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Homoerotic Liaisons among the Mamluk Elite in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria

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In the year 1307, Edward I of England died and was succeeded by his twenty-three-year-old son, Edward II, whose reign, a remarkably unhappy one, extended over the next twenty years. Contemporary chronicles attribute many of the disasters of his rule to his inordinate attachment to a French peer named Piers Gaveston who was a few years his senior. Originally, it appears, brought to the English court by Edward I to be a companion and indeed model for his son, Gaveston came to exercise a powerful hold over the young man. The young king lavished attention, gifts, and titles on Gaveston, ultimately neglecting affairs of state and incensing the nobles, who forced him twice to exile Gaveston and finally, in 1312, captured and beheaded the despised favorite. Relations between the king and his nobles did not improve, however, and soon Edward had adopted another pair of favorites, the Despencers, father and son, with the latter of whom he was rumored to be maintaining the same sort of intimate relationship widely assumed to have obtained earlier between him and Gaveston. Things came to a head when Edward's estranged wife, the sister of the king of France, took up with a Welsh earl and launched an invasion of England. Edward fled

but was captured, and the Despencers were executed. Given an opportunity to abdicate, Edward did so but was nevertheless murdered in 1327—according to some later accounts, by having a red-hot poker rammed up his anus.¹

Edward's attachment to his favorites was clearly a major scandal and one that somewhat muffles the force of the crusader tracts that were composed during his reign against the Saracens and attacked their sodomitical profligacy. Most famously, the French Dominican William of Adam, writing about 1318, explains, "In the Saracen sect any sexual act at all is not only not forbidden, but permitted and praised." He goes on to excoriate, among the Saracens, effeminate men who shave their beards, adorn themselves in women's finery, and sell themselves to other men with whom they proceed to cohabit as husband and wife, as well as eastern Christians who fatten up and adorn their sons to cater to the unnatural lusts of the Saracens, who race to buy them up.² However distorted his polemic may be, William was clearly aware not only of the phenomenon of the *mukhannath* (the effeminate cross-dresser to whom Muslim societies accorded a recognized, if not universally approved, role)³ but also of the recruiting practices of the Mamluk regime in Egypt and Syria (1250–1517 CE), whereby boys from outside the realm of Islam—mostly Turks and some of them Christian—were purchased as slaves, imported, converted to Islam, trained as soldiers, and manumitted, thereby becoming part of the ruling elite (with the possibility of rising to the position of sultan).⁴ Where sodomy actually fits into this picture is not an idle question, although it is a complicated one, and the world of the Mamluk sultans is not devoid of parallels to the case of Edward II, although the differences are as important as the similarities.⁵

Perhaps the closest parallel to the unfortunate Edward is Ahmad b. al-Nasir Muhammad, who ruled briefly (four months) in 742/1342 as sultan over Egypt and Syria some fifteen years after Edward's death.⁶ Ahmad's father had enjoyed the longest reign of any of the Mamluks (albeit with two interruptions)—ascending the throne in 693/1293, reigning for

forty-eight years, and dying in 741/1341.⁷ Ahmad grew up largely apart from his family in Karak, an important fortress a few miles southeast of the Dead Sea, where al-Nasir Muhammad had spent his time away from the capital, Cairo, during the two temporarily successful revolts against his reign. When his father heard that the young man (then about twenty-one) had developed a friendship with someone "unsuitable" (*man la yaslāh*) in Karak, he brought him to Cairo, married him off to the daughter of one of his own *mamluks* (military slaves), and then sent him back to Karak. There Ahmad, we are told, "fell madly in love with a beautiful young man named al-Shuhayb"—but perhaps this was the unsuitable relationship he had already developed—"and disgraced himself over him, showering him with money." On being informed of this, the indignant al-Nasir Muhammad had the boy's favorite seized and got the money back, but the distraught Ahmad appealed to two of his father's most powerful *mamluks*, declaring, "If this young man is punished, I will kill myself!" He proceeded to stop eating and drinking and took to his bed. At that, al-Nasir Muhammad relented and released al-Shuhayb but sought—in vain—to deflect his son's obsession by offering him one hundred of his own *mamluks* in his place.⁸

The situation worsened when one of the eunuchs mistreated al-Shuhayb (a hint that the young man was in fact a soldier in training, subject to the customary eunuch supervision, although our sources do not say this explicitly), and Ahmad had the offending eunuch beaten almost to death.⁹ In response, al-Nasir Muhammad threatened to banish Ahmad himself if he refused to banish his favorite. Ahmad's response was to declare to his father's envoys—the same two powerful *mamluks* to whom he had initially appealed—that "Each of you has a hundred pretty young boys and girls, and you are merely my father's slaves [*mamalik*], while I, who am his son, have contented myself with regard to worldly pleasures with only this boy because he has shared my exile, having left his family. How can I expel him? If the sultan commands that I do so, then let him expel me too!"

And in fact, the disgruntled father did exactly that, for a brief period, until intercession from the boy's female relatives led him again to relent.¹⁰

He disinherited his son, however, choosing another son, Abu Bakr, to succeed him, which he did on al-Nasir's death shortly thereafter in 742/1342. At this point, the story becomes exceedingly—and typically, for the Mamluks—complicated. The late sultan's powerful *mamluks* promptly divided into factions, some supporting the new (and very young) sultan and others backing other sons, including Ahmad. Abu Bakr lasted on the throne only a few months and was succeeded by another and even younger brother, Kujuk. Meanwhile, Ahmad had garnered support from the *mamluks* in Syria, but in the midst of all these machinations, Ahmad's own *mamluks* murdered the unfortunate al-Shuhayb. Ahmad was devastated—he almost went mad, we are told—but persevered in his drive for the throne in Cairo and was duly installed shortly thereafter. Barely a month later, he decided to return to Karak and govern from there—or not to govern, as the sources report, but rather to immerse himself in private pleasures (including wine) and, fatally, to turn on his erstwhile supporters, whom he had murdered, one by one. To make matters worse, he imprisoned their female relatives and permitted the local Christians to commit all manner of abuses against them. Revulsion at his actions was universal, and back in Cairo yet another brother, al-Salih Isma'il, was raised to the throne. After a lengthy siege, Ahmad was captured and killed in Karak in 745/1345, and his head was delivered to his (temporarily) triumphant brother.¹¹

The historian Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, to whom we owe the most detailed account of Ahmad's lamentable career, sums it up by saying that he was "a truly terrible administrator, a hedonist, and a drunkard."¹² He does not, however, focus on Ahmad's favoritism, and it would certainly be a mistake to attribute his problems to his "homosexuality"—rather than, perhaps, to his obsessiveness. Al-Shuhayb may have been an "unsuitable" object for Ahmad's obsession, but the material available to us for

contextualizing this account does not suggest that his unsuitability was due to his sex; more likely, he was just inappropriately plebeian. It is the contextualizing material that is the focus of this chapter, and it shows the degree to which the world in which Ahmad lived was in fact saturated in homoeroticism. To that extent, perhaps, William of Adam was not so very wide of the mark. On the other hand, he could hardly be expected—at least, until he was posted to Iran *after* composing his anti-Saracen diatribe—to appreciate how homoeroticism actually fit into Middle Eastern societies.¹³

We may address two kinds of questions to our sources—one synchronic and the other diachronic. Synchronically, we may ask whether homoerotic attachments (whether they resulted in acts of sodomy or not—itsself a significant question) were or were perceived to be particularly associated with one group within the larger society of the Mamluk realm. Was there something about the Mamluks themselves—that alien presence in Arab society, paradoxically both a slave class and a fairly stringently segregated ruling class—that was particularly conducive to homoeroticism? Or was homoeroticism an indulgence of the elite generally, also encompassing the native elite, the Arabs who made their mark in the world of high culture and in particular religious scholarship? Or, rather, were homoerotic relationships a commonplace throughout society, extending beyond the elite to the middle and lower classes as well?

Diachronically, can we detect a significant shift in the conceptualization of homoeroticism in the Arab (or Muslim) world under the Mamluk regime? It could be (and has been) argued that the intensely homosocial environment of the Mamluk barracks, in which the future leaders of society were trained in warfare, kept strictly separate from women, and presided over by attentive eunuchs, was every bit as likely to foster homoerotic attachments as was the nineteenth-century English public school. Or did the importation of *mamluks* from radically different social environments—the Eurasian steppes—result in the importation as well of indulgent attitudes toward homoeroticism, as some

medieval observers claimed? Altogether, did tolerance for homoeroticism increase during the Mamluk period? And given such stories as that of Ahmad b. al-Nasir Muhammad, can we posit a more “coeval” pattern than in earlier periods, in which, it seems, an age- and role-differentiated, “pederastic” pattern of adult/active-adolescent/passive homoerotic relationships seems to have prevailed?

But the first task is to show that Ahmad’s story did not represent (like that of Edward II)¹⁴ an unprecedented, abhorrent departure from societal norms. This is easily done, even if we focus exclusively on rulers. In Egypt itself, two hundred years previously, we may note the lurid end of the Fatimid caliph al-Zafir.¹⁵ An exceptionally good-looking young man, al-Zafir had come to the throne in 544/1149 at the age of sixteen and quickly established a reputation for frivolity and self-indulgence, including both music and dalliance with slave girls. He also became very close to the young and equally handsome Nasr b. ‘Abbas, whose father was a stepson and ally of the governor of Alexandria, Ibn al-Sallar, whom ‘Abbas assisted in his successful plot to murder the caliph’s vizier and take his place. Ibn al-Sallar took a dim view of Nasr’s friendship with the caliph and urged the boy’s father to intervene, “for two young men together can result in inappropriate things.”¹⁶ In an apparently unrelated development, ‘Abbas then resolved himself to supplant his stepfather in the vizierate, and in the event it was his son Nasr who undertook, with the caliph’s explicit approval, to surprise Ibn al-Sallar (who was cohabiting with the boy’s grandmother) and behead him. Seriously implicated in this plot was the famous “Syrian gentleman,” Usama b. Munqidh, who, fearing retribution from the late vizier’s supporters, found a way to incite ‘Abbas against the caliph himself.¹⁷ Pointing to al-Zafir’s ongoing extravagant generosity to Nasr and his habit of visiting him in his home on a regular basis, accompanied only by two of his trusted eunuchs, he asked the boy’s father, “How can you put up with what people are saying to your son’s discredit and their insinuations that the caliph does with him what is done with women?”¹⁸ Some of

our sources add that when Nasr boasted to his father that al-Zafir had granted him the revenues of the entire district of Qalyub, Usama wryly remarked, "Hardly an excessive bride-price for such as you!"¹⁹ 'Abbas was more direct, telling his son, "You have destroyed your honor by consorting with al-Zafir, and people have begun to talk about the two of you. Kill him in order to free yourself from this accusation!"²⁰ Stung and carried away by youthful impetuosity, Nasr arranged for an ambush to meet and hack down the caliph on his next visit. At court the morning after this had been accomplished, when al-Zafir appeared to have gone missing, 'Abbas summoned his two younger brothers to inquire about his whereabouts, but they simply replied, "Ask your son! He knows more about his comings and goings than we!"²¹ But 'Abbas promptly accused *them* of the murder and had them executed on the spot.

In this case, it was not concern for good government doomed a ruler with a favorite, and despite the appearance of remarks about "inappropriateness," we should not assume that the caliph's honor was irremediably tarnished by his relationship with Nasr. On the contrary, the plot turns, which have everything to do with real politics, depend only indirectly on sexual politics: it was *Nasr*, as the presumed passive partner, whose honor was at stake and who could thus be goaded into disposing of his (putative) lover.²²

Nor is it a given that this sort of favoritism led inexorably to scandal and bloodshed. Unquestionably, the most famous male favorite in all of Islamic history was Ayaz, the beloved of the sultan Mahmud (d. 421/1030), who was the founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty in Afghanistan and eastern Iran. Ayaz was Mahmud's cupbearer and his acknowledged intimate for some years. While we can assume that he was younger than the sultan, he was presumably a mature (bearded) man or at least became one fairly early on in their relationship (although our meager historical sources do not permit precision on this point). In any case, we hear nothing of scandal in this instance. On the contrary, the

love of Mahmud and Ayaz was quickly to take on legendary trappings, to the point that Persian romances extolling it—often in the form of Sufi mystical allegories for the love between the believer and God—took their place beside such established heteroerotic tales as those of the Arab lovers Majnun and Layla and the Persian lovers Khusraw and Shirin.²³

It could be argued that Mahmud and Ayaz lived in and were celebrated by a cultural environment that was significantly different from that of Arab Egypt and Syria—that is, that the Iranian world exhibited a more tolerant attitude, either toward the phenomenon of the adult male beloved specifically or toward publicly acknowledged homoerotic relationships in general. Other instances of royal favoritism, both east and west, offer only ambiguous evidence on this point. We hear, for example, that the Seljuq ruler Tughril Beg (d. 455/1063, ruled over Iran and Iraq) was so entranced (*mashghuf*) by his commander Khumartakin al-Tughra'i that he not only honored him to the point of stirring up his vizier's jealousy but even had him castrated so that he could be present "at home" with the sultan in the presence of his wife; the erotic dimension of this relationship is not at all clear.²⁴ Further west and somewhat later, we are told that the ruler of northern Iraq and Syria, Zangi (d. 541/1146, ruled from Mosul) was infatuated with eunuchs, whether Turkish, Armenian, or Greek, and would castrate the sons of his enemies so as to perpetuate their beardlessness—although one of them eventually murdered him.²⁵ Zangi's son Nur al-Din (d. 569/1174, ruled from Damascus) seems to have been more impervious to the attractions of either eunuchs or intact young men. According to the historian Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, he succumbed to lust for a beautiful boy only once, buying a beautiful *mamluk* for ten times the regular price, but God came to his aid and the *mamluk* died.²⁶ More clearly a case of favoritism but again involving a eunuch is that of the tragic Khwarazmshah Jalal al-Din (d. 628/1231), who late in his ultimately futile defense against the Mongols flagged at one point because of the death of

his beloved young eunuch Qilij, for whom he ordered elaborate obsequies and spent some time in mourning when he should have been fighting.²⁷

Whatever the stance taken by those reporting on such rulers' homoerotic interests, the latter were clearly often unconcerned about their becoming public. The same could be said, presumably, for the Ayyubid ruler in Damascus, al-Malik al-Ashraf Musa (d. 635/1237), who, we are informed in a single breath, "restrained himself from seizing the wealth of the populace and was devoted to his pleasures, famous for his love of young Turkish soldiers [*al-ghilman al-Atrak*] and his attraction to them, and quite unrestrained with regard to them [*mustahtir bihim*]." He composed a lot of bad poetry about them, such as the following about a Turkish young man who was in charge of his treasury:

May I be the ransom for a full moon whom description is at a loss
to encompass,
One who is liberal with my blood, despite being honest and
trustworthy.
Should I marvel? He keeps my wealth safe,
But sees my soul destroyed by him and pays it no mind!²⁸

Such proclivities by no means prevented al-Malik al-Ashraf from coming down hard on the Sufi shaykh Abu I-Hasan 'Ali al-Hariri (d. 645/1247), who is said to have corrupted many young aristocrats in Damascus through his sessions of "music, dance, and beardless boys" and who was once found in the baths with a group of boys without loincloths and when asked "What is this?" simply replied, "Nothing but this!" and ordered one of the boys to lie down prone (as a preliminary to being sexually penetrated), which the boy did. Al-Malik al-Ashraf had him imprisoned and then exiled, to the intense satisfaction of various conservative religious scholars, who had in fact issued *fatwas* calling for his execution.²⁹

That the public expression of homoerotic sentiments (especially in poetry) was fully sanctioned by Islamic societies both before and during the Mamluk period while too-public, too-

sexual homosexual behavior was not can be abundantly documented, and in that sense, at least, rulers constitute no exceptional case. On the negative side, measures taken by Mamluk sultans against potential "scandal" that are roughly parallel to those by al-Malik al-Ashraf against al-Hariri are recorded throughout the eighth/fourteenth and ninth/fifteenth centuries, each case, however, having its own interesting specificities.

Under al-Ashraf Khalil (r. 689–693/1290–1293), for example, the notoriously harsh vizier Ibn Sal'us was looking for ways to attack 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, the son of the pre-eminent jurist Ibn Bint al-A'azz. Besides enlisting various false witnesses to unspecified offenses on 'Abd al-Rahman's part, he also suborned a good-looking young man to claim that 'Abd al-Rahman had committed sodomy with him (*lata bibi*) and found someone else to allege that he had donned the *zunnar*, the girdle stipulated as Christian dress. 'Abd al-Rahman denied all the charges but admitted they were all *plausible*, except for that concerning the *zunnar*, since in fact even Christians donned the *zunnur* only under duress. Despite lack of proof, he was nevertheless discharged, publicly humiliated, and briefly imprisoned.³⁰

There seems to have been more substance to another, long-running case against a prominent religious scholar that began under al-Ashraf Khalil's father Qalawun and concluded only under his brother and successor al-Nasir Muhammad. In 686/1287, the jurist, *littérateur*, and impressive debater Ibn al-Baqaqi was accused of committing immorality, mocking Islam, and, even more gravely, declaring illicit things licit (*istihlal al-muharramat*), a charge that was legally understood to imply apostasy and thus justify the death penalty. According to one source, he had gathered around himself a group of impious Turks and other ignorant people to whom he taught that both wine and sodomy (*liwat*) were permissible; it is not specified whether he (and they) practiced what he preached. Ibn al-Baqaqi was thrown into prison, where he appears to have languished for many years, engaged in defending himself and spar-

ring with imminent jurists. Finally, in 701/1302, he was beheaded in Bayn al-Qasrayn, the central square of Cairo.³¹

Although suspicions or accusations of sodomy could be a danger for some of the religious scholars (*ʿulama*), specific love affairs seem to have been an Achilles' heel for both Mamluks and bureaucrats. A particularly complex case revolved, some thirty years later, around the decline and fall of al-Nasir Muhammad's chief financial officer, al-Nashw, whose attempts to impose fiscal responsibility earned him the general enmity of the sultan's *mamluks*. At one point, the sultan received an anonymous note attacking al-Nashw and his relatives, including the charge that al-Nashw's brother-in-law Wali al-Din had fallen in love with a young Turk named ʿUmayr, was spending vast amounts on him, and, along with other relatives, carousing with him. (In an aside, our sources identify ʿUmayr as the "boy from the Husayniyya quarter" over whom the extremely prominent *mamluk* Almas had earlier made a fool of himself—one of the factors that had led to Almas's execution.) Al-Nashw dismissed the charges as just a crude slander cooked up by the retinue of his enemy the *mamluk* Qawsun, but Qawsun insisted they were true and suggested that the sultan have the boy arrested and tortured to get him to reveal the names of those with whom he had been consorting. This was carried out, and the boy named Wali al-Din as one of a large number of the sultan's bureaucrats. Distrusting the boy's testimony but also fearful of scandal, al-Nasir Muhammad—who "hated immorality [*fahsh*]"—contented himself with sending the boy and his father into exile in Gaza.

This was not the end of the story, however. Sometimes later, the irrepressible Wali al-Din took up with another handsome young *mamluk*, this one the slave of his neighbor the prominent *mamluk* Taybugha al-Qasimi. Taybugha became aware of the situation, kept watch, and finally managed to catch Wali al-Din, again with other relatives, carousing with the boy in al-Nashw's house. Before he could complain to the sultan, al-Nashw anticipated him, reporting that Taybugha was involved in an affair

with his *mamluk* and wasting his money on him and that he "invaded my home in a drunken fury, drew his sword, and screamed abuse at my family." Al-Nasir Muhammad—who "hated drunkenness"—promptly had Taybugha and his *mamluk* exiled to Syria. While our sources indicate these events as the first to instill doubts in the sultan about al-Nashw, it was several years before the Mamluks succeeded in having him deposed and executed, along with several of his (fun-loving) relatives.³²

The persistent linkage between sodomy—or at least homoeroticism—and wine in these accounts is hardly surprising. One need think only of the celebrated tavern poems—with wine and cupbearer—of the ninth-century Abu Nuwas and indeed the torrent of similarly themed poetry throughout the intervening centuries.³³ More pertinently, perhaps, the entire Mamluk period was punctuated by a series of antivice campaigns by various sultans, of which the first and most famous was certainly that of Baybars in 665/1257, immortalized by Ibn Daniyal's (d. 710/1310) shadow play *Tayf al-khayal*, with its celebrated elegy on the devil (clearly dead in cleaned-up Cairo) as well as other poems in which winebibbers, hashish eaters, prostitutes, and sodomites all lament their fate.³⁴ Ibn Daniyal responded in a similar way to a later campaign by Lajin (r. 696–698/1296–1299), and Mamluk chronicles make it clear that there was a rhythm to these efforts, whose effects seem never to have been very long-lasting (in part, no doubt, because of the loss of income from taxes assessed on taverns and brothels when they were tolerated). In 831/1428, for example, sultan Barsbay abolished the taxes on wine and hashish in Cairo but directed special efforts to wiping out vice in Damietta. In this context, we are told about a complaint lodged by residents of the town against a Christian named Ibn al-Mallah, whose sodomitical goings-on were scandalously public. He made a practice of hiring beautiful boys as servants, entertaining them with gifts, wine, and music, and often brazenly retiring to another room to have sex with them and reemerging in a disheveled state. The

sultan himself presided over his trial, at which he first denied the charges but when confronted with irrefutable testimony promptly converted to Islam. This obtained his forgiveness, although with a stern warning from the judge not to revert to his wicked ways—which, we are told, he managed not to do.³⁵

Less fortunate was a Turk later in the ninth/fifteenth century, about whom the sultan Qaytbay was informed in 879/1496 that he was consorting with and had committed sodomy with several of his own *mamluks*. All we are told about this case is that the sultan had the offender castrated—apparently a then unprecedented punishment.³⁶ A few years after that, in 920/1514, we have an exceedingly unusual report of a man who raped and murdered a ten-year-old boy and was sentenced by the sultan Qansawh al-Ghawri to be hanged at the scene of his crime, according to some reports with his amputated genitals hung about his neck.³⁷

William of Adam was wrong when he maintained that “any sexual act at all is not only not forbidden but permitted and praised”—even if our relatively meager sources perhaps suggest a somewhat more lenient attitude toward sodomy in his own day than 150 or 200 years later. On the other hand, the persistent references in those sources to young Mamluks (or Turks, which amounts to much, if not exactly, the same thing)³⁸ as the object of homoerotic interest offer some idea of where William may have got his ideas about sexual motives for the competitive purchase of them and raise the larger question of whether there was something about the Mamluk system altogether that encouraged homoeroticism and its public expression. Mamluk historians on occasion express their own opinions on this question as well, and although there is no consensus among them on the answer, these discussions serve to modify and balance the picture one might draw from an exclusive focus on scandals, prosecutions, and antice campaigns.

Al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1441) has no doubt that homoeroticism and the concomitant sin of sodomy have increased in his own day, and he knows exactly where to lay the blame—on the

founder of the second, “Circassian” Mamluk dynasty, the sultan Barquq (r. 784–801/1382–1399, with one brief interruption). Although it is only one of three lamentable developments for which he holds Barquq responsible—the other two are the practice of accepting bribes for appointments to major offices, for which the sultan served as a model, and the general deterioration of the economy, for which the sultan’s personal parsimony is to blame—al-Maqrizi gives pride of place to (the prevalence of) “sodomy, due to his notorious practice of showing favor to handsome Mamluks [*ityan al-dhukran . . . li-shtiharihi bi-taqrib al-mamalik al-hisan*].”³⁹ He elaborates further on this theme in a different context in a description of one of the markets of Cairo, where various sorts of headgear were sold. Speaking of skull-caps (*tawaqi*), formerly worn primarily by children (of both sexes), he notes that they were taken up as a fashion by the Mamluks and the military generally under the Circassians (meaning under Barquq) and quickly became subject to diversification in color and form, until under Barquq’s successor Faraj (r. 801–815/1399–1412, with one brief interruption) there appeared the extravagant “Circassian cap.” Al-Maqrizi finds this an appalling development that was made worse by the fact that women began to ape men in adopting the dreadful headgear, for two reasons. First, “love of males [*mahabbat al-dhukran*] had become prevalent among the ruling elite, so their wives decided to imitate males in an attempt to win over their husbands’ hearts, and then the women of the city in general followed their lead in doing this,” and second, the economic crisis forced women to cut back on their customary adornments and do their best in the more constrained area of their hats.⁴⁰

Al-Maqrizi’s implied contrast between the Circassian sultanate and happier earlier times might seem plausible, at least with regard to the sultans themselves, if we consider the early Mamluk period. Love of handsome young *mamluks* does not seem to have been characteristic of the first few Mamluk sultans and certainly not of the stern Baybars. We are told that Baybars’s son Salamish, who reigned briefly in 678/1279 before being deposed

and retired to private life, was extremely handsome (and wore his hair long), so that "many of the sodomites [*lutiyya*] who love beardless boys [*murdan*] were bewitched by him, and poets composed love lyrics about him,"⁴¹ but nowhere are we informed of homoerotic interests on the part of Salamish himself. Nor do we hear of such regarding Qalawun (r. 678–689/1279–1290) (during whose reign occurred the arrest of the notorious shaykh al-Baqaqi). It was under Qalawun's son al-Ashraf Khalil that the vizier Ibn Sa'ūs attempted to frame the jurist Ibn Bint al-A'azz with a trumped-up charge of sodomy. For al-Ashraf himself, the only hint of any impropriety is a peculiar aside in an eyewitness account by an aide-de-camp of his assassination, which occurred during a hunting expedition near Alexandria. Before the appearance of the sultan's murderous *mamluks*, this man reports that al-Ashraf stopped to urinate, and while doing so "he began to show off his penis and tease me," but nothing more is made of this, and it is unclear why it was included in the account.⁴²

With al-Ashraf's successor al-Nasir Muhammad, however, we do encounter a problem for al-Maqrizi's theory. In a recent account of al-Nasir Muhammad's (third) reign, Amalia Levanoni has stressed the dire consequences of his penchant for promoting his *mamluk* far more quickly than had heretofore been customary and for doing so on the basis of their good looks and his intense love for them.⁴³ Given what we are told about the sultan's "hatred of immorality" and his outraged response to reports of homoerotic infatuations and perhaps actual sodomy among his *mamluks* and bureaucrats, one might interpret this in terms of platonic admiration and more or less appropriate assessment of his slaves' qualities, discounting any truly homoerotic overtones. In fact, however, Levanoni's observations echo those of the historian Ibn Taghri Birdi (d. 874/1470), who is considerably more explicit and tackles al-Maqrizi straight on. Assessing the career of Barquq, Ibn Taghri Birdi first quotes al-Maqrizi's remarks on his three deplorable "innovations," and then proceeds to refute them one by one. His refutations of the

second and third may be ignored here, as not germane to the present topic, but his response to the first is of considerable interest:

As for sodomy [*ityan al-dhukran*], this scourge [*bala'*] is a very old one. Its appearance as a major phenomenon has been attributed to the advance of the Khurasanians on Iraq under the command of Abu Muslim al-Khurasani in the year 132 of the *hijra* [749–750 CE]. And as for acquiring handsome *mamluks*, what would the shaykh Taqi al-Din [al-Maqrizi] have to say about al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad b. Qalawun's purchase of handsome *mamluks* at the highest prices, far beyond anything that al-Malik al-Zahir [Barquq] could match? Al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad went so far as to promote an entire group of his *mamluks* with whom he was madly in love [*shughifa bi-mahabbatihim*] and wildly generous [*an'ama 'alayhim*] to the Command of a Thousand in Egypt before a single one's mustache had begun to sprout, including Baktamur al-Saqi, Yalbugha al-Yahyawī, Altunbugha al-Maridani, Qawsun, Maliktamur al-Hijazi, Tuquzdamur al-Hamawi, Bashtak, and Tughay the Elder, and married them to his daughters. The difference between [al-Nasir Muhammad and Barquq] in this respect is obvious!⁴⁴

Ibn Taghri Birdi's appeal to ancient history is commented on below. As for his detailed catalogue of al-Nasir Muhammad's favorite *mamluks*, other earlier sources by and large confirm his claims and supply a wealth of detail (including some important additions to the list), which cannot be canvassed here except for some brief remarks. Maliktamur seems to have won the prize both for looks and for the amount he cost al-Nasir Muhammad—in excess of 50,000 dirhams, despite the fact that he was technically free, not a slave.⁴⁵ But the dearest of all to the sultan was surely Baktamur, from whom he was inseparable, day or night, for several years, although in the end al-Nasir probably poisoned him (and his son) because of suspicion that he was plotting (with Almas) to assassinate him.⁴⁶ His place was quickly taken by the stunning Bashtak, despite the fact that the latter was a notorious womanizer. Bashtak had been given by al-

Nasir to Qawsun to raise, and the two became firm allies—they served as envoys to al-Nasir's besotted son Ahmad at Karak—until al-Nasir's death, at which point succession politics divided them, and Bashtak ended up being the first major casualty of the conflict.⁴⁷

It could be argued, perhaps rather persuasively, that al-Nasir Muhammad collected beautiful boys but did not “do anything” with them; there is no way, of course, that we will ever know (although this seems to be a bit of a stretch with Baktamur, at least). In any case, that at least some of the Mamluk sultans, well before Barquq, had homoerotic interests in their *mamluks* seems to be incontrovertible. After Barquq, Ibn Taghri Birdi is inclined, in his assessment of each sultan, to continue to pick quarrels with al-Maqrizi and also, among other criteria, to note the sultan's position on homoeroticism. He defends al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (r. 815–824/1412–1421), for example, against al-Maqrizi's criticisms, approving his passion for music, his appreciation of literature, and his sense of humor and illustrating the latter with two anecdotes, both of which turn on homoerotic topics. According to one of these, al-Mu'ayyad's stable superintendent Tughan offered Jani Bak, one of the sultan's bodyguards, 1,000 dinars to visit him; offended, the latter complained to the sultan, who was furious and summoned Tughan. Tughan defended himself, however, by pointing out that if the delectable Jani Bak were not al-Mu'ayyad's own *mamluk*, the sultan himself would have gladly offered him 10,000 dinars for a visit—a response that enormously amused al-Mu'ayyad and completely dissipated his anger.⁴⁸

Ibn Taghri Birdi is equally positive about al-Mu'ayyad's short-lived successor Tatar (r. 824/1421), considering him the second of only two Circassian sultans (al-Mu'ayyad himself being the other one) who cared anything about high culture and absolving him of any interest in alcohol, while refusing to adjudge the truth of rumors about his “love of young men [*mahabbat al-shabab*].”⁴⁹ About the sultan Jaqmaq (r. 842–857/1438–1453), who seems to be his hero, the historian is considerably more em-

phatic. Not only was he uninterested in either wine or boys, but “we know of no ruler of Egypt, either Ayyubid⁵⁰ or Mamluk [*Turkiyya*], who can compare with him in this respect: neither in his adolescence nor in his adulthood was it ever reported that he had indulged in alcohol or any other prohibited thing; in fact, he is said never to have committed anything forbidden. With regard to love of young men, he might not even have believed that anyone could succumb to it, given his remoteness from even knowing about such things.”⁵¹ Jaqmaq's successor Inal (r. 857–865/1453–1461) fares rather less well. Aside from his effeminate voice and his near total illiteracy (he signed documents by tracing), “he was not sexually continent; indeed, he was accused in some quarters of loving pretty faces and beautiful young men—but God alone knows; on the other hand, he did abstain from forbidden intoxicants.”⁵²

With regard to the *longue durée* of homoeroticism in Islamic societies, Ibn Taghri Birdi clearly has a firmer grasp on reality than al-Maqrizi. It is in fact difficult not to accuse the latter of bad faith in his rush to attribute all of contemporary society's ills to the maleficent influence of Barquq. On the other hand, neither author seems to have any problem subscribing to an “importation” theory of homoeroticism: the idea that they “got” it from someone else seems to be well nigh universal. But while al-Maqrizi seems to be ignoring a sizable chunk of Islamic intellectual and literary history, Ibn Taghri Birdi is obliquely referring to one of the early icons of that history, al-Jahiz (d. 255/869). Al-Jahiz famously (if unbelievably) opined that the fashion for boy love in Iraq in his own day (illustrated most vividly by the poetry of Abu Nuwas) was the result of the commander Abu Muslim's decision, some decades earlier, to forbid the eastern Iranian soldiers of the 'Abbasid revolution to bring their wives along on campaign, resulting in their turning, *faute de mieux*, to their male pages for sexual satisfaction, a “habit” with which they subsequently infected the populace of the 'Abbasids' new capital of Baghdad.⁵³

While Ibn Taghri Birdi seems to have denied that the Mamluk

regime represented any innovation in the societal role of homoeroticism, al-Maqrizi was not the only one to perceive some change in the situation in this period. The historian Ibn al-Dawadari preserves a precious record of an embassy from al-Nasir Muhammad to the Ilkhanid (Mongol) ruler of Persia, Ghazan, reported by the (terrified) ambassador, al-Mujiri, directly. Among the many tricky subjects broached by the Iranian monarch was that of homoeroticism. "How is it," asked Ghazan, "that your amirs abandon women and have recourse to [*yastakhdimun*] young men [*shabab*]?" Al-Mujiri replied, "Our amirs formerly knew nothing of this; it was an innovation introduced into our lands when Turghay came to us from you. He arrived with young men from the Tatars, and people were distracted by them from women." Ghazan was apparently not pleased by this reply but, distracted by the mention of women, quickly passed on to the next question, that of comparing the women in Iran with those in Egypt and Syria.⁵⁴ It is ironic that Ghazan should find the homoeroticism of the Mamluk realms surprising in the first place, considering that our sources leave little doubt that the public face of homoeroticism in Iran in this period well outshone that in the Arab lands: was Ghazan not paying attention, or was he being disingenuous?⁵⁵

But al-Mujiri was pointing to a significant phenomenon with his reference to Turghay. As the Mongols advanced across western Asia in the mid-seventh/thirteenth century, some of their numbers, for various reasons, defected from their military campaigns and took refuge in the Mamluk realm of Syria and Egypt. These were the *Wafidiyya*, among whom the largest contingent came from the Oirat Mongols. Among the first of the Oirats to arrive in Cairo was Kitbugha, who managed to ascend to the sultanate, briefly (r. 694–696/1294–1296), during one of the interruptions to the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad. While on the throne, he welcomed a large contingent of his fellow Oirats into Syria, where he settled most of the rank and file, and Egypt, to which he permitted the elite commanders to proceed, the latter being led by Turghay, the son-in-law of Hülegü, the Mongol

conqueror of Baghdad. In Cairo, the Oirats (who were settled in the quarter of al-Husayniyya) were both a burden—they were non-Muslims and badly behaved—and a sensation: they were, both male and female, perceived as extraordinarily beautiful.⁵⁶

It is al-Maqrizi, again, who best describes the resulting situation (despite his remarks elsewhere about the much later Barquq):

The amirs were entranced by them and competed (to obtain) their children, male and female. They took quite a number of them (from among the males) and added them to their troops and courted them. One of them would seek to obtain from another someone he had singled out and made the object of his desire. Then the amirs decided there were not enough of them in Egypt and sent to Syria summoning a large group of them. Thus their offspring became numerous in Cairo and everyone became desirous of their children, according to their tastes for females or males [*'ala khtilaf al-ara' fi l-inath wa-l-dhukur*], so that mutual envy and quarreling arose among the ruling elite, until finally, due to this and other reasons, the sultan al-Malik al-'Adil Kitbugha was deposed, in Safar 696 [December 1296]. His successor, al-Malik al-Mansur Husam l-Din Lajin, arrested Turghay, the Oirats' leader, and a number of their other important men and sent them to Alexandria, where he had them imprisoned and then executed. Then he distributed the rest of the Oirats among the amirs to serve them and join their troops. All this is why the people of al-Husayniyya are known for their extreme beauty—something that is still largely true even today. Some people were eager to marry their women, while others were bewitched by their sons. How well the shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Saruji has expressed himself in the following verses!

O messenger of desire, who setting out finds
My tears running with him and serving as his aides:
Bring me a reply to my letter
That I have addressed to al-Husayniyya!
For that is the place they call the Protected Valley,
And its inhabitants are, in their beauty, its gazelles.
Walk a bit, and then turn left,

And you will find before you a lane bordered by tall buildings.

Go to the house at the top of that lane, belonging to one

Whose beauty makes all his neighbors beautiful too.

Greet him, and say, "Yahşi misin? İyi misin? [Are you fine? Are you well?]

İşte [There you have] words that have long been hidden!"

Then ask him to come to me, and if he says "Yok! [No!]"

Say "Evet! [Yes!]"—for he has stayed away too long!⁵⁷

Unlike al-Mujiri, al-Maqrizi does not here imply that the beauty of Oirat boys led to any *increase* in homoeroticism. Indeed, verses like al-Saruji's about the beauty of *Turkish* boys had already long been a staple of Arabic poetry, even if his macaronic use of Turkish was something of an innovation. The available biographical information on al-Saruji himself (who died in 693/1294 and thus must have been rhapsodizing about some of the earlier Oirat arrivals) tells us something more about attitudes in his day. According to Ibn Shakir al-Kutubi, he was "a good man, chaste, a Qur'an reciter, well versed in grammar, lexicography, and literature, and abstemious in his lifestyle. His chief preoccupation was love of beauty but that accompanied by complete chastity and respectability. He wrote quite a lot of verse, which the musicians sang as lyrics." Furthermore, he rarely socialized, and when he did, he had a personal rule that his friends had to observe: he would not attend any gathering where there were women present. And "when he died, the father of his beloved said, 'I will bury him nowhere but in my son's grave, for he loved him [*kana yahwahu*], and I will not part them'—so convinced was he of al-Saruji's piety and chastity."⁵⁸

Love of this sort—passionate but chaste—had a very long history in Arabic literature and presumably life and had been seen as a homoerotic as well as heteroerotic ideal since at least the time of Muhammad b. Dawud al-Zahiri (d. 297/901), author of the first Arabic book of "love theory," the *Kitab al-Zahra* (The book of the flower), and famous for dying of chaste love for a pharmacist friend.⁵⁹ By no means all love poetry, addressed to ei-

ther sex, conformed to this particular ideal, but it certainly did offer one way—in both poetry and life—for expressing homoerotic sentiments positively and publicly without incurring the opprobrium, or punishment, prescribed for homosexual behavior.

Al-Saruji's macaronic verse was imitated by others, notably by the high-level bureaucrat Ibn Katib Qarasunqur (d. 744/1343), who addressed a poetic "letter" to a boy in Baha' al-Din Lane, just inside the city's Gate of Conquests (Bab al-Futuh) and thus adjoining the Husayniyya quarter, where, he tells the messenger,

Look there and you will see one with an innocent gaze,

Ruby-lipped, gazing with an eye adorned by kohl,

A son of the Turks, whose languid glances are arrows [*nibal*]

Shot from his eyelashes at every noble man [*nabil*].⁶⁰

It was in fact the Turks' narrow eyes, above all, that were admired, and this shift in taste—from the wide-eyed Arab, as well as from the Bedouin (and heteroerotic) to the urban (and homoerotic)—did not go unrecorded, as in these lines recorded by the famous littérateur al-Safadi (d. 764/1363) (himself the son of a Mamluk) in a richly documented discussion precisely of the change:

O Arab maiden of the nomads, get you away,

For I have hitched my fate to a Turkish city boy!

Go back to your family, you with the wide eyes,

For it is this narrow glance that has captivated me!⁶¹

Further attestation to this cult of the Turkish ephebe is provided by a *maqama* of al-Safadi's composition, entitled *Law'at al-shaki wa-dam'at al-baki* (The plaint of the lovelorn and tears of the disconsolate), which in eighty pages of elaborate Arabic rhetorical prose describes the progression of the narrator's (apparently ultimately consummated) love affair with a beautiful young Turk, whom he first encounters riding with a group of his friends, all of them carrying bows. Although the text is not ex-

plicit, they are presumably all young Mamluks. (It may be noted in passing that in 733/1333 al-Nasir Muhammad forbade archery contests because the amateurs of such contests were "corrupting" the sons of the Mamluks, being themselves notorious for "sodomy, immorality, and impiety.")⁶² Equally eloquent but in a very different register is Ibn Daniyal's shadow-play *al-Mutayyam wa-l-da'i al-yutayyim* (The man distracted by passion and the little vagabond orphan), a scabrous send-up of the ideals represented by al-Safadi's *maqama*, in which getting the boy into bed is the protagonist's only (and ultimately unfulfilled) objective.⁶³

The Mamluks themselves did not, on the whole, go in much for Arabic literature. Some never even really learned the language—Almas (another fan of Husayniyya boys, it will be remembered) being an example.⁶⁴ But there were exceptions. Perhaps the best-known Mamluk scholar and littérateur from the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad was Altunbugha al-Jawuli (d. 744/1343), whose studies in the jurisprudence of the Shafi'i legal school, as well as his admiration for the influential but controversial religious conservative Ibn Taymiyya, did not prevent him from writing love lyrics (about both sexes) and even incorporating into them quotations from the Qur'an, as in this two-line poem:

Your coming to me will be only when the Pleiades are in conjunction [i.e., never],
While your standoffishness and cruelty are two steeds in a close race.
May I be your ransom! It is my bad luck that all you have managed
To memorize from the Qur'an is "You will not see me!"

The quoted words (Qur'an 7:143) are God's response to Moses's request to show Himself to him.⁶⁵

The high degree of homoerotic attention focused on young Turks and young Mamluks in particular raises questions about what went on in the homosocial world of the Mamluk barracks,

where recently arrived adolescent *mamluks* were put through a rigorous training course and forged the intense ties of loyalty to their fellow recruits known as *khushdashiyya*. It is al-Maqrizi, again, who alerts us to the concerns we might expect. Looking back nostalgically to the good old days when discipline was enforced, he explains that when the eunuch officer in charge of the young *mamluks* (*muqaddam al-mamalik*) was informed by the supervisor of the barracks (*muqaddam al-tibaq*) that one of his charges was performing the major ablution, he would send someone to investigate the source of the pollution from which the boy was purifying himself. He would examine the boy's underwear, looking for evidence of a nocturnal emission, but if he did not find any, there would be hell to pay.⁶⁶ These remarks may be compared to what the Shafi'i jurist Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 771/1370) has to say in his moral tract on the professions, the *Restorer of Blessings and Annihilator of Banes*, about the duties of the *muqaddam al-mamalik*: "Being charged with supervision of beardless boys, he is not permitted to engage in sexual immorality [*al-muwata'a 'ala l-fujur*] with them, nor should he allow two of them to sleep together in a single bed; but these officials have now become notorious for pimping their charges."⁶⁷ And al-Subki is equally distressed about the immoral possibilities presented to the valets (*jamdariyya*),

most of whom are pretty beardless young boys, sought after by kings and amirs. They serve their masters in shifts, staying with them until bedtime. They are in extremely high demand because the desire for pretty beardless boys has captured the hearts of most of those who succumb to worldly desires [*ahl al-dunya*]. The *jamdariyya* have worked out new fashions in clothing designed to stimulate lust; they outdo women in adorning themselves and seduce people with their loveliness. But it is forbidden for any *jamdar* who believes in God and the Last Day to set himself up for such a purpose or to imitate women in what they were created for. He must not permit his master to commit sodomy with him [*yalut bihi*] nor even to kiss him. Let him fear God, his Lord, and have mercy on his own youth.⁶⁸

Such strictures are echoed in numerous other texts, especially in the literature of moral exhortation that enjoyed a particular efflorescence in the Mamluk period—at the same time that a fashion in poetic anthologies devoted entirely to the attractions of boys can be documented.⁶⁹ But while condemnatory religious scholars and exuberant *littérateurs* each had their own reasons for devoting some particular attention to aspects of the Mamluk institution (opportunities for immorality) or to young Mamluks themselves (concentration of beauty), in neither sort of literature is it suggested that there was any real difference in *attitudes* toward homoeroticism between the Mamluks and everybody else.

The evidence brought to bear in this essay on those attitudes and on the place of homoeroticism generally in Mamluk society and among the Mamluk elite is far from comprehensive, given the vast quantity of relevant sources available.⁷⁰ It does, however, permit some tentative answers to the questions posed. First of all, the particular attractiveness of Turks was an aesthetic and erotic taste that predated the Mamluk period but was certainly reinforced by the Mamluk system, as well as by such events as the descent of the Oirats on Cairo. Mamluks themselves were *perhaps* particularly susceptible to such charms because of the segregation (in both gender and more broadly societal terms) built into their world, but the non-Mamluk elite and probably the populace understood and to a significant extent shared such tastes. Widespread homoerotic interest in adolescent males was in any case given, although the sexual activities to which it naturally gave rise were widely deplored, not only by the professionally pious but (at least pro forma) by almost everyone. That members of the Mamluk elite would frequently have “favorites” or even that sultans would consider physical beauty a major criterion in choosing and promoting their *mamluks* made perfect sense under such circumstances. If a young heir to the throne like Ahmad b. al-Nasir Muhammad lost his head over a young soldier, it was certainly unfortunate but neither insane nor hopelessly perverted.⁷¹

Questions about change over time are more difficult. Of the

two major red herrings offered to explain the presence of homoeroticism in a given society, the “importation” theory, while appealed to by al-Maqrizi (and much earlier by al-Jahiz), was clearly invalid. The “hydraulic” theory—that heterosexual impulses checked by sexual segregation were redirected in homosexual directions—was *not* appealed to by local observers, and while it perhaps retains some degree of plausibility with regard to medieval Muslim society in general, its particular applicability to the case of the Mamluks remains undocumentable.⁷² A satisfactory answer to the question whether “tolerance” toward homoeroticism (or sodomy) increased, decreased, or stayed the same in the Mamluk period would depend on a much fuller assessment of the pre-Mamluk situation than has been attempted here, but contemporary perceptions would perhaps favor an increase—of which the fairly impressive log of prosecutions and persecutions for too-blatant sodomitical practices throughout the period may in fact be an index. Finally, the “pederastic” pattern of homoerotic relationships, with the “be-loved” assumed to be adolescent or slightly out of adolescence, clearly remained dominant (in terms of expectations, at least) during this period, although the military Mamluk environment probably did encourage some increased elasticity in the understanding of what was acceptable.

None of this would William of Adam have understood, but his caricature of the situation (leaving aside the question of cross-dressers, which this essay has not attempted to address) is what one might expect from an observer from a different society with such different presuppositions. As for Edward II and Ahmad b. al-Nasir Muhammad, the parallels are clear enough—disgust and resentment at a ruler’s or potential ruler’s obsession with a private passion, rendered worse by its object being a male who was as such part of the public world of power. With regard to the differences, from a Middle East perspective it is tempting to point first of all to the fact that Ahmad was perceived to be the active partner (the “man”) in his relationship, whereas Edward looks like the passive partner (judging from the age differ-

ence between him and Gaveston, as well as the reported nature of his execution). Whether or to what extent such considerations are in fact relevant in the case of Edward is a question for Europeanists (and one I have not seen addressed), but the general contours sketched here of how homoeroticism worked in Mamluk society should make it clear that Cairo was a long way from London.

NOTES

1. On Edward, see Caroline Bingham, *The Life and Times of Edward II* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973); on Gaveston, see J. S. Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall 1307–1312: Politics and Patronage in the Reign of Edward II* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), and Pierre Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston: Edward II's Adoptive Brother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Bingham and Hamilton accept the sexual dimension of the relationship between the two men as obvious; Chaplais (not entirely convincingly) rejects it as unwarranted by contemporary evidence; Hamilton has responded to Chaplais with arguments for Edward and Piers being more than friends in "Ménage à Roi: Edward II and Piers Gaveston," *History Today* 49(6)(June 1999): 26–31.
2. Cited and translated by Michael Uebel, "Re-Orienting Desire: Writing on Gender Trouble in Fourteenth-Century Egypt," in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 244–45 and n. 63.
3. On the *mukhannath*, see my articles (dealing with earlier periods) "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111(1991): 671–93, and "Gender Irregularity as Entertainment: Institutionalized Transvestism at the Caliphal Court in Medieval Baghdad," in Farmer and Pasternack, *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, 45–72. Beard-shaving, cross-dressing, and passive homosexuality are all very well attested for the *mukhannaths* in this period; cohabitation is not.
4. The peculiar system of the Mamluk (literally, "slave") regime is most fully laid out by David Ayalon, *The Mamluk Military Society*

- (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979). "Turk" here, following Arabic usage of the time, refers (rather imprecisely) to members of various ethnic groups speaking Turkic languages.
5. For useful, if brief, discussions of sexuality and homosexuality in Mamluk society (and literature), see Robert Irwin, "Ali al-Baghdadi and the Joy of Mamluk Sex," in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950–1800)*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 45–57, and Louis Pouzet, *Damas au VIIe/XIIIe siècle: vie et structures religieuses dans une métropole islamique* (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq Sarl, 1991), 365–72. Stephen O. Murray, "Male Homosexuality, Inheritance Rules, and the Status of Women in Medieval Egypt: The Case of the Mamluks," in *Islamic Homosexualities*, ed. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 161–73, which is based entirely on secondary literature and a few translated sources, is less helpful.
 6. Ahmad's biography is succinctly presented by Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *al-Durar al-kamina fi a'yan al-mi'a al-thamina* (Hyderabad, 1348–1350), 1:294–96. See also al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Suluk li-ma'rifat duwal al-muluk*, vol. 2, ed. Muhammad Mustafa Ziyada (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1942), 461, 578, 593–619; Ibn Taghri Birdi, *al-Nujum al-zahira fi muluk Misr wa-l-Qahira* (Cairo: al-Mu'assasa al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1963–1971), 10:23, 50, 69–72.
 7. The bibliography on al-Nasir Muhammad is extensive; see *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1954–2002), s.v. al-Nasir; and Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nasir Muhammad Ibn Qalawun 1310–1341* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).
 8. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *al-Durar al-kamina*, 1:294.
 9. On the role of eunuchs in the Mamluk military (and society), see David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study of Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), and earlier scholarship cited therein.
 10. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *al-Durar al-kamina*, 1:294–95.
 11. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *al-Durar al-kamina*, 1:295–96. For the general political history and primary references, see Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1383* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 125–29.

12. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *al-Durar al-kamina*, 1:296.
13. Uebel, "Re-Orienting Desire," 241–42.
14. Scattered innuendo in the sources about Edward's predecessors William II and Richard I notwithstanding.
15. I have relied on Ibn al-Tuwayr, *Nuzhat al-muqlatayn fi akhbar al-dawlatayn*, ed. Ayman Fu'ad Sayyid (Beirut: Franz Steiner, 1992), 61–68; Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-a'yan*, ed. Ihsan 'Abbas (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1968–1972), 1:237–38; and al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az al-hunafa' bi-akhbar al-a'immah al-Fatimiyyin al-khulafa'*, ed. Muhammad 'Abd al-Qadir Ahmad 'Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), 2:270–73. See also Ibn Muyassar, *al-Muntaqa min Akhbar Misr*, ed. Ayman Fu'ad Sayyid (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1981), 147–49. For full references and a summary in English, see the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. al-Zafir bi-A'da' Allah.
16. *Fa-rubbama nataja min al-shabbayn ma la yanbaghi*; al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az al-hunafa'*, 2:270.
17. On Usama b. Munqidh, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. He gives his own version of this story in his memoirs, *Kitab al-Itibar*, ed. Philip Hitti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930), 18–21, trans. Philip K. Hitti, *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usamah Ibn-Munqidh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929), 42–46.
18. Al-Maqrizi, *Itti'az al-hunafa'*, 2:272.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-a'yan*, 1:237.
21. Ibid., 1:238.
22. For the crucial distinction, in the eyes of medieval Islamic societies, between active and passive partners in male homoerotic relationships, see my "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 50–79.
23. On Ayaz, see *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (various publishers, 1982–), s.v., and references there; also Michael Glünz, "Das männliche Liebespaar in der persischen und türkischen Diwanlyrik," in *Homoerotic Lyrik: 6. Kolloquium der Forschungsstelle für europäische Lyrik des Mittelalters*, ed. Theo Stum-

- mer (Mannheim: Forschungsstelle für europäische Lyrik des Mittelalters an der Universität Mannheim, 1992), 119–28.
24. Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzi, *Mir'at al-zaman fi ta'rikh al-a'yan*, section on the Seljuqs, ed. Ali Sevīm (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1968), 84–85, cited and discussed in Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 153–56. The exceptional status of eunuchs within the system of strict gender segregation observed by (elite) medieval Muslims was the basis for the development of the eunuch institution.
25. Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 166–67, with references.
26. Ibid., 320, citing Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzi, *Mir'at al-zaman fi ta'rikh al-a'yan* (Hyderabad, 1951), 8:318–20 (inaccessible to me).
27. Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil fi l-ta'rikh*, ed. C. Tornburg (Leiden: Brill, 1853), 12:496–97, cited in Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, 241, 318.
28. Ps.-Ibn al-Fuwari, *Kitab al-Hawadith*, ed. Bashshar 'Awwad Ma'ruf and 'Imad 'Abd al-Salam Ra'uf (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1997), 134–35.
29. Ibn Shakir al-Kutubi, *Fawat al-wafayat*, ed. Ihsan 'Abbas (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1974), 3:6–12. See also Abu Shama, *Tarajim rijal al-qarnayn al-sadis wa-l-sabi'*, ed. Muhammad al-Kawthari (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1947), 180; Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa-l-nihaya* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1978), 13:173–74; and the discussion and references in Pouzet, *Damas*, 367–68.
30. Al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-kubra*, ed. Mahmud Muhammad al-Tanahi and 'Abd al-Fattah Muhammad al-Hulw (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1964–1976), 8:173. See also al-Safadi, *al-Wafi bi-l-wafayat* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1962–), 18:180; and Pouzet, *Damas*, 109 n. 10.
31. Ibn Kathir, *Bidaya*, 14:18. See also Ibn Shakir al-Kutubi, *Fawat*, 1:152–53; al-Safadi, *Wafi*, 8:158–59; and Pouzet, *Damas*, 366. Pouzet follows Ibn Kathir in reading "al-Thaqafi," but the other sources confirm that the correct reading is "al-Baqafi."
32. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 9:113–19. For a full discussion of al-Nashw's career, including attention to these incidents, see Donald P. Little, "Notes on the Early *nazar al-khass*," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235–53.

33. The literature on this phenomenon is abundant but widely scattered. For general access, see the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. *saki* (cupbearer).
34. See Li Guo, "Paradise Lost: Ibn Daniyal's Response to Baybars' Campaign against Vice in Cairo," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 219–35 and references there.
35. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Inba' al-ghumr bi-abna' al-'umr*, vol. 3, ed. Hasan Habashi (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Shu'un al-Islamiyya, 1972), 399–400.
36. Ibn Iyas, *Bada'i' al-zuhur fi waqa'i' al-duhur*, ed. Muhammad Mustafa, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1963), 3:96. Castration for such an offense (or any offense) flew in the face of Islamic law but could have been justified on the basis of *siyasa*, overriding state interest (as were many or most penal measures). Ibn Iyas specifies that the operation was carried out in Old Cairo, probably implying that it was performed by a Christian, and adds that at this time a Jew appeared who was an expert in castration and who subsequently performed the operation on "many people," who, like the Turk, survived it (which is what appears to surprise Ibn Iyas). There were large numbers of eunuchs in Cairo at this time, but theoretically they had all been castrated outside Islamic territory and then imported (as slaves), and certainly the operations were carried out by non-Muslims.
37. *Ibid.*, 4:278–79.
38. Over the course of the Mamluk centuries, the predominance of ethnic Turks among the imported *mamluks* gradually yielded to Circassians. A number of other ethnic groups were always included, however.
39. Al-Maqrizi, *Suluk*, 3:618. He adds that female prostitutes, due to the bear market in which they found themselves, were obliged to imitate boys, presumably in dress, as elaborated on below.
40. Al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawa'iz wa-l-i'tibar bi-dhikr al-khitat wa-l-athar* (generally referred to as *al-Khitat*) (Bulaq: Dar al-Tiba'a al-Misriyya, 1853), 2:204.
41. Ibn Kathir, *Bidaya*, 13:326, reading *min al-lutiyya* for *wa-l-lutiyya* and *shabbaba* for *shabbaha*; cited by Pouzet, *Damas*, 366 n. 147.
42. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 8:18; "show off" is *yuli'*, for the text's *yuligh*, "to give (a dog a bowl) to lick," which is in fact impossible despite its perhaps apparent plausibility; but neither reading is sat-

- isfactory. According to al-Maqrizi (*Suluk*, 1:792–93), al-Ashraf's assassin later attempted to justify his deed by claiming that the sultan drank wine in Ramadan, committed immoral acts with beardless boys (*yafsiqu bi-l-murdan*), and neglected to perform his prayers (in that order).
43. Levanoni, *Turning Point*, 37–40.
44. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 11:290–92.
45. See the biography of him in Ibn Hajar, *Durar*, 4:358–59.
46. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 9:300–02.
47. Ibn Hajar, *Durar*, 1:477–79.
48. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 14:111. The other anecdote describes how Ibn Taghri Birdi's own father, in attendance on the sultan, offered a clever aside to him on the attractiveness of one of the young men present in the room, which the sultan much appreciated.
49. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 14:207–10.
50. The dynasty preceding the Mamluks, 564–650/1169–1252, founded by Saladin.
51. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 15:454–59.
52. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 16:157–60.
53. Al-Jahiz put forth this theory in a work *On Schoolmasters* (*Fi l-mu'allimin*), now lost, but the relevant passage was widely copied, most notably by Hamza al-Isfahani in his recension of the poetry of Abu Nuwas. See Abu Nuwas, *Diwan*, vol. 4, ed. Gregor Schoeler (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), 141–42.
54. Ibn al-Dawadari, *Kanz al-durar wa-jami' al-ghurar*, vol. 9, ed. H. R. Roemer (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960), 74–75.
55. For an overview of the Iranian situation, see Ehsan Yarshater, "Love-Related Conventions in Sa'di's *Ghazals*," in *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, vol. 2, *The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 420–38.
56. David Ayalon, "The Wafidiyya in the Mamluk Kingdom," *Islamic Culture* 25 (1951): 89–104; S. M. Elham, *Kitbuga und Lagin: Studien zur Mamluken Geschichte nach Baibars al-Mansuri und an-Nuwairi* (Freiburg: Schwarz, 1977), 77–78.
57. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2:22–23.
58. Ibn Shakir al-Kutubi, *Fawat*, 2:196–206.
59. For the literary tradition of chaste love, known as *udhri* (after the name of an Arab tribe celebrated for it), see *Encyclopaedia of Is-*

lam, s.v. *ʿudhri*; for love theory, Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

60. Al-Safadi, *Wafi*, 15:341–42, cited by Nasser Rabbat, “Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing,” in Kennedy, *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt*, 69 and n. 28; al-Safadi explicitly compares this to al-Saruji’s verse. The poem also appears in Ibn Shakir al-Kutubi, *Fawat*, 2:199–200 (in the entry on al-Saruji), with variants in the Turkish lines, which I am not qualified to attempt to decipher.
61. Al-Safadi, *al-Ghayth al-musajjam fi sharh Lamiyyat al-ʿAjam* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), 2:19. On the poetic topos of “narrow” Turkish eyes, see Thomas Bauer, *Liebe und Liebesdichtung in der arabischen Welt des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 285–86. Relying on al-Safadi, Bauer suggests that the shift is first detectable in the early sixth/twelfth century, but it can be pushed back about a hundred years earlier, as illustrated, for example, in lines by al-Bahhathi (d. 463/1071) preserved in al-Thaʿalibi, *Tatimmat al-Yatima*, ed. ʿAbbas Iqbal (Tehran, 1934), 2:32:

I have been afflicted by a hunter of lions, himself a gazelle fawn
Of the Turks, whose childhood amulets have not yet been
removed.
I find the earth narrow about me because of his narrow eyes,
And his black curly hair (*shaʿr*) exhausts the wellsprings of my
verses (*shiʿr*).
62. *Al-liwat wa-l-fisq wa-qillat al-din*: Ibn Kathir, *Bidaya*, 14:161.
63. For discussion and references, see my article “Two Homoerotic Narratives from Mamluk Literature: al-Safadi’s *Lawʿat al-shaki* and Ibn Daniyal’s *al-Mutayyam*,” in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J. W. Wright, Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 158–91. The attribution of the *Lawʿat al-shaki* to al-Safadi is uncertain.
64. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 9:301–2.
65. Ibn Taghri Birdi, *Nujum*, 10:105–6; al-Safadi, *Wafi*, 9:366–69; Ulrich Haarmann, “Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage: Mamluks and Their Sons in the Intellectual Life of Fourteenth-Century Egypt and Syria,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988): 81–114.

66. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2:214, cited by Ayalon, *Eunuchs*, 55. “There would be hell to pay” renders *jaʿahu l-mawt min kull makan*, literally, “there would come to him death from every place.” Ayalon has mistranscribed *makan* as *hal* (“circumstance”) and translated “would be executed under any condition,” but I am not convinced that the phrase is to be taken so literally.
67. Al-Subki, *Muʿd al-niʿam wa-mubid al-niqam*, ed. Muhammad ʿAli al-Najjar et al. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1993), 40.
68. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
69. An example of the former is al-Dhahabi’s (d. 748/1348) survey of major sins, *Kitab al-Kabaʾir*, ed. al-Sayyid al-ʿArabi (al-Mansura: Dar al-Khulafaʾ li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʿ, 1995), in which sodomy (*liwat*) appears as the sixteenth (pp. 55–63) in a list of seventy. Exactly contemporary are Ibn al-Wardi’s (d. 749/1349) *al-Kalam ʿala miʿat malih* (Discourse on one hundred pretty boys, unpublished) and al-Safadi’s *al-Husn al-sarih fi miʿat malih* (Manifest beauty on one hundred pretty boys, ed. Ahmad Fawzi al-Hayb [Damascus: Dar Saʿd al-Din, 2003]). On the genre, see Franz Rosenthal, “Male and Female: Described and Compared,” in Wright and Rowson, *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, 24–54.
70. A fuller contextualization of elite behavior in this regard would have to deal with homoeroticism among the Sufi mystics, a topic touched on in some of the anecdotes cited here but in need of more detailed treatment.
71. Three centuries earlier, in a celebrated Persian “mirror for princes” addressed to his son and heir, the ruler of Jurjan (on the southeast coast of the Caspian Sea) had warned against the dangers a monarch incurs through passionate love—for either sex, but the accompanying anecdotes are exclusively homoerotic. In a separate chapter on “pleasure,” he strongly advocated that his son’s (moderate) pursuit of sexual enjoyment be directed at both sexes, invoking medical reasons for recommending that he turn to boys in the summer and women in the winter (Kaykawus, *Qabusnama*, ed. Ghulamhusayn Yusufi [Tehran: Sharikat-i Intisharat-i ʿIlmi wa-Farhangi, 1988], 80–87; trans. Reuben Levy, *A Mirror for Princes: The Qabus Nama* [New York: Dutton, 1951], 70–78). I have not seen this “seasonal” theory proposed elsewhere in Islamic sources, but it does turn up, surprisingly, in the *De planctu naturae* (The complaint of nature) of Alan of Lille (d. 1203 CE); for a discussion

of this work (but omitting the references to seasons), see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), ch. 4.

72. These are actually two different, if related, aspects of sexual segregation—the unavailability of women because of societywide sexual segregation and the all-male environment of the Mamluk barracks.

• SEVEN •

*“In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow”
Female Companionship in Seventeenth-
Century Safavi Iran¹*

Kathryn Babayan

This chapter interprets a widow’s “inscription” of herself in a journey of loss and separation in late seventeenth-century Isfahan.² My reading of the author’s poetic narrative has taken liberties in understanding her suffering because human beings share emotions of grief, though temporal and cultural forms of expression may separate them. Such emotional sensibilities have colored my rendition of her decision after her husband’s death to travel and perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. I locate her poem as a singular female expression of sorrow and more generally as a source about death and love within certain textual and social milieus. This Isfahani widow’s choice to “cure” her melancholy through the writing of a mystical journey toward God reveals how piety and life experiences kindled her desire to circumambulate the Ka’ba.

To imagine this widow’s social world, I focus on Isfahan where she lived and on the Ka’ba to which she traveled as devout pilgrim. I analyze the Isfahani widow’s narrativized experiences through the symbols and words she used to translate her per-