

# THE SLAVE OF 8J10.9: ELITE AND SUBALTERN AGENTS OF THE GLOBAL SLAVE TRADE

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*My presentation analyzes a short letter, or memorandum, exchanged by Jewish merchants to facilitate the trade and transport of an enslaved woman from Cairo to Alexandria. In this brief missive, one trader tells another to use the money he has already given him to rent provisions and a space on a ship for an enslaved woman that another slave trader, named Ibrahim, has purchased for a Jewish notable nicknamed “The Diadem.” This note was preserved in the Cairo Geniza, a cache of manuscripts preserved in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Fustat (Old Cairo). Today this record is part of the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection in Cambridge University Library (U. K.).*

*While the memo offers only a fragmented snapshot of the slave trade, I argue that it can be read alongside other documentary records and narrative sources to write a connected history of the global Middle Ages. Other Geniza merchant-letters reveal how Jewish merchants routinely shipped slaves to each other, not only within Egypt, but also from as far away as India and the Yemen. Narrative and legal sources contemporary with this letter help historians flesh out a picture of the medieval inter-regional slave trade and the experiences of the enslaved people who were swept up in its wake. Medieval market-inspector and medical manuals provide instructions for slave merchants in how to conduct this commerce. Travelogues and chronicles provide glimpses into how famine pressured parents to sell their children into slavery and into how a veritable kidnapping industry thrived in certain regions and supplied slaves to large markets such as Cairo.*

*The bibliography below provides references for published sources used in the talk as well as other relevant materials for undergraduate teaching and research. Future updates to this bibliography will be uploaded to the Humanities Commons Core <<http://hcommons.org>>.*

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*This book is not primarily a history of slavery. But several chapters are excellent in this regard. See especially chapters 3, 4, and 30.*

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*"Slaves and Slave Girls" is largely duplicated and superseded by Mediterranean Society 1:130-147. Excellent translated primary sources include: "A Dying Woman Frees Her Two Slave Girls" and "Manumission of a Slave Girl" in Mediterranean Society 5:147-150; "Letter of a Woman, Who Was Seriously Ill...[and insists that her daughter and her slave-nurse not be separated after her death]" in "Side Lights," 85-87; and "The Abandoned Concubine" in Letters, 335-338.*

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*Contains valuable primary sources.*

Ibn al-Sai. *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*. Edited by Shawkat M. Toorawa. NYU Press, 2015.

*See the brief interview with Professor Sean Anthony (Ohio State) about how he uses this book in his classes: <https://arablit.org/2017/08/22/teaching-lal/>*

Ibn Buṭlān (11<sup>th</sup> c.). *Epistle about the Purchase of Slaves and Their Examination*.

*English translations available at*

*[http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Ibn\\_Butlan](http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Ibn_Butlan); Mez (below); and Simon Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam: A Critical Edition, English Translation, and Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 273-274.*

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*Focused on the nineteenth-century United States context, but a thoughtful essay about how historians study the agency of the enslaved. Can pair with Thomas below, who engages with this essay.*

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*Dated. But there is a chapter on slaves with a great number of anecdotal detail as well as scattered references to slaves and slavery throughout the entire volume. The chapter on slaves is in pages 156-169.*

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*“The Daily Life of Slaves” can be downloaded from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses or (for the time being) from the author’s Academia.edu page.*

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*Specifically, see the section “Murder by Domestic Slaves,” 224-237.*

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*This roundtable is a collection of eight short essays on topics including the slave trade and concubinage.*

Thomas, Lynn M. “Historicising Agency.” *Gender & History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 324–39.

*Engages with Johnson (above).*

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*The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 2.

*Look for this volume on global medieval slavery in late 2019 or in 2020.*

More work needs to be done on identifying and collecting visual images for medieval slavery in the Islamic World. One striking image is of a slave market in Zabid, Yemen from a thirteenth-century illustrated manuscript of *The Māqamāt* of al-Harīrī painted by the artist al-Wasiṭī. See *Bibliothèque nationale de France: Manuscrit arabe 5847, folio 105, Maqāma 34*. Public domain image available as “Slaves Zadib Yemen 13th century BNF Paris.jpg” [sic.] in Wikimedia Commons:[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Slaves\\_Zadib\\_Yemen\\_13th\\_century\\_BNF\\_Paris.jpg#file](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Slaves_Zadib_Yemen_13th_century_BNF_Paris.jpg#file) (accessed January 25, 2019).

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