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Slave Concubinage in Premodern Muslim Families: Sex, Status, and Family Dynamics

Abstract:

As Islamic law legalised the sexual use of female slaves, it also improved the legal status of slave mothers. These women could not be sold, they were liberated upon the death of their owner, and their children were entitled to the same share in the father's estate as his children with free mothers. Together with the ease of divorce for men, this had potential implications for free wives. Scrutinizing available sources, it is clear that the integration of slave women in families as sexual partners was not always smooth. Even though the institution of concubinage was normalized, the anxieties surrounding it indicate that it was constantly challenged. In this talk, I discuss the possible effects of slave concubinage on family dynamics, and how the asymmetrical arrangement of free and enslaved women in the family was addressed in a range of medieval Arabic literature. There are occasional references to women criticising the practice, whereas male authors felt compelled to justify, explain and defend sexual slavery, while also seeking solutions to potential problems. I look particularly at three erotic manuals written in the tenth, twelfth and early fourteenth centuries. For the authors of these manuals, sexual slavery was connected with the pursuit of pleasure, a main incentive of the genre. A dilemma was how to secure access to slave concubines without alienating free wives and endangering family ties.

Bio:

Pernilla Myrne is Associate Professor of Arabic History and Literature at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her research interests include the representation of women in pre-modern Arabic literature, history, sexuality and emotions, erotic literature and slavery.