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## **“She is a Boy, or if Not a Boy, Then a Boy Resembles Her”: Cross-Dressing, Homosexuality and Enslaved Sex and Gender in Umayyad Iberia**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper will interrogate the cultural origins and social consequences of three sex and gender categories in medieval Islamic Spain during the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries: Eunuchs, *ghumaliyyat*, and homosexuality. I pay special attention to Christian eunuchs, who came to occupy an important social and political role as caliphs' preferred type of enslaved servant, and to *ghumaliyyat*, a term used to describe young enslaved women who would masculinize themselves in order to appeal to men. When Islamic Umayyads conquered al-Andalus during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, they brought with them a bevy of cultural practices that were disruptive to native Iberian Christians' sense of social order. Particularly upsetting to Christians were elite Muslims' lax attitude towards homosexuality and cross-dressing. In this paper, I explore the ways that these unprecedented sex and gender paradigms impacted interfaith relationships in medieval Iberia, as well as *sui generis* notions of Christianity and Islam. I suggest that homosexuality and cross-dressing became a tangible thing that Christians could vilify about Muslim culture. Christian disgust over homosexuality and cross-dressing thus became a way to express dissent over Islamic rule, as well as to solidify a burgeoning sense of culturally unified identity.

*Keywords:* Umayyad Iberia, Al-Andalus, Homosexuality, Islam, Gender, Sexuality

## INTRODUCTION

It was the early 9<sup>th</sup> century in Abbasid Baghdad, and Zubayda bint Jaf'ar was worried. Her son, the caliph al-Amin, would not consummate his marriage. In fact, he seemed to have no lasting interest in his abundantly populated female harem at all. Al-Amin preferred the company of eunuchs, harboring a special fondness for the servant Kauthar (Abbot 1946). Sometimes, Amin would dress his eunuchs up in female attire and split them into different groups by phenotype, referring to black eunuchs as “ravens,” while white eunuchs were “grasshoppers” (Abbot 1946). As a result of al-Amin’s unorthodox tastes, the Abbasid court was aflutter in scandal, Baghdad’s caliphate was lacking an heir, and, as has been mentioned, Zubayda was worried (Scholz 2001).

Realizing her son’s disregard for women, and his seeming fondness for the modified male figure, Zubayda hatched a plan. According to the Ottoman historian Nabia Abbott (1946, p. 212), Zubayda “selected some of her most gifted and attractive maidens with beauty of form and of face and dressed them up in the current elegant costume of page boys. She then displayed these, in large numbers, before her son in the hope of winning him away from his unnatural life.”<sup>1</sup> Amin was charmed, and even made romantic attachments to some of these women. After that, writes Abbot (1946, p. 212), “society, high and low, made these boy-attired page girls the popular fad of the day.”

A century and a half later and more than 3,000 miles afield, the Umayyad Iberian caliph Al-Hakam II prepared to marry Subh of Cordoba (Ruggles, 2004). Subh, a Navarrian Christian who had clawed her way up from concubine to favorite concubine to queen, had a fierce intellect and blinding ambition (Mernissi, 1993). She also embodied what had come to be referred to in

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<sup>1</sup>“Zubayda” is sometimes referred to as “Zubaida” in other texts.

Islamicate courtly culture as *ghumaliyyat*: a boyish woman, often musically gifted, who would masculinize herself in order to appeal sexually to men. What Zubayda had unwittingly created in her 9<sup>th</sup> century quest for al-Amin's heir was a sex and gender category that would spread rapidly throughout Baghdad, traverse the space between Iraq and al-Andalus, and persist as a cultural staple of Arab Islamicate culture for several hundreds of years.

This paper will interrogate the cultural origins and social consequences of three sex and gender categories in medieval Islamic Spain: Eunuchs, *ghumaliyyat*, and homosexuality. While each of these markers were unique, connoting distinct cultural meanings, they were united by the fact that the native Christians of medieval Iberia found all of them abhorrent. The sex and gender paradigms that invading Muslims brought to Christian Iberia during the 9th-11th century were disruptive to traditional Christian standards of gender and sexuality, and thus compounded a growing resentment among Iberian Christians who did not want to be subordinated by Muslim rule.

### **HOMOSEXUALITY IN MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC SOCIETY**

Daniel Eisenberg (2002). writes that homosexuality was especially popular among the political and intellectual elite of Muslim Spain. Same-sex dalliances were evidently enjoyed by caliphs and emirs throughout the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, many of whom had male harems as well as female ones. As Ibn Hazm wrote in *Ring of the Dove*, “many rightly-guided caliphs and imams have been lovers” (Arberry, 1953, p. 220; Crompton, 1997, p. 148). There is considerable evidence of individual men having significant romantic entanglements with one another in medieval al-Andalus. For example, the 11th century emir of Seville, al-Mutamid, embarked on what literary scholar and historian Louis Crompton (1997) described as “the most famous, and most tragic, romance in the history of al-Andalus” with the poet Ibn Ammar (p. 167).

In a poem about al-Mutamid, Ammar wrote, “During the night of union there was wafted / To me, in his caresses, the perfume of its dawns, / My tears streamed out over the beautiful garden / Of his cheeks to moisten its myrtles and lilies” (Crompton, 1997, p. 167).

This did not mean that medieval Islamic society was universally accepting of homosexuality, however. Many Muslims perceived homosexuality as a dubious, if not outright illegal, affair, despite (or, perhaps because of,) the elite’s enjoyment of it. For example, in the 6th century, Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad’s direct successors, ordered the execution of a man who had had sex with another man by stoning him to death. Precedent for this punishment lay in the Quran, which refers to the “people of Lot,” who were stoned to death for sodomy. A lot can change in two hundred years, of course, and by the 9<sup>th</sup> century, many Islamic attitudes towards same-sex relationships had softened. Still, a nagging sense of discomfort over homosexuality stubbornly persisted, even in free-wheeling al-Andalus. In his 2004 tome *Homosexuality and Civilization*, for instance, Louis Crompton writes that “to moralists beyond the Pyrenees, Islamic culture seemed a luxurious paradise tantalizingly endowed with harems, pretty slave girls, and suspiciously handsome sakis. But in sexual matters, Islam maintained a paradoxical ambivalence, not least with respect to homosexuality” (p. 161).

The ambivalence Crompton describes is nicely summarized by Ibn Hazm’s paradoxical treatment of homosexuality within his poetry and legal scholarship (Adang, 2004). Hazm, a renowned Andalusian writer and judge, was the author of *Ring of the Dove*, an unparalleled book which described the roles of love and sex in medieval al-Andalus, as well as many works on Zahirī law. Interestingly, his legal opinions on homosexuality seem to contrast with those espoused in his poetry, and certain passages in *Ring of the Dove*. For instance, although Hazm’s poetry features homoerotic themes, Ibn Hazm’s legal writings describe homosexuality as sinful, and in need of

reformation. He did not believe homosexuality was on par with illegal sexual relations between the sexes, however, recommending the relatively light punishment of ten lashes for homosexual behavior (*litwat*), as opposed to stoning for adultery between men and women (*zina*). On the other hand, Hazm flits between male and female pronouns when discussing the pleasures and pitfalls of romance, seemingly indiscriminately. According to Crompton (2004), “Ibn Hazm repeatedly intermingles stories of men falling in love with other males [with stories of men falling in love with females] and assumes that homosexual love is, psychologically, no different from heterosexual love” (p. 164).

Crompton (2004) argues that the dividing line between Christian and Islamic attitudes towards sexuality lay in their respective attitudes towards slavery, describing how, while “Islam freely granted men sexual access to their slaves, Christianity did not. ... Unlike Christianity, which for its first three hundred years lacked political or military power, Islam from the start had enormous military success, conquering nation after nation. In this triumphal atmosphere few moralists were prepared to challenge the victors’ prerogatives, which included sexual rights to women, married or unmarried, belonging to men defeated in battle. To these all-powerful rulers, riding the crest of a wave of military good fortune, it must have seemed eminently reasonable that attractive young male captives should also be regarded as legitimate bedmates” (p. 156). Eisenberg (2002, p. 398) builds upon Crompton’s socio-religious taxonomy, writing that “many Christians in northern Iberia and elsewhere in Europe were scandalized by or terrified of Andalusian sexual behavior, which relied heavily on slavery [and] homosexual indulgence.”

Perhaps the most potent example of Christian political resistance manifesting as aversion to homosexuality in Umayyad Iberia is the saga of Abd al-Rahman III (r. 925-965) and the martyr Pelagius. We have but one extant record of what exactly transpired between Rahman and Pelagius,

which comes to us in the form of a chronicle by the Cordóban priest Raguel (Bowman, 2006; Bowman 2000). Raguel's account details Rahman, the caliph of al-Andalus, amorously approaching Pelagius, who was at that time a thirteen-year-old Christian slave. According to Jeffery Bowman (2006), "The phrase Raguel uses ... (*tangere joculariter*) might be translated literally as something like 'to touch playfully,' but it is clear that Raguel meant to indicate that the caliph's intentions were sexual; words like 'fondle' or 'grope' might [be more apt]" (p. 237). Pelagius was not interested. In fact, Pelagius felt insulted and disgusted, and responded to the caliph's overtures by exclaiming, "Get back, you dog! Do you think I am effeminate like yourselves?" (Bowman, 2006, p. 237) In response to this humiliation, Rahman had Pelagius executed in a most excruciating manner: Ripped limb from limb and then disposed of in the river. Thus Raguel, and subsequent writers like the German nun Hrotswintha, took it upon themselves to make a martyr of Pelagius. Raguel's work is an overtly hagiographic account of the torture and execution of a young Christian boy under the reign of Abd al-Rahman III. He describes Pelagius as "chaste, sober, gentle, and meek ... vigilant in his prayers ... enriched both by his virginity and by the crown of his suffering" (Bowman, 2000, p. 232). Pelagius thus came to symbolize not just himself, but the body politic and dissent of Iberian Christianity itself. The fact that Hrotswintha, who was not yet born at the time of Pelagius's death, was writing about Pelagius in Germany years after the fact, speaks to the boy's lasting legacy. Pelagius came to embody more than an individual person declining an amorous invitation. The story of Pelagius was an important tale of a disenfranchised Christian standing up to the Muslim majority. Thus, domestic politics, religious conflict, and homosexuality were all intimately tied together in the story of Pelagius.

#### ***GHUMALIYYAT AS CONCEPT AND PRACTICE***

The term *ghumaliya*, which was derived from the Arabic *ghalima*, meaning “to be excited by lust” or “to be seized by sensuous desire,” described a class of young women who would intentionally masculinize their appearance, often to appeal to men (Schilde, 1997). According to historian Maarten Schild (1997), “this rare Arabic term ... alludes to a girl whose appearance is as boyish as possible, and who therefore possesses a kind of boyish sensuality” (p. 476). Peaking in popularity in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, “A ghulamiyya [sic] dressed in a short tunic with loose sleeves; her hair was worn long or short, with ornamental curls across the temples. Some girls even painted a mustache on their upper lips, using a colored perfume such as musk ... Ghulamiyyat [sic] also tried, as much as possible, to act and speak like boys, often taking up sports or other masculine pastimes” (Schild, 1997, p. 476). Schild’s description probes many interesting questions about the etiology of the identity category “*ghumaliya*.” Why did certain women choose to adopt these “masculine pastimes”? Why would the women who comprised this group paint on mustaches, cultivate “musk” on their persons, and generally emulate the cultural markers commonly associated with men? The issue of slavery muddies these questions, since enslavement necessarily strips an individual of myriad axes of agency. However, the analysis of Iberia’s *ghumaliyyat* has often been frustratingly narrow. For instance, Kristina Richardson (2009), a historian of Islamic civilization at CUNY Hunter College, builds her discussion of *ghumaliyyat* around men’s sexual preferences. Richardson argues that a *ghumaliya* woman’s choice to masculinize herself invariably revolved around the men who held power over her. Given that so many *ghumaliyyat* were enslaved, this is a legitimate and important analytical perspective. However, many other lines of analysis could enhance and deepen our understanding of this group. Here I ask, what if *ghumaliyyat* women’s masculine preferences had not so much to do with the men in their lives, on average, but rather their private aesthetic and recreational preferences?

Depictions of *ghumaliyyat* and other forms of cross-dressing infuse the works of several poets during the Umayyad-Abbasid time period. For example, Abu Nuwas, the ultimate hedonist of 8<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, is said to have had a one-time affair with a *ghumaliyya* woman (Schild, 1997, p. 476). The experience must have made an impact on Nuwas, whose writing primarily detailed the affairs he had with other men, for references to *ghumaliyyat* physicality show up in his poetry. Specifically, Nuwas describes in detail what a person labelled “*ghumaliya*” might look like, and how she might behave. In one poem, Nuwas wrote, “She is a boy, or if not a boy, then a boy who resembles her.” One wonders, was he alluding to a *ghumaliya* woman? In a different poem, Nuwas described *ghumaliya* as “A swaggerer, glorying in a face whose beauty / is like a flash of light in the darkness of night ... She wears her hair like a male, lets her sidecurl grow long, and twists her sleeves like a boy” (Wagner and Scholder, 1958, p. 176). In still another poem, Nuwas writes, “You see figures that are female in behavior, but in men’s clothes. Their hands and feet are bare, their ears and necks unadorned. They are slim as the reins of a horse, sword sheaths, or belts. But they have ample bottoms in their tunics and daggers at their waists. Their curls are coiled like a scorpion, and their mustaches are perfumed” (Wagner and Scholder, 1958, p. 178).

Another poet whose work references the flexible nature of elite Muslim gender presentation was the 11<sup>th</sup> century Cordoban poet, Ibn Quzman, who was one of several same-sex lovers profiled by Ibn Hazm in *Ring of the Dove*. Having fallen in love with Aslam, the brother of a prime minister, Hazm pointed to Quzman as an example of one of the many forms that romantic love could take in 11<sup>th</sup> century Cordoba (Arberry, 1953; Crompton, 1997). Ibn Quzman was a celebrated poet in his own rite, and in his poem “Zajal #12,” he describes a theatrical event involving cross-dressing that took place in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. His poetic account describes not

a woman dressed as a man, but rather a man dressed as a woman: “Cover Qurra for me / in a flowing veil / Taffeta he’s wearing / With a full-length tail” (Quzman, 2005).

Crompton draws a similarity between the two poets, writing that “Tall, blond, and blue-eyed, Ibn Quzman led a licentious life resembling that of ... the poet Abu Nuwas, who was also unabashedly explicit about his homosexuality” (Crompton, 1997, p. 154). The parallels between these two poets’ themes and syntax reflect the durability of the cultural category *ghumaliya*, as well as the intelligibility of cross-dressing people under Umayyad rule. The fact that Quzman’s 11th century poems echo descriptions of gender-variant people written by Nuwas nearly two hundred years prior may support the idea that *ghumaliya* were indeed an important, and deeply entrenched, aspect of Arab-Islamic culture.

#### **EUNUCHS, CONCUBINES, SLAVERY, AND POWER**

The prophet Muhammad found castration a despicable practice, and thus, castration was a punishable offense in Islam from the very beginning (Adang, 2003; Scholz, 2001). Ironically, while Muhammed’s aversion to castration may have been a reflection of the value that early Islam placed on equality between individuals. Castration was a visceral way of instituting permanent, material inequality between people. It provided physical “proof” of one’s social class based on whether or not one was castrated, and thus a tangible vector of inequality that could not be supported within Islam during Muhammed’s era. Historian Piotr O. Scholz adds that prohibitions on harems, which is where several eunuchs worked, also prevailed throughout the Umayyad dynasty until 750, presumably to align with the views of Muhammad. However, after the Muslim invasion of Persia, where eunuchs were an important part of courtly culture, Islamic norms surrounding the social tolerance of eunuchs began to change. Slavic eunuchs first came to Islamic Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, under the reign of al-Hakam I, and grew in importance until the late 10<sup>th</sup>

or early 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the vizier Abu ‘Amir al-Mansur tried to dampen Slavic influence in Spain by tapering off the number of eunuchs imported from Slavic areas (Catlos, 1997).

The integration of eunuchs into Muslim society did not make it acceptable for Muslims to be castrated, however. In order to avoid breaking Qur’anic law, Islamic society relied upon non-Muslim eunuchs to serve the roles they had played in Persia prior to the invasion: that of courtly servants and advisors. In other words, after exposure to the benefit and ease that castrated slaves could bring to their lives, those Muslims who were in power wanted to have their cake and eat it too. They wanted to maintain their faith-based practices while also enjoying the material comforts that came with the service and prestige accorded to those who owned eunuchs. Muslims were not allowed to *be* castrated, nor were they allowed to actively castrate others, but they were allowed to possess castrated individuals as slaves.

In order to avoid committing the sin of castration themselves, Muslim rulers relied on non-Muslim populations to convert slaves into eunuchs. Jewish traders and doctors were integral to the burgeoning Andalusian slave trade. Jewish traders would bring caravans of captured slaves from Christian principalities in Northern Iberia, whereupon Jewish Andalusian doctors would castrate them, and sell them for a handsome price (Eisenberg, 2002). This phenomenon is well illustrated in the story of the Eunuch Bekhit in *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, a seminal collection of Islamic folklore which was first disseminated during Abd al-Rahman III’s reign (Catlos, 2018, p. 164). Anthologized by the geographer Sir Richard Frances Burton in 1863, the story describes a young slave who was “brought from [his] native country when [he] was five years old,” only to be castrated after he reached puberty and had an illicit love affair with his owner’s daughter (Payne, 1901). This passage describes Bekhit’s castration in detail: “During my unconsciousness a barber was sent for, who castrated me completely and cauterized the wound with red-hot irons. I woke to

find myself a eunuch for good and all ... Later [my master] took me to the market and sold me for a much greater price than I had fetched before, because I was a eunuch” (Scholz, 2001, p. 193). This event describes an interesting dichotomy: Bekhit was ostensibly castrated as punishment for the sexual relationship he had with his owner’s daughter. However, his owner was also able to capitalize upon that punishment by selling him at a profit. Castration was thus not only a symbolic mark and a physical ordeal to be feared, but a tool used to create a permanent servile class.

Importantly, both the story of Bekhit and the Islamic government’s policy exporting of castration duties allude to the manipulation of sexual virility in order to maintain strict socioeconomic boundaries. The fact that eunuchs were physically identifiable due to their unique genital appearance resulted in the reification of social boundaries between the slave and master classes in a way that verged on racialization. Jewish doctors’ and traders’ participation in the production and dissemination of enslaved eunuchs also gave them a distinct, recognizable role within Andalusian society that was contingent upon the acceptance and propagation of a specific sex and gender paradigm that explicitly included eunuchs, as well as *ghumaliyyat* and homosexuality. Importantly, the tale depicts eunuchs as being not only tolerated, but actually valuable in the Arab-Islamic market. According to Eisenberg (2002, p. 759), for instance, “ownership of slaves gave the owner prestige; ownership of expensive slaves — eunuchs, educated, or white — even more so.” A similar sort of value was invested in *ghumaliyyat*, whose education was often provided for by slave traders in an attempt to augment their market value. Similarly, Evan K. Rowson (2003, p. 46) describes the way institutionalized forms of cross-dressing in the medieval Islamic world that was “not only tolerated, but... salaried, as forms of entertainment.”

Scholz (2001, p. 200) writes that “eunuchism tends to be considered only in the context of harems. However, right from the beginning of the caliphate, eunuchism had a much broader dimension. Eunuchs were omnipresent. They were barred only from official religious positions, but it would have been inconceivable for anyone else to carry out their cult function as guardians of the holy sites.” In addition to this “cult position,” elite eunuchs enjoyed access to a good deal of political power and influence, due to their close contact with the caliphs, who often trusted them implicitly because they were perceived as non-threatening (Scholz, 2001).

For example, when Abd al-Rahman II died in 852, Ibn al-Quttiya (Dozy, 2013, p. 294) wrote an incisive account of the palatial eunuchs’ much-needed crisis management:

Abd er-Rahman II died suddenly... Since Abd er-Rahman had not decided which of his sons, Mohammed and Abdallah, was to succeed him, and both aspirants to the throne were ignorant of their father’s death, all depended on the choice made by the eunuchs of the palace. Those who had attended Abd er-Rahman during his last moments promptly locked the gates of the castle, in order to prevent any rumor of the Sultan’s death escaping and summoned their colleagues. One of the most influential eunuchs addressed the assembly. ‘Comrades,’ he said, ‘an event of the deepest importance to us all has happened. Our master is no more.’ Thereupon the eunuchs began to weep and lament. ‘This is no time for tears,’ he continued, ‘our lamentations can be post-poned. The moments are precious. Let us first guard our own interests and those of our fellow Moslems. To whom do ye award the throne?’ ‘To our lord, the son of our benefactress the Sultana!’ they cried with one.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a different translation, refer to David James, *Early Islamic Spain: The History of Ibn Al-Qutiyah*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 211.

This passage encompasses both the intimacy that eunuchs had with caliphs, and the gravity of their role within government. While this specific story details eunuchs debating who to nominate as a new caliph, eunuchs were not limited to advocating for what a late caliph would have wanted. Eunuchs had enough agency, in some cases, to manipulate the political landscape towards their own interests. After the Umayyad empire disintegrated in al-Andalus, for example, many eunuchs took leadership positions in the burgeoning Taifa kingdoms. Almería, the Balearic Islands, Valencia, Tortosa, Badajoz, and Denia were all ruled for a time by former eunuch servants of the Umayyad caliphate (Catlos, 1997). Eunuchs' fly-on-the-wall exposure to governmental proceedings would have prepared them well for these roles--even if caliphs didn't realize what they were preparing the eunuchs for at the time. Due to the unprecedented volume of information they could glean as taken-for-granted members of the royal ecosystem, eunuchs were well-equipped with insight into how to run a political body. Importantly, eunuchs, like all members of society, had individual desires, perspectives, aspirations, and personalities. Thus, certain eunuchs were more inclined to manipulate their subordinated privilege in order to achieve more power.

According to Catlos (2018, p. 173), "the efficiency and order established by 'Abd al-Rahman III would prove in the end to be the undoing of the caliphate he founded. With the day-to-day affairs of state in the hands of capable and loyal servants of the Umayyad state, and the elevation of the caliph as a distant, almost semi-divine figurehead, his successor, al-Hakam II, was left free to indulge his intellectual passions. The servants of the state saw an opportunity to move into the resulting vacuum and plotted to expand their own authority and influence, not only at each other's expense but at that of the ruling family, ultimately precipitating the implosion of the dynasty."

Eunuchs and concubines shared an intimate symbiotic relationship in al-Andalus. Eunuchs would sometimes serve as interlocutor between master and concubine. They were, in a sense, the lynchpin of the royal harem. For example, Piotr Scholz writes that “female slaves were carefully selected by the ruler or the eunuch he entrusted with the task” (Scholz, 2001, p. 200). Thus, while eunuchs are often thought of as sharing an intimate connection to his caliph first and foremost, eunuchs and concubines also enjoyed a unique societal relationship. The two social classes are sometimes elided by scholars, as they were by contemporary chroniclers, into a single subordinated-yet- privileged class: “the unfree elite” (Anderson, 2012, p. 635).

Interestingly, the language around slavery evolved alongside social preferences. The Arabic term “*saqaliba*,” which became popular around the time the Andalusian slave trade first began to flourish in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, initially referred to all slaves of European origin. In fact, *saqaliba* translates directly in English as “Slav” (Catlos, 1997, p. 565). As eunuchs grew in popularity, however, the words for “slave” and “eunuch” merged. Catlos (1997, p. 565) writes that *saqaliba* were “known for their red hair and fair complexions,” and “were favored as concubines and soldiers. Slavic eunuchs were so popular and widely distributed that they became synonymous with *saqaliba*, but the term really applied to slaves of various origins, including Turks and captives taken in raids on Christian Spain.” Like the word *saqaliba*’s relationship to eunuchs, the proof of homosexuality and cross-dressing’s cultural relevance in Islamic society lays in its language. The most common term for homosexuality in Arabic is *fi’l qawm lut*, which translates to “the act of the people from Lot” (Adang, 2004, p. 7). Lesbianism had several distinct words associated with it in Arabic, including *sahq*, *sihaqa*, and *sihaqa*’s longer cousin, *sihaqa, musahaqat al-nisar*’ (Ahmer 2009). Puzzlingly, despite the abundance of vocabulary available to describe it, lesbianism is hardly ever referenced in contemporaneous primary documents of medieval Spain. The fact that

Arabic had specific words to describe these cultural categories, however, speaks volumes about the relevance of these categories in Umayyad Iberian life.

#### **ALTERITY, IDENTITY, AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF MUSLIM ELITE SEXUALITY**

Because they were so new and flamboyant in the early days of Iberia's Umayyad caliphate, Islamic models of gender and sexuality were instructive to Christians in how to communicate resistance to Islamic culture, and thus Islamic power. Because they were easily identifiable as "Muslim" cultural markers, rejection of certain sex and gender categories like homosexuality and cross-dressing became an important element in the development of an independent Iberian Christian identity between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In order to communicate their displeasure over Islamic dominion, and express their distinctive group identity, Christians developed a strong and vocal distaste for cross-dressing and especially homosexuality. They developed this attitude in direct opposition to the common acceptance of homosexuality and cross-dressing among Andalusian Muslim elites.

In other words, like so many other staples of cultural Spanish Catholicism, Iberian Christian paradigms of gender and sexuality revolved around Muslim ones. Likewise, Muslim paradigms of gender and sexuality seemed more "deviant" when cast in the light of Christian asceticism. The two were, in effect, mutually dependent. Through vilifying homosexuality, eunuchism, and *ghumaliyat*, Iberian Christians were able to simultaneously express their dissent towards the ruling class, rebel against Muslim sovereignty, and solidify a burgeoning sense of cultural unity.

According to historian Brian Catlos (2018, p. 169), "the high culture of the native Christians of al-Andalus ... was a casualty of the Umayyad renaissance. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Latin letters had been all but subsumed by Arabic, and the Gospels, the Psalms, and the Epistles needed

to be translated into Arabic for the benefit of the faithful.” The subsuming and usurpation of Christian high culture by the newly arrived Muslims surely did not sit well with native Christians. Bowman reminds us that the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries were a difficult era for Iberia’s Christian minority. During this period, “armies from al-Andalus regularly raided the Christian kingdoms, destroying fortresses, seizing booty, and taking prisoners” (Bowman, 2000, p. 227). Resentment over symbolic and material theft by Muslim rule no doubt permeated the group Christian psyche during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, always simmering and occasionally bubbling over into conflict. Christians would have been all too happy to latch onto something specific to derogate in Muslims. In homosexuality and cross-dressing, Christians found a specific aspect of Muslim identity to lambaste, and thus could air their broader frustrations.

It was not just the material fact of cross-dressing or same-sex intimacy that unnerved Iberian Christians. Additionally, “[homosexuality was] viewed as an incurable and contagious vice, [which] was seen as a threat to the fighting strength of the army, and thus to the integrity of the state” (Bowman, 2000, p. 227). In other words, Christians perceived homosexuality as a literal sickness that weakened people’s bodies, was communicable to others by proximity, and could enfeeble Andalusian soldiers. Homosexuality, to Christians, held the ominous promise of weakening al-Andalus to the point of political vulnerability.

Clearly, Abd al-Rahman III, the ruler who put Pelagius to death, was a singular character in the history of medieval Spain. Known to have had both male and female harems, Rahman was the first Andalusian ruler to declare himself a caliph (as opposed to emir). He is remembered as bringing political unity to al-Andalus, and he was the first to grant eunuchs access to all government positions (Eisenberg, 2002). Under the first caliph, Spain’s eunuch population swelled to the thousands. Sources estimate anywhere between 3,750 and 13,750. Scholz (2001, pp. 212-3)

writes, for example, that “Slavic and Frankish eunuchs enjoyed an exalted status ... Eunuchs were everywhere; they held very high offices, were rewarded with landed property, and in some cases became local princes.”

While Rahman’s unprecedented embrace of eunuchs may be viewed in one sense as an initiative for social tolerance, it was actually a soft power move meant to control the eunuch class. By elevating court eunuchs into formal positions of power, Rahman III hoped to keep tabs on them, and keep them in check. By preemptively appeasing the discontent that he may have anticipated, or actually seen brewing within eunuch groups, Rahman III hoped to diffuse mounting social tensions and discourage eunuch dissent.

Eisenberg (2002, p. 759) argues that “Slave women often led a better life than did free women. The concubine had freedom to go about the town, more access to education, and a richer emotional and sexual life ... Slave concubines could manipulate their masters into giving rich gifts.” Further, “Marriage between master and slave was ... not uncommon” (Eisenberg, 2002, p. 759). This sort of manipulation may be evident in the tale of Subh of Cordoba, who ascended the ranks by seducing, and then marrying, the bookish al-Hakam II, who had only had male lovers before her. On the other hand, Subh and Hakam’s arrangement may have been mutually beneficial, since Subh was clearly more invested in governmental politics, while Hakam preferred to wile away the days in his library (Ruggles, 2004).

While Hakam technically remained the caliph, Subh came to assume a majority of the executive leadership responsibilities related to the caliphal title during the later portion of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Mernissi, 1993). It should come as no surprise, then that under al-Hakam II’s rule (and Subh’s *de facto* rule), “promising slave girls were educated according to their aptitudes in calligraphy, astronomy and astrology, medicine, mathematics, and other sciences” (Catlos, 2018,

p. 166). Hakam, having married a concubine; and Subh, having ascended from the role of concubine herself, would have been keenly aware of the artistic and intellectual potentialities residing within palacial harems. A precedent for developing the talents of slave girls had taken root in the middle east, centuries before Subh or Hakam had ascended to the roles of caliph and queen. For example, Kristina Richardson (2009) writes about the “singing slave girls,” or *qiyān*, who permeated the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century ‘Abbasid court. While having a child with an elite man was one way for slave women to augment their power, as Subh did, another avenue towards social escalation was getting trained in music, poetry, and performance. Musical gifts heightened a concubine’s value, and the most promising concubines were selected for rigorous training programs in singing, dancing, and musicianship before being sold to the highest bidder. Catlos (2018) argues that Subh, who had been “well-trained in Arabo-Islamic high culture and *adab*, including singing,” (p. 174) was favored by the art-loving Hakam especially because she was musically gifted.

#### **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

I end this composition with a devilish nod towards epistemological doubt. Most often, scholars have chalked up Andalusian men’s incentive to masculinize their concubines to personal preference. Ruggles (2004), for instance, argues that part of Subh’s incentive for masculinizing her appearance was to appeal to Al-Hakam. Likewise, Kristina Richardson argues that the fact that ‘Arib, a *ghumaliya* girl in 9th century Baghdad, had adopted masculine attire was directly related to caliph al-Amin’s sexual orientation. Richardson (2009, p. 114) writes that al-Amin had “sexual interest in male youths.” Thus, “for him a girl dressed as a young boy would have had abundant sex appeal.” In short, these scholars suggest that the men whom *ghumaliyyat* seduced were gay. I wonder whether that is an incomplete assessment of what *ghumaliyyat* meant to the people of al-

Andalus. Over time, the cultural category would have grown to command its own specific meaning; its own level of cultural capital irrespective of individuals' homosexual or heterosexual interests. In other words: A man who partnered with a *ghumaliyyat* woman may have partnered with her due to an insatiable desire to be with another man and a woman dressed as a man was the sorry, watered-down substitute for that. Alternatively, men could have been attracted to *ghumaliyyat* in and of itself. In this paper I've most often referred to *ghumaliyyat* as women, and I wonder, too, whether that term is as ontologically sound a choice as I initially thought. Perhaps it is best to consider *ghumaliyyat*, as the past's cultural category, as its own phenomena that was understood in its own terms in its own time and should still be understood that way today.

Although I've argued throughout this essay that gender, sexuality, religion and politics were mutually contingent elements within the social identities of Umayyad Iberians, there was no hard-and-fast rule for how individuals related to their own gender, their own sexuality, their own relationship to faith. For example, there is no evidence of Subh of Cordoba, a Christian, hesitating to assume the non-normative gender presentation that most Christians as a group seemed to disdain. Subh was primarily interested in how she could maximize her social position, and that of her children, within her own lifetime. Her personal ambition may have been what motivated her to adopt a masculine appearance in order to seduce, and then marry al-Hakam. According to this theory, Subh was a calculating reacher who made the most of her enslavement. On the other hand, Subh may have adopted *ghumaliyya* because she enjoyed the aesthetic. She may have married Hakam because she loved him. Certainly, none of these theories are mutually exclusive. People in medieval Spain, just as people today, were first and foremost individuals who metabolized the larger social and political circumstances they were surrounded by to make meaning out of the world. An abundance of evidence suggests that the unprecedented cultural practices surrounding

gender and sexuality that the Umayyads brought with them were alienating to Christians, who were already disenfranchised by the new political regime. How individual people interpreted and experienced that disenfranchisement, however, depended on the individual--his or her own personality, unique life experiences, and irreplaceable perspective on life.

Cultural concepts of gender and sexuality are interesting in that they affect both individual identity and group dynamics in important ways. In this paper, I've argued that the sex and gender paradigms introduced to medieval Spain by Umayyad elites had a lasting impact on the ways Christians and Muslims related both to themselves and each other. Comfort, or discomfort, with these sex and gender categories could become shorthand for communicating one's religious and political affiliation, as we've seen with the martyr Pelagius and Abd al-Rahman III. On the other hand, if an enslaved Christian, like Subh, could master the vocabulary and practices of an Umayyad gender category like *ghumaliyya*, that Christian had the opportunity to escalate throughout the social ranks of Umayyad Iberia, establishing a better circumstance for both herself and her children. Gender presentation and sexuality was a messy and kaleidoscopic field in medieval Spain, just as it is today. Sex and gender were contested grounds in a moment of cultural transition. One's comfort with homosexuality and cross-dressing during the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries in Iberia, especially if one was Christian, may be seen as a litmus test for how comfortable one was with Muslim Umayyad sovereignty. Sex and gender in medieval Spain, like most things in medieval Europe, were highly symbolic. The words, garb, and actions that composed one's gender presentation and material sexuality became a way to communicate about one's social identity--be that Muslim, Christian, free or enslaved.

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