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### **At the Helm of the Harem: Eunuchs and Their Function in the 9th/10th Century Abbasid Court**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the role and function of eunuchs within the 9th/10th century Abbasid court, with particular attention being paid to the role of eunuchs in the court of the caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908-932 CE). Eunuchs, like other slaves within the Abbasid Empire, were predominantly foreigners. They were purchased as young boys and castrated before reaching their final market in one of the major cities of the Abbasid Empire. As guardians of the harem, Eunuchs were granted high levels of access to the caliph and freedom of movement within the caliphal court, providing them with the opportunity to attain influence amongst elite men. Outside the harem, eunuchs held key offices within the army and the police, were utilised in ceremonies, and regulated access to the caliph. This allowed them to serve as vassals for the power of their masters, and it presented them with opportunities to exercise their own influence within the court despite their enslaved status. Socially, eunuchs were often understood to exist as a sort of third gender, granting them the ability to move between the highly gendered spaces that existed within the Abbasid caliphate and, occasionally, making them the objects of lust and desire. As eunuchs existed outside the social institution of the family, occupied a liminal space between male and female, and had no ties to the society over which the caliph ruled, they were understood to be ideally suited to serve as agents and proxies for their masters.

## **Introduction**

In 909, the vizier Abu al-‘Abbas b. al-Hasan staged a coup against al-Muqtadir, the 13-year-old caliph installed as ruler of the Abbasid caliphate only four months earlier. Mu’nis al-Khadim, chief of the caliphal military under the caliph al-Mu‘tadid in 900 and commander of the Abbasid army from 908-933, remained loyal to the young caliph, defending the palace against the attack. Though his numbers were limited, Mu’nis marched against Abu al-‘Abbas b. al-Hasan, whose supporters were scattered throughout Baghdad, reversing the coup and surrendering Abu al-‘Abbas b. al-Hasan and his supporters to the chief of police, Mu’nis al-Khazin.<sup>1</sup> The court of al-Muqtadir, who served as caliph in 908-932 CE, held the largest number of eunuchs in Islamic history, numbering an estimated 11,000.<sup>2</sup> Both Mu’nis al-Khadim, the commander of the Abbasid army, and Mu’nis al-Khazin, the chief of police, were included amongst this elite group of slaves, who often held positions of extreme influence and power within harems, courts, and political institutions in the Abbasid caliphate.

Eunuchs, like other slaves within the Abbasid Empire, were predominantly foreigners. They were purchased as young boys and castrated before reaching their final market in one of the Abbasid Empire’s major cities. As guardians of the harem, they were granted a high levels of access to the caliph and freedom of movement within the caliphal court, providing them with the opportunity to attain influence amongst elite men.<sup>3</sup> Outside the harem, eunuchs held key offices within the army and the police, were utilised in ceremonies and served as *hajibs*, the office responsible for regulating and supervising access to the caliph.<sup>4</sup> This allowed eunuchs to serve as

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<sup>1</sup> Taef El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” in *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History, 661–1257* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 163.

<sup>2</sup> El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” 162.

<sup>3</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, “Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of Al-Muqtadir.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 2 (2005): 238.

<sup>4</sup> El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” 163.

vassals for the power of their masters, and presented them with opportunities to exercise their own influence within the court despite their enslaved status. Socially, eunuchs were often understood to exist within a sort of liminal space between distinctly sexed categories of male and female, granting them the ability to move between the highly gendered spaces that existed within the Abbasid caliphate and, occasionally, making them the objects of lust and desire. As eunuchs existed outside of the social institution of the family, occupied a liminal space between male and female, and had no ties to the society over which the caliph ruled, they were understood to be ideally suited to serve as agents and proxies for their masters.<sup>5</sup>

### **Defining Abbasid Slavery and Eunuchism**

Abbasid slavery was defined and regulated by Islamic law, with the statutes that dictated the legal status of a slave being outlined in the Quran and the Hadith: Slaves were considered as human beings with distinct rights who were not considered chattel; their inferiority was not natural or inherent, but instead arose from their subjection under the legal institution of slavery and ended when their enslavement ended; the relationship between slave and master was personal and defined by their membership within the household; and, lastly, kindness from the master to the slave was strongly encouraged, as was manumission, which was optional. Slaves were entitled to life and well-being, and the master did not have the right to kill his slave.<sup>6</sup> Islamic jurisprudence restricted the enslavement of fellow coreligionists and further stipulated that Muslims must not sell themselves into slavery or renounce their freedom due to debt.<sup>7</sup> While Muslims were prevented

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<sup>5</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "The Harem," in *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court*, eds. Maaike van Berkel et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 179.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Franz, "Slavery in Islam: Legal Norms and Social Practice" in *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000-1500 CE)*, eds. Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017) 69.

<sup>7</sup> Franz, "Slavery in Islam: Legal Norms and Social Practice," 82.

from enslaving fellow Muslims, conversion to Islam did not necessarily change a slave's legal status. Regardless, slaves were not to be denied their right to fulfil their religious obligations and were understood to have the same religious obligations and rights as freemen. This stipulation applied not only to Muslim slaves, but included non-Muslims as well, as "even beyond Islam, man awaits the Day of Judgement and will meet his fate according to his actions and omissions, regardless of personal status."<sup>8</sup>

What distinguished eunuchs from other groups of enslaved people within the Abbasid caliphate was the physical mutilation that accompanied their enslavement and granted them their elite status. As it was not permitted for castration to occur within the borders Islamic world, eunuchs underwent castration outside the boundaries of Islam before arriving at their final point of sale.<sup>9</sup> The act of castration is what granted eunuchs their unique position of influence within the Abbasid court and accounted for their high price, as their eunuchism allowed them to be trusted with supervising and guarding the large harems of the elite.<sup>10</sup> Further, as castration was intended to ensure the eunuch had no biological future, they were thought to have no personal ambitions outside of their service to the caliph, a fact that was assumed to ensure the total loyalty of the eunuch to his master and made him an especially effective vassal to function as an extension of his master's power.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Franz, "Slavery in Islam: Legal Norms and Social Practice," 81.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Hogendorn, "The Hideous Trade. Economic Aspects of the 'Manufacture' and Sale of Eunuchs," *Paideuma* 45 (1999), 140.

<sup>10</sup> Hogendorn, "The Hideous Trade," 137.

<sup>11</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids,'" 144.

## **The Origin and Creation of Abbasid Eunuchs**

In 750, the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad caliphate after a decisive victory at the River Zab. Support for the Abbasid cause was largely based amongst the non-Arab converts to Islam who faced discrimination under Umayyad rule. Though most of the population under Umayyad rule were non-Arab converts, Arab ethnicity was central to the political ideology and policy of the Umayyads, who continued to tax non-Arab converts as if they were non-Muslims.<sup>12</sup> After establishing themselves in Iraq, the Abbasids set out to establish a new capital to serve as the base of caliphal power. The Abbasid caliph al-Mansur chose the point at which the Euphrates and Tigris came to a point, just north of the old Sassanid capital Ctsephon, founding the capital city of Baghdad in 762.<sup>13</sup>

The choice by al-Mansur to establish Baghdad as the centre of caliphal rule was influenced by the legacy of Sassinia in Mesopotamia, as well as the presence of Persian converts to Islam, whose armies had supported the Abbasid revolution, within the highest ranks of Abbasid government.<sup>14</sup> Persian influence was further reflected in the planning and construction of Baghdad, which was built as a circular city in the Persian tradition. The caliph's palace and a great mosque formed the centre of the city, with the caliph's throne room at its very centre. The rest of the city formed concentric circles surrounding the centre, with an inner circle composed of residences for princes and elite officials, and an outer ring composed of dwellings for the caliph's military and assorted staff.<sup>15</sup> From an economic perspective, Baghdad was a strategic choice for a capital, being situated within one of the richest agricultural regions in the Middle East and lying between both

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<sup>12</sup> Tayeb El-Hibri, "From Revolution to Foundations (750–775)," in *The Abbasid Caliphate: A History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 34.

<sup>13</sup> El-Hibri, "From Revolution to Foundations (750–775)," 55-56.

<sup>14</sup> Amira K. Bennison, "From Baghdad to Cordoba: The Cities of Classical Islam," in *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>15</sup> Bennison, "From Baghdad to Cordoba," 70.

the Tigris and the Euphrates, providing ample opportunities for water transport and making Baghdad a centre for international trade.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond Baghdad, the Abbasid Empire encompassed the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula, extending into Egypt to the west, to Kabul in the east, and to Black Sea in the North, bordering the Byzantine Empire. The Tigris River allowed for trade with China through the Persian Gulf, and access to the broader Mediterranean world via the Nile enabled the transport of goods to and from Cairo via the port of Alexandria.<sup>17</sup> The far reaching trade networks of the Abbasid empire provided a strong market for slaves, the majority of whom hailed from sub-Saharan Africa, the Christian parts of Spain, Frankish territories, Caucasia, Central/Eastern Europe, and the Turkish steppe.<sup>18</sup>

The historian al-Mas‘udi, in his 10th-century book *Murūj ad-Dahab wa-Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar* or *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, describes four types of eunuch: Sudanese, Saqaliba/Slavic, Rum/Byzantine, and Chinese.<sup>19</sup> Records from 9th-century Egypt describe sporadic raids taking place in Nubian and Buja territory when their peace agreements with Egypt were violated, allowing for male, female, and child captives to be acquired and sold as slaves.<sup>20</sup> Most slaving, however, was conducted by professional slavers and merchants in regions with no peace agreements with Muslim authorities. The African hinterland surrounding Egypt, the coast of Asia Minor, and Europe were referenced as the territories in which slave raids were regularly conducted.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> El-Hibri, “From Revolution to Foundations (750–775),” 59.

<sup>17</sup> Amira K. Bennison, “The Lifeblood of Empire: Trade and Traders in the ‘Abbasid Age,” in *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ‘Abbasid Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Bennison, “The Lifeblood of Empire,” 146.

<sup>19</sup> Mas‘ūdī, *The Meadows of Gold*. Trans. and ed. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 345.

<sup>20</sup> Jelle Bruning, “Slave Trade Dynamics in Abbasid Egypt: The Papyrological Evidence.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 63, 5-6 (2020), 687.

<sup>21</sup> Bruning, “Slave Trade Dynamics in Abbasid Egypt,” 688.

The act of castration required in the creation of eunuchs intended for the Islamic market provided an added complication to their enslavement. Prohibitions within Muslim territories required it to be conducted before they reached their final market. References are often made to several major castration centres used by slave traders *en route* to markets in Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba, where castration specialists could be found. Specialist knowledge was especially vital in the creation of eunuchs due to high rates of mortality associated with the procedure.<sup>22</sup> Eunuchs coming from Europe were typically castrated in Verdun, Prague, and Pechina, while eunuchs from Southern Russia and Asia were brought through Samarkand, Bukhara, Armenia, and Khwarizm.<sup>23</sup>

Slaves purchased to become eunuchs were typically castrated between the ages of four and twelve, as mortality rates were lower amongst juveniles than adolescent or adult men. Mortality rates because of castration depended largely on two factors: the skill of the specialist performing the procedure and the chance of infection within the environment in which a eunuch was castrated. Estimates indicate that rates of mortality were, on average, between 66% and 75%.<sup>24</sup> This accounts for the high price demanded for eunuchs, who were often 3-4 times more expensive than other slaves.<sup>25</sup>

Two categories of eunuch existed within the Abbasid caliphate: The first, known as *khasiyy* or *khisyan*, referred to a eunuch who had only had his testicles removed. The second, *majbub*, referred to a eunuch who had both the testicles as well as the penis entirely removed or mutilated. Sources, however, rarely distinguish between the two categories.<sup>26</sup> It is assumed that the *khisyan* were employed outside of the harem, serving in positions within the military and police, and as

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<sup>22</sup> Hogendorn, "The Hideous Trade," 141.

<sup>23</sup> Hogendorn, "The Hideous Trade," 141.

<sup>24</sup> Hogendorn, "The Hideous Trade," 143-145.

<sup>25</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 144.

<sup>26</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 145.



*hajibs*, while the *majbub* were employed within the private quarters of the caliph as guardians of the harem.<sup>27</sup> The *khisyan* are said to have had a strong desire for women and are recorded as having owned concubines or having married, and there exist several cases of rulers banning *khisyan* from entering the harem after they had reached puberty, as they were still capable of copulating with the women.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Role of the Eunuch in the Abbasid Court**

The early 10th-century court of al-Muqtadir held the largest number of eunuchs in Islamic history. Of the 11,000 eunuchs employed by al-Muqtadir, the majority served within the harem as servants and guardians of the 4,000 *jawari*, a term used for slave girls who served as entertainment for their master or mistress, and concubines of the caliph.<sup>29</sup> The term *harem*, within the Abbasid context, referred to the parts of the household to which access was limited or restricted, and typically encompassed what might be termed the “women’s quarters.” The caliphal harem included the mother of the caliph, his wives, his concubines, his female slaves, the female servants who served the harem, and eunuchs.<sup>30</sup> The progressive increase in women within the harem corresponded directly with the number of eunuchs present within the Abbasid court, with an estimated ratio of three eunuchs for every woman within the harem. While this number may be exaggerated, it is important to consider that the harem required round-the-clock guardianship and oversight, and it is likely that supervision was conducted in shifts. Further, the duties of eunuchs extended beyond the court and included guarding the gates of the palace, engaging in missions for the caliph both within and outside of the court, and serving an important role in training and managing the caliph’s

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<sup>27</sup> El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” 147.

<sup>28</sup> El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” 146.

<sup>29</sup> El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” 163.

<sup>30</sup> El-Cheikh, “The Harem,” 167.

*mamluk/ghulam* military (the Turkic slave army formed during the reign of the 9th-century caliph al-Mu'tasim).<sup>31</sup>

Within the harem, eunuchs were entrusted with both the protection of the caliph's women and the education of his children. Their status as castrated men granted them a unique freedom of movement within the palace of the caliph, as they were permitted to move freely between the court and the caliph's private quarters, granting them direct access to the ruler. The influence of the harem's eunuchs was especially pronounced during the reign of al-Muqtadir due to the importance of the caliph's mother, Shaghab, in the affairs of the state. Due to her confinement within the harem, Shaghab's dealings with the court were mediated through eunuchs.<sup>32</sup> Eunuchs within the harem regularly served as intermediaries between the men of the court and the women of the harem, and their access to the harem presented eunuchs with the unique opportunity to influence the former.<sup>33</sup>

In this context, the Black eunuch Mufhli was noted as having had particularly strong influence during the reign of al-Muqtadir. He may have played a decisive role in the reappointment of Ibn al-Furat as vizier in 923, replacing Hamid.<sup>34</sup> When Hamid came to the palace following his dismissal to try and meet with al-Muqtadir, he asked Mufhli to deliver his request. Though he promised to deliver his message, Mufhli instead took the opportunity to disparage Hamid.<sup>35</sup> As go-betweens both within and outside of the court, eunuchs not only controlled the information the caliph would receive but were also able to withhold information to further their own ambitions.

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<sup>31</sup> David Ayalon, "The Eunuchs in Islam: Basic Characteristics" in *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), 16-17.

<sup>32</sup> Nadia Maria El Cheikh "Guarding the harem, protecting the state," in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power: Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World*, eds. Almut Höfert, Matthew Mesley and Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2018), 71.

<sup>33</sup> El-Cheikh, "The Harem," 179.

<sup>34</sup> El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 244.

<sup>35</sup> El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 246.

The eunuchs' closeness to the caliph provided lucrative opportunities for eunuchs themselves, as those who sought favours from the caliph could bribe his eunuchs to persuade the caliph towards their cause, a tactic utilised by Mufhli, whose position allowed for him to accumulate wealth and eventually become the owner of a large estate.<sup>36</sup> Mufhli serves as a strong example of the double nature of dependency in the relationship between a eunuch and his master. The position of the caliph within the Abbasid court itself created a need that the position of eunuch fulfilled. While the eunuch was reliant upon the caliph for his influence, it is the power lent to him by the caliph that itself allowed him to operate according to his own interests, and sometimes against the interests of the caliph as well.

These kinds of conditions allowed eunuchs to flourish within the Abbasid caliphate during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, not only within the harem but within the political institutions of the caliphate. Eunuchs occupied elite offices and positions of significant power within the court. Of particular importance in the evolution of the eunuchs' power was the establishment of intricate ceremonies and rituals surrounding the public appearances of the caliph. The caliph was increasingly isolated from the public, becoming private rather than public rulers, whose appearances gradually became large-scale, theatrically staged events.<sup>37</sup> The early 11<sup>th</sup> century *Kitab al-Hadata wa al-Tuhaf* or *Book of Gifts and Rarities* describes such a ceremony, which took place in 917, when two diplomatic envoys from the Byzantine Empire came to Baghdad to request a peace treaty from al-Muqtadir.<sup>38</sup> The text describes the intricate series of palaces and courtyards the envoys were led

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<sup>36</sup> El-Cheikh, "Servants at the Gate," 247.

<sup>37</sup> Nadia Maria El Cheikh "Guarding the harem, Protecting the State: Eunuchs in a fourth/tenth-century Abbasid court" in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World*, eds. Almut Höfert, Matthew Mesley, Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2017), 67-68.

<sup>38</sup> Ghada Hijjawi Qaddumi, *A Medieval Islamic book of Gifts and Treasures: Translation, annotation, and commentary on the "Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf."* (Harvard, 1990), 137.

through before they reached the caliph, all filled with slaves, soldiers, and various luxuries, intended to glorify the caliph and instil a sense of awe within those who sought his audience:

When they looked at all the things in the passageways, sitting halls, and treasuries they became bewildered and confused. They saw a gorgeous view of a multitude of soldiers in their best attire and full armour. As they [the envoys] along with 'Abd al-BaqI, reached the place where the Caliph sat, they were taken through a passageway that opens into one of those courtyards. Then they were turned to another passageway whence they were led to another courtyard, which was more spacious than the previous one. The chamberlains continued to take them across courtyards and passageways until they became tired and breathless from all the walking. All those courtyards and passageways were completely filled with slave-boys and servants, until they, along with Ibn 'Abd al-Baqi the interpreter, approached the audience hall (majlis) where al-Muqtadir bi-Allan sat.<sup>39</sup>

This new style of rulership saw the influence of the eunuchs increase, as they figured prominently within these ceremonial rituals. Further, the increasing seclusion of the caliph meant that access to the person of the ruler became ever the more important. Eunuchs, as mediators between the caliph and his subjects, saw their influence multiply, their sway within the court being bolstered by their ability to control the distribution of favour due to their continued proximity to the caliph.<sup>40</sup>

The career of Mu'nis al-Khadim, the aforementioned commander of the Abbasid army, exemplifies the point. A military man, Mu'nis first appeared in 880, fighting Zanj rebels in southern Iraq in the army of the caliph al-Mu'tadid. Mu'nis was one of the few eunuchs within the military, which was largely composed of *ghilman*, non-eunuch Turkic slave soldiers. Unlike other eunuchs, Mu'nis was denied access to the harem, being restricted to public areas and the parade grounds.<sup>41</sup> His long military career was marked by twelve major successful campaigns between 909 and 928. His reputation for having never lost a military campaign earned him the title *al-*

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<sup>39</sup> *Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf*, 144

<sup>40</sup> El Cheikh "Guarding the harem, Protecting the State," 68.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Kennedy, "Mu'nis al-Muzaffar: An exceptional eunuch" in *Celibate and Childless Men in Power Ruling Eunuchs and Bishops in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Almut Höfert, Matthew Mesley, Serena Tolino (London: Routledge, 2017), 81.

*Muzaffar*, literally “always victorious,” in 918.<sup>42</sup> The late 10th-century history *Tajārib al-umam* or *Experiences of the Nations*, written by Abu ‘Ali Miskawayh, described one episode from 910 in which Mu’nis refused the caliph’s suggestion to reappoint Ibn al-Furat as vizier, instead proposing that ‘Ali b. ‘Isa be given the position, a suggestion that was accepted by al-Muqtadir:

When Muqtadir perceived the disorder, mismanagement and anarchy, he consulted Munis the Eunuch, informing him that the state of affairs suggested the restoration of Ibn al-Furat to the vizierate; Mu’nis was however offended with Ibn al-Furat owing to certain matters, some of which we have recorded in the account of the episode with Subkara, when he arranged the affairs of Fars, and that arrangement was cancelled by Ibn al-Furat. He told Muqtadir that it would cause a scandal if the provincial governors were to learn that the Sultan had dismissed a vizier and then been compelled to restore him to office after a few months of dismissal...besides these there was 'Ali b. 'Isa, and with the exception of him there was no-one left capable of administering the empire. Mu’nis described him as trustworthy, faithful, pious, single-minded, safe and competent; so he was ordered by Muqtadir to despatch Yalbaq to him to summon him to the metropolis.<sup>43</sup>

Another episode from 924 saw Mu’nis participate in the arrest and sentencing of Ibn al-Furat, who had become vizier for a third time in 923. After being reinstated as vizier, Ibn al-Furat made it his mission to undermine the position of Mu’nis, who had openly criticised the cruelty and excesses of the vizier and his son al Muhassin, sending him and his army to Raqqa in a sort of semi-exile intended to get Mu’nis away from the capital and allow Ibn al-Furat to act against the Mu’nis’ allies. An attack on the *hajj* (pilgrimage caravan) by the Qaramita while *en route* from to the Holy Cities and the outrage this caused in Baghdad, coupled with financial hardship under Ibn al-Furat, required that the vizier recall Mu’nis from Raqqa.<sup>44</sup> Ibn al-Furat was promptly placed in the custody of Mu’nis and the chamberlain Nasr, who questioned the vizier and his son before handing

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<sup>42</sup> El-Azhari, “The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the ‘Abbasids,” 167.

<sup>43</sup> *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate; Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century (The Concluding Portion of the Experiences of Nations by Miskawaihi)*, v.4 pp. 28-29

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, “Mu’nis al-Muzaffar: An exceptional eunuch,” 85.

them over to Nazuk, the eunuch chief of police, where they were tortured and eventually put to death.<sup>45</sup>

The most important episode in the political intercession of Mu'nis, however, came about in February 929, when he returned from the Byzantine frontier following rumours that he would be supplanted as commander of the Abbasid army by Harun b. Gharib, the maternal cousin of Shaghab. In a letter to the caliph, Mu'nis complained that he could no longer tolerate the power of Shaghab, and stated the army's grievances with the amount of money and land wasted on eunuchs and women of the court and their continued interference in the administration, demanding their removal from the palace and the seizure of their possessions.<sup>46</sup> Muqtadir, in his reply, lamented his admiration of Mu'nis, referring to him as his mentor and tutor:

As for thee, Abu'l-Hasan the Conqueror, — may I never lose thee ! — thou art my teacher and my elder, thou art he whom I cease not to favour, to honour, to befriend and to support, whether this trouble come between us or not, and whether the bonds between us be broken or be unbroken. I hope that thou wilt entertain no doubt thereof when thou art true to thyself and dost reason with thy soul, banishing therefrom all evil thoughts — long may God protect and strengthen it!<sup>47</sup>

While he agreed to some of Mu'nis' demands, Muqtadir explained that he could not entirely abolish the allowances of the harem, and would not dismiss them altogether. If this was not enough, he would accept his fate, just as the caliph 'Uthman had accepted his.<sup>48</sup> Mu'nis responded by sacking the palace of al-Muqtadir, arresting the caliph, his mother, his aunt, and his private *jawari*. On the orders of Mu'nis, Nazuk was sent to summon Muhammad, the brother of the caliph, who had been chosen as the new caliph and installed in the palace with the title of al-Qahir.<sup>49</sup> Though

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<sup>45</sup>Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Miskawayh and Henry Frederick Amedroz, *The Eclipse of the 'Abbasid Caliphate: Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century*, Volume IV, ed. by David Samuel Margoliouth. (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1920) 150-151, 153-155.

<sup>46</sup> Kennedy, "Mu'nis al-Muzaffar: An exceptional eunuch," 87.

<sup>47</sup> *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate; Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century (The Concluding Portion of the Experiences of Nations by Miskawaihi)*, v.4 pp. 215.

<sup>48</sup> Miskawayh, *The Eclipse of the 'Abbasid Caliphate*, 214-216.

<sup>49</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 172.

he had orchestrated the coup, Mu'nis distanced himself from the palace, allowing Nazuk to take the fall in the disastrous collapse that followed. The coup was quickly overturned by the *Masaffi* infantry, who killed Nazuk before marching on the residence of Mu'nis, where al-Muqtadir was being held. Upon reaching the residence, the infantry demanded Muqtadir be released, and Mu'nis quickly complied, allowing for Muqtadir to be restored to the throne.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the attempted coup, relations between Mu'nis and Muqtadir were quickly remedied, and Mu'nis continued to act as the commander of the Abbasid army. The bond between Mu'nis and Muqtadir, however, was soon broken once again. In 932, Mu'nis left Baghdad for Mosul, stating his dissatisfaction with the caliph's policy and his courtiers, especially the continued influence of Shaghab, who was in control of the state finances. In his absence, the vizier Ibn Qasim, in collaboration with al-Muqtadir, sacked and looted many of Mu'nis' lands and farms. This prompted Mu'nis to march on Baghdad in November 932, his army meeting that of al-Muqtadir in the city.<sup>51</sup> Muqtadir was slain during the conflict, his body being left on the battlefield and his head being brought to Mu'nis, who had remained outside the city throughout the conflict. Despite their strained relationship, Mu'nis was overwhelmed with grief at the sight of the caliph.<sup>52</sup> Mu'nis soon saw his own end at the hands of al-Quahir, Muqtadir's brother, who had briefly served as caliph during the coup attempt in 929. Relations between al-Quahir and Mu'nis quickly deteriorated after al-Quahir was installed as caliph in December 932. In September 933, Mu'nis was executed, along with his ally Yalbaq and Yalbaq's son, 'Ali:

Qahir went to the place wherein Mu'nis, Yalbaq and his son were confined; the throat of 'Ali was cut in Qahir's presence, and his head was sent to his father, who wept with despair at the sight; then Yalbaq's throat was cut and his head with that of his son sent to Mu'nis, who when he saw them cursed their slayer. He was dragged by the foot to the gutter, and there slaughtered like a sheep, while Qahir

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<sup>50</sup> Miskawayh, *The Eclipse of the 'Abbasid Caliphate*, 220-223

<sup>51</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 173-174.

<sup>52</sup> Kennedy, "Mu'nis al-Muzaffar: An exceptional eunuch," 89.

looked on. The three heads were brought out in three basins to the parade-ground, to be seen by the people.<sup>53</sup>

The fifty-year career of Mu'nis saw him dominate the military and political affairs of the Abbasid court, even serving as a sort of kingmaker towards the end of his career. Never before had there been a eunuch who served for such a prolonged period of time with such a high office, his death marking an end to the prolonged period of unity within the Abbasid army, a fact which was further bolstered by his status as a eunuch: Mu'nis left no heirs capable of continuing his legacy and had few allies still alive within the court at the time of his death. Mu'nis, like other eunuchs within the court, was able to bolster his status and proximity to the caliph to achieve massive influence and power, especially in his later years, becoming a major arbiter of state affairs within al-Muqtadir's court.

### **Gendered Understandings of Eunuchs**

Any investigation into the ability of eunuchs to attain influence and power within the Abbasid court must lend some attention towards the social conception and understanding of eunuchs as existing outside the bounds of conventional categories of gender. The eunuch's capacity to gain influence and power was a direct consequence of his eunuchism. In the highly gendered spaces that existed within the Abbasid court, the central function of the eunuch as an occupant and guardian of the harem and his ability to move between gendered spaces lends some credence to the notion that eunuchs were understood, to some degree, to form a distinct gender group.<sup>54</sup> Al-Mas'udi wrote of the eunuchs' gender in his *Murūj al-Dahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar*:

It has been maintained that they are men with women and women with men. But these are false theories and bad arguments. The truth is that they remain men. Being

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<sup>53</sup> *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate; Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century (The Concluding Portion of the Experiences of Nations by Miskawaihi)*, v.4, pp. 304

<sup>54</sup> El-Cheikh, "The Harem," 179.



deprived of one organ is not enough for them to be allotted this double role and the lack of a beard does not prevent them from belonging to the male sex. Claiming that they are closer to being women implies that the works of the Creator can be modified, since He created them men and not women, male and not female. The crime which has been perpetrated on their bodies does not alter the constituent elements any more than it destroys the work of the All-Powerful Creator who gave them life.<sup>55</sup>

Mas'udi's argument seems to assume an entirely biological understanding of the eunuch's sex. Castration did not transform the eunuch from a man to a woman, nor did it lend him a double status as both a man and a woman. Eunuchs were not treated as if they were women, but instead seemed to be understood as occupying a gendered space between man and non-man. Many of the roles assigned to eunuchs, especially *majbub* or "full" eunuchs, were deemed to be "unmasculine." This included controlling access to the caliph, operating as doorkeepers and servants, and dwelling in the company of women and children in the harem. Though these positions might have been considered less-than masculine, they were also not "feminine," and they granted eunuchs a level of access to the caliph and his domestic circle that "full" men were not able to achieve.<sup>56</sup>

It should be noted that the masculinity of a eunuch can be understood as existing on a sliding scale, partially dependent on the status of a eunuch as either a *khasiyy* or *majbub*. The former could remain sexually capable and could exhibit a strong desire for women. Thus, some of them were married and owned concubines. The latter, by contrast, were entirely incapable of reproductive sex and did not pose any threat towards the harem.<sup>57</sup>

The understanding of eunuchs as functioning as a sort of "third gender" is furthered by their actual, physical appearance. Beyond the obvious differences between castrated and non-castrated men, various accounts detail the numerous physical differences that distinguish eunuchs

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<sup>55</sup> *The Meadows of Gold*, 345.

<sup>56</sup> El Cheikh "Guarding the harem, Protecting the State," 71.

<sup>57</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 145-146.

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from non-castrated men. Eunuchs were said to have large bones and feet and a voracious appetite, as well as a strong sexual desire. If the operation was performed before adolescence, eunuchs were not able to grow a beard and sounded like a child. Due to the hormone imbalance which results from the procedure, eunuchs often suffered quick changes in mood. Eunuchs often had a different gait than the average person, which is the result of nerve damage resulting from the procedure. Both the *khasiyy* and *majbub* were said to have a bad odour and suffered from bending limbs later in life.<sup>58</sup>

These physical differences were often commented upon by non-castrated men, including other slaves. One account from the life of Mu'nis saw his subordinates joke that they would fight for him until his beard grows, which, of course, would never happen. The beardlessness of the eunuch was likely one of the most obvious physical differences between them and Muslim non-castrated men, as the latter always wore a beard.<sup>59</sup>

Beyond their physical differences, eunuchs were also recorded as having served as sources of lust for caliphs and other elite men. The caliph al-Amin, who ruled between 809 and 813, is noted as having had a taste for court eunuchs. The eunuch Kawthar, in particular, was seen as having the caliph's favour, being appointed as the bearer of the insignia and of the sword.<sup>60</sup> In a piece of romantic poetry, al-Amin described his love for Kawthar as follows:

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.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 146.

<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, "Mu'nis al-Muzaffar: An exceptional eunuch," 81.

<sup>60</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 154.

<sup>61</sup> El-Azhari, "The Kingdom of Eunuchs under the 'Abbasids," 142.

The caliph's mother, Zubayda, aware of the failing political conduct of her son, attempted to turn his attention away from Kawthar and towards the women in his retinue. She was reported to have dressed up the slave girls as boys, styling them as eunuchs, to catch the eye of her son. This innovation by Zubayda saw the *ghulamīyyat*, or "boyish girl" popularised amongst Baghdad's elites for at least a generation.<sup>62</sup> Though male sexual interest in eunuchs did not appear to have been especially pronounced amongst the male elite, the phenomenon was itself connected more broadly to the homoerotic liaisons occurring between some elite Abbasid men and slave-boys. In fact, the coup attempt by Mu'nis and Nazuk is stated to have been fuelled, to some degree, by the competing interest of Nazuk and Harun in an attractive slave-boy, which resulted in a confrontation between their troops.<sup>63</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The role and influence of eunuchs in the Abbasid caliphate, particularly during the reign of al-Muqtadir, can ultimately be understood as a product of their unique outsider status. As foreigners, they were outsiders within the Abbasid empire; as slaves, outsiders amongst the elite men of the court; and as eunuchs, outsiders with respect to their own gender, being differentiated not just from freemen but from other slaves. This unique otherness is what allowed for their proximity to the caliph and attainment of influence within the court. The 10th-century court of al-Muqtadir, with its estimated 11,000 eunuchs, showcases the prominence of these castrated individuals within Abbasid history. Despite their enslaved status, eunuchs held key positions in the harem, military,

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<sup>62</sup> Everett K. Rowson "The Traffic in Boys: Slavery and Homoerotic Liaisons in Elite 'Abbāsīd Society,'" *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 11:2 (2008): 197.

<sup>63</sup> Kennedy, "Mu'nis al-Muzaffar: An exceptional eunuch," 87.

police, and political institutions, making them influential actors in the Abbasid court and state affairs. Eunuchs, distinct in their physical mutilation, were permitted a level of influence and control over state affairs not attained by other categories of enslaved persons in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid empire. Castration not only facilitated their role as guardians of harems but also acted as a means of guaranteeing their loyalty. This unique status allowed eunuchs to serve as powerful extensions of their masters, both within the harem and in broader political arenas. The eunuch Mufhli, in particular, played a decisive role in political appointments and power struggles, utilising his connection to the caliph to tip the political scales in his own favour. Further, the political career of Mu'nis al-Khadim exemplifies the pinnacle of eunuch influence in the Abbasid court. His military success and political manoeuvring, especially in the later years of his career, highlight the extraordinary power eunuchs could wield. The gendered understanding of eunuchs as existing between conventional categories of male and female added complexity to their social roles, and further granted the unique freedom of movement between gendered spaces. This allowed them to serve as mediators between the caliph and his subjects. The physical differences resulting from castration further contributed to the perception of eunuchs as a distinct gender group, with their appearance, voice, and mannerisms setting them apart from non-castrated men. In a broader context, the socio-political landscape of the Abbasid caliphate, so intricately connected to and reliant on the slave trade, presented eunuchs with the opportunity to occupy unique and influential positions within the institutions of the caliphate.