

rapidly to the point that eunuchs controlled various positions, both civil and military, in the state. It peaked with the appointment of a eunuch as official ruler of 'Abbasid Egypt under the Ikhshidids in the third 'Abbasid era. That eunuch ruler was Kafur (r. 966–8). He had been de facto ruler of Egypt and parts of Syria during the previous two decades.⁴

We have seen earlier how the Prophet owned a eunuch named Mabur, given to him as a gift by the Byzantine ruler of Egypt. The Prophet used him as a servant for his Egyptian concubine, Mariya, in her house, which the Prophet would visit. Under the Umayyads, eunuchs were used as servants in the harem, until Caliph 'Abd al-Malik employed them as *hajibs* at his palace doors; with such an important office, this was the beginning of their introduction to the world of politics and power. As we seen, the last Umayyad ruler, Marwan II, entrusted a eunuch to carry the insignia of the caliph, and act as a bodyguard to his harem during his escape from 'Abbasid forces.⁵

Eunuchs in Islam and Other Civilisations

Eunuchs (*khisyan*) had existed in other civilisations before Islam. There is sufficient evidence to prove that the Chinese, Byzantines and Persians, among others, used eunuchs in their palaces for the rulers and aristocracy. They were used mainly in the harem section of the court.⁶

Al-Jahiz pays great attention to the phenomenon in his great work, *Al-Hayawan (The Animal)*. He mentions that the castration carried out by the Byzantines was done in order to donate their sons to the church, hoping they would become priests in the future. The families of the little boys carried out the castration (removing the testicles without cutting the male organ) to limit the male temptation from impregnating the nuns. Having said that, the Council of Nicaea held in 325 CE had already prohibited eunuchs from entering the priesthood, but the door was open to them in the Eastern oriental churches.⁷ There were two eunuchs who became Patriarch of Constantinople in the tenth century.⁸

From the period of the Umayyads onwards, surrounding empires, including those of the Sasanids and Byzantines, were assimilated into Islamic civilisation. The service of eunuchs was required for several purposes, such as serving, guarding and protecting the harem, especially with the rapid increase of polygamy, and the flood of *jawari*, concubines and *qiyān* accompanying

Taef El-Azhari, Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic

History, 661-1257, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni. Press, 2019.

3

ISAM DN-281787

Hadim

080122

The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids

MAUDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

01 Ekim 2020

The full moon describes the beauty of your face (Kawthar)
I become confused: am I looking at the moon or at you?
If the soft narcissus flower breathes
I imagine it as the scent of your mouth
Kawthar is my religion and my world
My illness and cure
The most failing people are
Those who blame a lover for his beloved.¹

This rare romantic poetry by the 'Abbasid caliph al-Amin (d. 813) was written to his lover, Kawthar. Kawthar was not a woman, but a eunuch. The evolution of the phenomenon of the eunuch under the 'Abbasids influenced almost all other dynasties that followed, from the medieval Fatimids, Turkmen and Ayyubids to the modern Ottomans and Qajars. David Ayalon states in his pioneering book, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans*, that further studies are needed in this field; he mentions that he did not cover the entire 'Abbasid and Ayyubid periods, and that he intentionally did not cover the Fatimid dynasty as 'it was saturated with eunuchs, and deserves a separate study'.² I intend to take up his invitation to uncover the influence of eunuchs in the political affairs of these periods. Shaun Marmon's study on eunuchs in Islamic history, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, covers the Mamluk dynasty onwards.³

The phenomenon of eunuchs started mainly in the harem, and in very small numbers at the time of the early 'Abbasid caliphs, but it accelerated