed to the close link between the eunuchs and the caliphal insignia emphasizing that eunuchs were entrusted with guarding the most precious caliphal symbols, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 101-2.

Ḥasan, the retainer of Abbās, called out to the boatmen to come inside. It occurred to Šāfi that ‘Abbās only desired Ja‘far to enter his palace because he had changed his mind with regard to the prince. Fearing that the vizier might transfer his choice to someone else, Šāfi ordered the boatmen to proceed to the caliph’s palace without stopping.³¹ Šāfi was, thus, instrumental in preventing Ja‘far’s potential arrest. ‘Arib states that Šāfi’s action “was reckoned to be [a reflection of] his determination and insight.”³² Šāfi was, moreover, responsible for getting the *bay‘a*, the oath of allegiance, to the young caliph. Objection to Ja‘far’s succession on account of his age incited Šāfi to rapidly sneak Ja‘far into the palace to get him the *bay‘a* promptly.

Al-Muqtadir’s caliphate began, as stated earlier, with the appointment of a sort of regency council that included Šāfi al-Ḥuramī. Thus, his role in ensuring the succession to al-Muqtadir provided him with significant power since Šāfi was now in a position to influence policies at the highest echelons. He reappears in the sources at an important juncture for al-Muqtadir. Very shortly after his accession, in 296/908, al-Muqtadir was deposed in favor of Ibn al-Mu‘tazz. The military leaders, the administrators, and the people all pledged allegiance to Ibn al-Mu‘tazz. The *khawāṣṣ* of al-Muqtadir are singled out among those who refused to partake in this conspiracy.³³ Men like Šāfi al-Huramī confronted an attempt which, if successful, would have left them with no link to the caliphate. Thus, they defended al-Muqtadir essentially to maintain their own position of power. These men were personally bound to al-Muqtadir and were dependent upon him. The caliph, in turn, expected from his protegés (*muṣṭana‘*) a lifelong commitment and loyalty in return for the benefits and favor that they received.³⁴

Eunuchs played a prominent role in the arrests that followed the failed conspiracy of Ibn al-Mu‘tazz. The conspirators Ibn ‘Abdūn and ‘Alī b. ‘Isa were betrayed by their protector to the mob who handed them over to one of al-Muqtadir’s eunuchs who was passing by. Ibn al-Mu‘tazz himself was also betrayed by a eunuch of the household in which he had taken refuge. The sources relate that a serving man of Abū ‘Abdallāh b. al-Jaṣṣāṣ informed Šāfi that Ibn al-Mu‘tazz

³¹ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 3-4; *Eclipse*, 1: 2-3.

³² ‘Arib, *Šilat*, 22.

³³ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, ed. C. J. Tornberg (Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1979), 8: 15. According to Roy Mottahedeh, sometimes the soldiers and secretaries were lumped together as a common interest group, and were called *khawāṣṣ*. *Khawāṣṣ* used to mean “those who were particularly associated with the ruler,” that is, the clerks and soldiers. In *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 115.

³⁴ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, 82-93.

was hiding in his master's house. Ṣāfi raided the residence of Ibn al-Jaṣṣāṣ, dragged Ibn al-Mu'tazz and conducted him to the Palace.³⁵ Ṣāfi's role as a trusted aide is repeatedly encountered in the sources, in particular, in sensitive and secretive missions. Such was the role he played when al-Muqtadir decided to rid himself of his chamberlain Sawsan whose power had become unmanageable. 'Arīb relates that one day, when al-Muqtadir was entering the square together with Sawsan, Ṣāfi helped the caliph execute his plan by feigning sickness. Sawsan dismounted to assist him. At that moment, armed men assaulted Sawsan, took him away, and Sawsan died within a few days in custody.³⁶

The anecdotes in which Ṣāfi al-Ḥuramī appears serve to distinguish him as one of the courtiers intimately linked with the protection of the contested caliph. The fact that he had served two previous caliphs entrenched his position in the palace. It was his direct access to the person of the ruler, the opportunities available to him for informal persuasion, and the caliph's personal trust which allowed Ṣāfi to exercise political influence. The sources are more copious with regard to the black eunuch Muflīḥ, whose career represents more clearly the wide range of power and influence that eunuchs did attain at the court of al-Muqtadir.

THE BLACK EUNUCH MUFLIḤ

Numerous black eunuchs rose in the military and administrative hierarchy, some even reaching the highest posts. According to David Ayalon, in the major centers of Islamic power there was hardly a black occupying an important position who was not a eunuch.³⁷ In his discussion of the reign of al-Muqtadir, 'Arīb states that in the year 311/923 "all affairs were in the hands of Muflīḥ, the black eunuch."³⁸ Muflīḥ played a decisive role in important appointments, notably, in the reappointment of Ibn al-Furāt as vizier for the third and last time in 311/923. It was his grudge against the vizier Ḥāmid that motivated Muflīḥ to further the cause of Ibn al-Furāt. The degree of animosity between Ḥāmid and

³⁵ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 6-8; and Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 8: 18.

³⁶ 'Arīb, *Ṣilat*, 29-30.

³⁷ According to David Ayalon, the blacks' chances to rise were extremely meager unless they were castrated. In *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 35. Perhaps the most famous black eunuch in the fourth/tenth century was Kāfūr who managed to declare himself sole master of Egypt in 355/966. For al-Mutannabī's poetry on Kāfūr see Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 210-237.

³⁸ 'Arīb, *Ṣilat*, 111. It is to be noted that if the eunuch was black, the word black, *aswad* was added. See Cheikh Moussa, "Gāḥiz et les eunuques."

Mufliḥ can be judged by an exchange of insults during which Ḥāmid retorted: "I have an idea of buying a hundred black slaves, naming them all Mufliḥ and presenting them to my retainers."³⁹

This episode is revealing of societal attitudes towards eunuchs. Ḥāmid's words reflected, perhaps, resentment of the eunuchs who placed themselves as a physical barrier between the bureaucrats and the caliph. Ḥāmid's remark was both racist and included anti-eunuch sentiments, targeting Mufliḥ's lowly origins and physical condition. Indeed, the physiological effects of castration were believed to affect changes in a eunuch's temperament and moral fiber. Eunuchs were often perceived to have feminine moral attributes to match their altered physical being. Al-Jāḥiẓ in the third/ninth century drew a typology of eunuchs that related to the cause of castration and the ethnic or cultural origin of the eunuch. The mutilation of the black Africans was the most complete. Al-Jāḥiẓ describes the metamorphosis of both body and character that such a subject undergoes as a result of this type of castration, *al-jibāb*. Their character, depicted in mostly negative terms, is comparable to that of women and children; they cry easily and are gluttonous, they like to play and are sexually obsessed; they like domestic work; they are avaricious, indiscreet, jealous and cruel. The appearance and behavior of eunuchs represented the antithesis of appropriate male behavior characterized by balance and harmony in body, mind and behavior. As a result, eunuchs, like women, were believed to be unable to control their desires for food, drink and physical pleasure.⁴⁰ The general attitude towards eunuchs is reported to us by al-Ṭabarī who mentions that in the year 284/897, the populace, whenever they saw a black eunuch would shout, *O 'aqīq*, a situation which made the eunuchs angry. When a eunuch of the caliph al-Mu'taḍid was mistreated by such a crowd, the caliph ordered one of his eunuchs to ride out and arrest anyone who would take such liberties with eunuchs.⁴¹

³⁹ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 87.

⁴⁰ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Ḥayawān*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo: al-Bābi, 1945), 1: 106-118. See A. Cheikh Moussa, "Jahiz et les eunuches . . ." Al-Jāḥiẓ's typology is similar to the hostile classical tradition which contributed a collection of stereotypes about eunuchs to later Byzantine authors. See Kathryn M. Ringrose "Passing the Test of Sanctity: Denial of Sexuality and Involuntary Castration," *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 123-137; and Steven M. Oberhelman, "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology and Power in Ancient and Medieval Greek and Arabic Dream Literature," *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, eds. J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 55-93. This early perception by al-Jāḥiẓ continued into Mamluk times where al-Subkī reiterates the lack of rational ability of eunuchs and their general similarity to women. See Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, 61.

⁴¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, tertia series, 4: 2163-4. Franz Rosenthal states that he is unable to explain the significance of *'aqīq*. *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad*, trans. and annotated by Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 38: 45, footnote 232.

Mufliḥ's influence was closely related to his mediating role, carrying messages within the court, between the court and the caliph's private quarters, and between the court and the outside world. His role as an influential messenger is repeatedly stressed. During the circumstances surrounding the "passion" of the mystic al-Ḥallāj, the vizier Ḥāmid wrote a letter to al-Muqtadir requesting that the execution be authorized and implemented immediately. He sent the letter to Mufliḥ asking him to deliver it and to carry back the reply. The next morning the answer of al-Muqtadir reached him via Mufliḥ.⁴² Mufliḥ's role is underlined as the carrier of the letter but, more important, as the one who made sure to come back with an answer.

Al-Muḥassin, the son of Ibn al-Furāt, used the tension between Mufliḥ and Ḥāmid and communicated with Mufliḥ's secretary—a Christian eunuch who wielded great influence—"to whom he guaranteed office and fortune and honors" so that at last he made an arrangement between him and Mufliḥ. Al-Muḥassin then addressed a note to al-Muqtadir through Mufliḥ.⁴³ Mufliḥ, thus, surrounded himself with the trappings of authority, having a bureau with secretaries who handled his appointments and other affairs.

The indisputable power of Mufliḥ becomes even more conspicuous in the episode that followed the dismissal of Ḥāmid. Trying to have an audience with the Caliph, Ḥāmid came to the palace and met with Naṣr the chamberlain. The reliance on Mufliḥ was, however, inescapable, he "being the official who demanded admissions to al-Muqtadir when the latter was in his private apartments." Naṣr pleaded Ḥāmid's cause with him: "he is now, he said, an object of pity, and it would be like you to be merciful to him and not to punish him for what he did on those occasions." Ḥāmid asked Mufliḥ to deliver to the caliph his message. Mufliḥ promised Ḥāmid to take his message to the caliph but instead he spoke to al-Muqtadir on the subject of Ḥāmid in a style that was contrary to the one promised. Al-Muqtadir, upon the recommendation of Mufliḥ, ordered Naṣr to dispatch Ḥāmid to Ibn al-Furāt.⁴⁴

This whole episode reflects the ever-increasing influence of Mufliḥ, giving a picture of the relative powers of individuals holding positions within the palace. The interventions which seem to have been carried out through Mufliḥ led to Ḥāmid's downfall, his imprisonment, and ultimate capture by al-Muḥassin. Mufliḥ, as the leading eunuch, had control over access to the caliph when the

⁴² Louis Massignon, *La passion d'al-Hosayn ibn Mansour al-Hallaj* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1921), 1: 288.

⁴³ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 87; *Eclipse*, 1: 96-7; 'Arīb, *Ṣilat*, 112; and Hilāl al-Sābi', *Kitāb tuḥfat al-umarā' fī tārikh al-wuzarā'*, ed. H. F. Amedroz (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1904), 243-4.

⁴⁴ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 107-8; *Eclipse*, 1: 107-108; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 8: 140-1.

latter was in the harem. Naşr the chamberlain had to call on Mufliḥ precisely because he, Naşr, could not enter the harem. Mufliḥ had greater access to the caliph and this made perhaps, all the difference. It was his status as eunuch—in other words, his gender—which gave Mufliḥ precious access. The power of the eunuchs stemmed directly from this one factor: they had spatial access to the caliph in his private quarters, the harem, when everyone else—all the other men, that is—did not. Indeed, Miskawayh states that “Mufliḥ was high in Muqtadir’s favor, and constantly in attendance.”⁴⁵

His access to the caliph allowed Mufliḥ to play a crucial role by introducing influential people to the caliph. One reads that Abū Bakr b. Qarabah had ingratiated himself with Mufliḥ who introduced him to al-Muqtadir.⁴⁶ Another such instance involved a man called Dāniāli who had managed to be in special favor with Mufliḥ, having informed him that he had found in his ancient books that Mufliḥ was a descendant of Ja‘far b. Abū Ṭālib—cousin of Prophet Muḥammad. Mufliḥ had rewarded him liberally for the discovery and tried to influence the caliph into choosing Dāniāli’s candidate, Ḥusayn b. Qāsim, as his next vizier.⁴⁷

Mufliḥ interceded for Ibn al-Furāt when the latter was under threat of being arrested by the palace retainers. Mufliḥ advised the caliph that to dismiss a vizier owing to the statements and encouragement of his enemies was dangerous and bad policy, and an encouragement for the retainers to interfere in affairs of state.⁴⁸ Al-Muqtadir followed Mufliḥ’s advice and Ibn al-Furāt owed his freedom during this particular instance to Mufliḥ, who had, thus, scored with Ibn al-Furāt, one of the most important viziers during the reign of al-Muqtadir. This is stressed by Hilāl al-Şābiʿ, who states that Mufliḥ, the black eunuch of al-Muqtadir, had an advanced standing with and a strong influence over Ibn al-Furāt.⁴⁹

A major product of the eunuchs’ closeness to the caliph was that those who wanted favors from the caliph could and did obtain them by greasing the eunuch’s palm to get him to espouse their cause, convinced as they were of the persuasive powers of the eunuchs. These activities were, thus, lucrative and paid, later on, in dividends. We know from Miskawayh that Mufliḥ’s position allowed him to accumulate wealth, and he became the owner of vast estates.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 87; *Eclipse*, 1: 96.

⁴⁶ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 212; *Eclipse*, 1: 237-238.

⁴⁷ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 215-6; *Eclipse*, 1: 241-2.

⁴⁸ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 124-5; *Eclipse*, 1: 138-9 and Hilāl al-Şābiʿ, *Tārikh*, 51.

⁴⁹ Hilāl al-Şābiʿ, *Tārikh*, 212.

⁵⁰ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 87 and 155-6. On the wealth that the chief black eunuch of the Ottoman imperial harem achieved, see Jane Hathaway “The Wealth and Influence of an Exiled Ottoman Eunuch in Egypt: The Waqf Inventory of ‘Abbās Agha,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 37 (1994): 293-317.

Thus, eunuchs gained privileges for themselves, exacting fees for audiences and, in a few instances, exacting commissions from appointees to public office in return for their influence in the process of selection. Exploiting such opportunities during the reign of al-Muqtadir, Mufliḥ managed to accumulate a fortune.

The eunuchs' power depended on and fueled the tension between the caliph and the other power elements in the state. One of the main poles of power during the reign of al-Muqtadir, another eunuch, was Mu'nis who achieved his eminence in leading the defense in 296/908 of the Ḥasani palace at Baghdad for al-Muqtadir against the pretender Ibn al-Mu'tazz. Later on, Munis' authority was confirmed through his successful generalship. He became all-powerful, was consulted on the appointment of viziers, and was increasingly in control of the government. Blaming the caliph for squandering and wasting money, Mu'nis addressed a letter to the caliph stating that the army complained bitterly about the money and land wasted upon the eunuchs and the women of the court, and of their participation in the administration. He demanded their dismissal and removal from the palace, with seizure of their possessions.⁵¹ In his reply to Mu'nis, al-Muqtadir came to the defense of the eunuchs and women:

... Now what our friends propose in the matter of the eunuchs and women, whom they would cast out of the Palace and remove far away, and whose emoluments for their service they hold should lapse, so that they should be precluded and deprived of their fortunes and kept at a distance from them until they deliver up the money and the estates which are in their hands, and restore them to their rightful owners, that is a proposal, which, if they properly considered and examined it, they would know to be an unjust proposal, and one whose iniquity is obvious to me. Still so anxious am I to agree with them . . . so that I am giving orders for the seizure of some of their fiefs, for the abolition of their privileges . . . and for the removal from the palace of all whom it is permissible to expel while those who remain shall not be permitted to interfere with my administration or counsels . . .⁵²

The answer acknowledges the powerful eunuchs—and women—as fief-holders and points to the privileges they have. Explicit reference is made to their interference in the administration. The caliph promised to curb their political influence but only in order to appease Mu'nis.

Mufliḥ's resistance to Mu'nis is understandable in light of the latter's effort to curb the influence and wealth of the eunuchs and other courtiers. Miskawayh states that at the head of the conspirators against Mu'nis stood the eunuch Mufliḥ. The confidence of the caliph in Mufliḥ was such that when Mu'nis wrote in 319/931 to al-Muqtadir that Mufliḥ was conspiring with Ḥusayn b. Qāsim against him and that Mufliḥ should be sent to him, al-Muqtadir replied

⁵¹ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 189; *Eclipse*, 1: 213 and Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, 8: 200.

⁵² Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 189-190; *Eclipse*, 1: 213-214.

that Mufliḥ was a faithful servant in whom he had confidence, and not the man to be mixed up in what Mu'nis was suggesting.⁵³ The caliph's belief in the eunuch's loyalty and devotion was absolute. In the end it was Mufliḥ and other courtiers who hated Mu'nis who prevailed in convincing the caliph to confront Mu'nis militarily, and this against the caliph's mother's better judgment.⁵⁴ The caliph was killed during this confrontation.

CONCLUSION

The two main reasons given as to why the Byzantine emperors were keen on employing eunuchs at court have generally been that eunuchs could never aspire to be emperors themselves and that they were safe to have around females. While these explanations are, in the words of Shawn F. Tougher, "half-truths," Keith Hopkins has proposed that the eunuchs' real function was to soak up criticism "which might otherwise have fallen upon the ruler and so acted as a lubricant preventing too much friction between the ruler and the other forces of the state."⁵⁵ The eunuchs served as go-betweens in transactions between men and women of the court and between the court and the outside world. Eunuchs were involved in mediating, brokering, and transmitting messages between persons who were constrained by etiquette from meeting the caliph directly. Many of the roles and functions ascribed primarily to eunuchs involved mediations and transactions across boundaries.

Eunuchism, thus, had a much broader dimension. The particular situation pertaining at the court of al-Muqtadir accounted for the increasing power and influence with which eunuchs were invested. The reign of al-Muqtadir exposed the tension between the various powers of the state. This allowed the palace officials, notably eunuchs, to become power brokers, a situation rendered more advantageous still by the constant removals of viziers which increased competition among bureaucrats. The eunuchs schemed for or against the bureaucrats by bringing information to the caliph which bureaucrats could not deliver by themselves. The tremendous and sustained influence which court eunuchs were able to bring to bear during the reign of al-Muqtadir is demonstrated by their occupation of a regularly increasing number of high-ranking offices. The seclusion of the caliph behind a highly formalized court ritual accentuated the need

⁵³ Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, 1: 222; *Eclipse*, 1: 249.

⁵⁴ 'Arib, *Ṣilat*, 165-6, 175.

⁵⁵ Shaun F. Tougher, "Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview, with Special Reference to their Creation and Origin," *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London: Routledge, 1997), 168-184; Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 174-180.

of various power groups around the caliph for intermediaries. The eunuchs exploited this situation, appropriating to themselves some of the power in controlling the distribution of favors through their privileged proximity to the caliph.

The reign of al-Muqtadir was intimately connected with eunuchs who played key roles at the court, protecting the inexperienced caliph, performing courtly duties while some of them managed to assume important public functions. Their role as confidants provided them access to very influential positions as requests were finagled into their hands. Šāfi played a major role in installing the young al-Muqtadir as caliph, protecting him at the outset of his rule. Muflīḥ carried letters, demanded admissions to the caliph, and used his proximity to the caliph and his abilities in persuasion to influence the caliph in appointments of the highest importance and in other significant political matters. Indeed, the extent of political power and sway which a eunuch could attain are reflected in the career of Muflīḥ, who managed to forge alliances with powerful and influential people through his intercession with the caliph. The degree of power wielded by those in the palace corresponded not to the hierarchy of positions but rather to the frequency of access to the caliph. Proximity to the caliph and the assurance of his favor was the crucial basis of the court eunuchs' power.

According to Kathryn Ringrose, "gendering involves the assignment of specific roles in society."⁵⁶ Many of the roles assigned to eunuchs in the fourth/tenth century Abbasid court, were deemed unmasculine tasks, acting as 'masters of ceremony', controlling access to the caliph, as doorkeepers and servants, and dwelling in the company of women and children in the harem. Taking on such duties, eunuchs stood "as the antithesis to elite masculinity, and as a reminder that gender organizes relationships of power among men as much as between men and women."⁵⁷ Genderless and kinless, eunuchs constituted the ultimate outsiders. From their powerlessness, however, sprang considerable influence in the form of great confidence and authority within the caliphs' court and household.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 85-519. Kathleen Biddick has analyzed eunuchs as "a kind of 'period piece' at sites of conflict between conventional historiographic periodization . . . and queer temporalities." "Translating the Foreskin," in *Queering the Middle Ages*, eds. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kurger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 193-212.

⁵⁷ Julia M. H. Smith, "Did Women Have a Transformation of the Roman World?" *Gender and History* 12 (2000): 552-571.

⁵⁸ Cheikh Moussa, "Gāhiz et les eunuques;" Michael McCormick has analyzed aspects of the eunuchs' power in Byzantium in "Emperors," *The Byzantines*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo, trans. Thomas Dunlap et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 230-254.

This paper has tried to explain why and how eunuchs held power in the early fourth/tenth-century Abbasid court. While studying the particular roles and functions of eunuchs provides insight into the operation of the caliphal apparatus, the sources say little about how eunuchs actually fitted in other parts of society. The work of exploring the social and cultural placement of eunuchs to investigate aspects of their sexual and gender identities still remains to be done.

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