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THE SLAVE TRADE OF EUROPEAN WOMEN  
TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND ASIA FROM  
ANTIQUITY TO THE NINTH CENTURY



by

Kathryn Ann Hain

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
The University of Utah  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History

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# The University of Utah Graduate School

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The dissertation of **Kathryn Ann Hain**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In the mid-ninth century, an Abbasid intelligence officer, Ibn Khurdadhbih, wrote a geography book, the extant sections of which describe the existing trade routes, products, and two major trade networks of the early Abbasid Empire. The Rus or Norse traders brought furs and swords from north to south down the Volga River to Baghdad. The Jewish Radhanite traders who spoke a plethora of languages traded luxury times west and east. The list of articles that they transported from Europe to Arabia, India, and China included eunuchs, concubines, and servant boys. This dissertation analyzes the historical context of this trade by asking two questions.

First, was this trade made possible by the ninth century convergence of the Carolingian-Abbasid-Tang empires or had west to east slave trade existed in antiquity? Greek, Latin, Prakrit, Sanskrit, and Tamil sources all reveal that Greek and then, Roman female slaves were transported in large enough numbers to be listed in bills of lading, tax rolls, descriptions of Jain harems, Sanskrit dramas, and the hagiography of St. Thomas.

The second question uses eastern sources to interrogate what cultural values in India, China, and Baghdad made Asians desire European slaves. Indian royalty and elite required enormous female retinues. Greek girls are listed in these entourages as royal guards armed with bows and arrows. Greek sex workers also appear in the sources as courtesans and flutegirls. In Chinese chronicles, Greek and Roman slaves appear as acrobatic performers or tricksters presented to the emperor as tribute from rulers in

Parthia and later, Burma. In Abbasid Baghdad, the ruler and elite desired slaves to gain the prestige that stemmed from having a large harem, one of the mores of the shared court culture across Asia.

The Eurasian trade from Spain to China described by Ibn Khurdadhbih was not just possible; it mirrored Greek and Roman trade with India and Han China. The female slaves that the traders transported to Asia provided not just sex and entertainment, but fulfilled a cultural value that possessing beautiful foreign women in large numbers proved a ruler or elite courtier's prestige and power.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Jerusalem, history is never dead. Fourteen years of living with the vibrant people of this city inspired my research. The rich, shared heritage of the resident Christians, Muslims, and Jews led me to the medieval period. Two different narratives about Arab and Jewish relations swirled around in the dust of the city. One was that Jews and Arabs had fought since Isaac and Ismail and would fight to the End of Days. The other was that during the medieval period, Jews and Muslims had lived in the peace and paradise of “*convincia*.” Both stereotypes were little more than a veneer covering deeper modern tensions. The past had social history that had contributed to the present lived experience of the not-so-holy city.

Slavery and the import of foreign slaves to the Muslim world was one of these wounds that had formed the present. Ibn Khurdadhbih wrote a geography book in ninth century Baghdad that had stayed on the “Best Copied” list of Arabic classics for centuries. It continues to amaze modern scholars. It described a trade including European slaves, “eunuchs, concubines, and boys” that reached through the Abbasid Empire and on to India and China. I encountered this text courtesy of Haim Beinart, author of *Atlas of Medieval Jewish History*. Beinart used student volunteers to gather materials and verify facts. One of these volunteers, Yonatan Kaplan, his new son-in-law and later, my advisor and lecturer in Jerusalem, introduced me to the puzzle of the medieval Radhanite Jewish trade network by giving his Medieval Middle East students a copy of the Ibn

Khurdadhbih text. He posed the discussion question, “How was this possible?” which grew into this dissertation. My thanks to him for an intellectual query that has taken fifteen years and counting to answer.

My appreciation extends to each of my committee members. Dr. Sluglett first took on the challenge of teaching me to write academically. Dr. Davies banned my “being” verbs and provided encouragement. Dr. Asad started the journey and Dr. Devir finished it. Dr. Adams fact checked the Greek and Roman chapters. And last, Dr. Thatcher, from generosity of heart, rather than from committee membership, fact checked all the Chinese sections and provided needed sources and translation. My greatest gratitude goes to Dr. von Sivers, who had the courage to accept a nontraditional, high mileage student of strong convictions. His patient, dedicated, and detailed, line by line editing of three drafts contributed to the quality of this research. All errors, however, are on my head.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: CONCUBINES AS COMMODITY

Around 1350-1332 BCE, the vassal king of Gezer in Canaan received cuneiform correspondence<sup>1</sup> from his overlord, the Egyptian pharaoh, with orders to send him "Forty extremely beautiful female cup bearers in whom there is no defect." To guarantee delivery and quality of these cupbearers, the pharaoh sent his military overseer with gifts, such as silver, gold, linen garments, precious stones, an ebony chair, and other "fine things."<sup>2</sup> This diplomatic correspondence reveals the full-blown custom of exchange of women for valuables and the use of slave women in the splendor and opulence of royal courts in the Middle East towards the end of the Bronze Age. Over two thousand years later, Abbasid and Tang sources show that similar exchanges of slave women and their use in royal courts still existed in their cultures.

This exchange of women for valuables is one aspect of a much broader spectrum of exchanges. Exchange becomes evident in archaeological finds with the rise of agrarian-urban civilization in Lower Mesopotamia (ca. 3500 BCE). The sources in this dissertation show the evolution of human trade within the history of exchange. The Middle Eastern civilizations, from the Sumerians to the Abbasids, served as the hub for

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<sup>1</sup> The cuneiform tablet comes from a long-buried royal archive called the Amarna Letters, found toward the end of the nineteenth century in Amarna, the former capital of Pharaoh Akhenaten (1350s – 1330s BC).

<sup>2</sup> EA 369, in *The Amarna Letters*, trans. and ed. William L. Moran (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

this exchange with spokes gradually extending in all directions of the “Old World,” that is, the contiguous continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. The evolution of this hub-spoke system forms the analytical framework of this dissertation. The period of 3500 BCE-900 CE forms its chronological-historical unit. The work concludes in the ninth century which marked a high period of Old World connections brought about by the Abbasid empire serving as the hub. The Arabic sources of the era reveal seamless trading networks spanning from Spain to China, from the Arctic to the Silk Road. The tenth century decline of the Carolingian, Abbasid, and Tang empires reduced Eurasian contact and trade for the following several centuries. The discovery of the Americas formed new frameworks and a very different form of slave trade.

Historians generally recognize a gradual European-Middle Eastern-Asian unification of exchanges. Immanuel M. Wallerstein in his multivolume work, *The Modern World-System*,<sup>3</sup> dated this unification to the rise of a capitalistic world economy, with Europe at its center, emerging in the long sixteenth century (1450-1640). Janet L. Abu-Lughod wrote *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* as a corrective. She argued that the world was united earlier, but with no center, showing the weakness in Wallenstein’s theory, in that he treated the European-dominated world of the sixteenth century as “if it had appeared de novo.”<sup>4</sup> She convincingly laid out the elements of the Eurasian-African encounters that existed in the second half of the Mongol-

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<sup>3</sup>Janet L. Abu-Lughod read the initial two volumes of Immanuel E. Wallerstein’s work, *The Modern World System* published in the 70s. These works have been updated and republished as *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Wallerstein responds to Lughod’s critique on his temporal and spacial boundaries in his *Prologue to the 2011 Edition* in 1:xxvi.

<sup>4</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), x.

dominated thirteenth century.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation agrees with Lughod against Wallerstein, but pushes the unification back to the eighth and ninth centuries and argues that there was indeed a center, with the Middle East acting as the hub.

Within the evolution of exchanges from 3500 BCE to 900 CE, this dissertation focuses on the trade of women from Europe and the Mediterranean Basin when the Greek and Roman empires encompassed all shores of the sea. Male entertainers or eunuchs are included when they appear in the same texts. The reverse slave trade from India to the Ptolemaic and Roman Empires is examined but proves that, in large part, the majority of slaves moved west to east. Many excellent studies exist on the general exchange of goods within this time frame, but this dissertation, to my knowledge, is the first that examines slaves, especially female slaves as a specific form of “goods” of exchange. Whether as gift or commodity, the sources mentioning slave women show the evolution of exchange and the growth of the Middle Eastern hub-spoke system from Europe and Africa to the Middle East, India, and China.

When approaching the long-term history of slave trade, especially its female version, an important methodological distinction should be made among the modes of procurement of slaves. War throughout history produced many captives, mostly women and children. These large numbers of slaves were more often visible in the historical record than small numbers through other forms of enslavement, such as child abandonment or sales by parents, self-enslavement, penal slavery, kidnapping, etc. These slaves resulting from defeat in war did not *require* markets for their distribution, even if recourse to markets was possible. The elite might be released for ransom but the majority of captives were sent to the ruler or used to reward troops. The rulers could enroll the

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<sup>5</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Hegemony*, x, 3.

beautiful girls and boys in their own palaces as signs of dynastic power or use them as gifts for their allies, courtiers, or vassals. The second form of slave acquisition from individual effort more often led to slave dealers and markets. The modes of acquisition of smaller numbers of slaves over time was usually not remarked upon in the historical record and therefore, it was their distribution via market methods that gained indirect attention in the record. These slaves moved through the market like any other commodity. The second form of enslavement underwent considerable historical change, parallel to how exchange in general evolved through time.

Initially, early Mesopotamian trade consisted of barter over short distances, for example, marble and copper from Zagros for tools and manufacturing. Gradually gold, silver, precious stones, manufactured garments, tin, wood, exotic birds, and animals traveled longer distances, to and from Mesopotamia with spokes reaching to Harappa and Anatolia. White jade ax heads from China ended up in ancient Troy, showing the growth in distances that trade items could travel through the Near Eastern hub. Finally, in Lydia, ca. 575 BCE, the first currency developed using standardized gold and silver, struck as coins, to guarantee weight, allowing for more versatile long-distance luxury purchases.

With the advent of coinage, long-distance markets evolved for luxury exchange. They developed as autonomous institutions under a ruler's protection with the presence of merchants or merchant colonies. Furthermore, they required advanced urbanization processes with the emergence of wealthy clientele outside of palaces. The dominant merchants and merchant colonies were those from the center of the hub, Middle Easterners of various ethnic origins. In the Roman period, these traders appear to be Greek Alexandrians or Syrians. The seventh through ninth century saw these traders

change to Persians and then Abbasids but identified in Chinese sources as “Persians” and in Indian sources as Persians, Greeks, or Turks. These traders traveled with gold and silver coinage, eastward for the acquisition of luxury goods, that is, primarily commodities in small quantities that yielded high profits and could not be produced in the Middle East, such as spices, silk, or porcelain. During the Hellenistic wars, elephants also joined the list of desired trade products traveling back west. Few easterners (Indians, Chinese) traveled westward since they required few imports, except precious metals, in their warm-weather (tropical or subtropical) lands.

The slave trade, however, the main focus, seems to have departed from this general west - east pattern of luxury trade. Middle Easterners, especially Persian Jews, came to Europe to trade gold and silver coinage for European slaves which they then transported in some cases as far as India and China. Northern Europeans, the Norse Rus, also took advantage of the eastern demand for luxury goods by bringing slave girls and furs down the Volga River to trade for Eastern spices, silks, and Islamic silver. The west to east trade in luxury slaves goes against the east to west trade in silks and spices that usually dominates discussions of trade. By focusing on the female slave trade in this dissertation, I seek to elucidate the extent, longevity, and cultural mores driving demand of a form of exchange that followed its own rules of demand and supply and thereby can be seen as an important facet in the overall evolution of exchange in the Old World from 3500 to 900 CE.

Two questions dominate this study of the slave trade between Europe and Asia. Chapters 2 through 4 answer the question. “For how long and why were European slaves traded to India and China?” The primary goal is to use ancient artifacts and Greek, Latin,



Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, and Chinese texts and art to determine when long-distance Eurasian slave trade began and what political and economic factors in Antiquity contributed to the slave trade of Europeans to India and China. Chapters 5 through 7 ask “Why did Asian elites desire western slaves?” and discuss how cultural practices individually affected how Indians, Chinese, and Abbasid Baghdadis used these women in their societies. These cultural differences caused a demand by royals and elites for western slaves which could be filled through the services of either diplomats or slave dealers. The Conclusion, **The Long Life of Abbasid Slavery**, asks how long this form of luxury slavery survived in Muslim royal courts and thereby caused centuries of enslavement of European women in Muslim royal harems.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 2, **Long-distance Exchange Across Bronze Age Eurasia**, starts the search for origins to answer the first question, “How long had this west to east, long-distance human trade been going on?” It examines trade, travel, and writing in Bronze Age societies to find clues on the exchange of women in early societies. The first foundational text of the Bronze Age in Europe, Homer’s epic *Iliad*, sets the stage. Herodotus later explains the causes of the war, illustrating how the abduction of a number of women, and finally the kidnapping of the beautiful Helen incited enduring hatred between the Persians and the Greeks. This chapter argues that the exchange of women, whether princess, slaves, entertainers, captives, or mutual gifts, underlies archaic long-

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<sup>6</sup> Harem comes from an Arabic root *hrm* that refers to something forbidden or sacrosanct. In the early Abbasid period, the term referred to all the servants and members of a family under a man’s responsibility and control. In this era, royal Abbasid women were not confined to the ruler’s palace but had their own palaces located around the city. Only much later in Islamic history did this term come to mean the physical part of the household or palace where the women and intimate family members lived and where access was forbidden to outside men. The Italian and Ottoman term *seraglio* from the Persian word *saray* for palace and the Urdu/Hindi *zenana* have the same function, but it is the Arabic word that has come into English to mean all the secluded women of any oriental palace or elite household and the physical location of their secluded section of the household in any era.

distance relations.

Theoreticians of exchange and kinship structures, as well cuneiform tablets, contribute to the examination of the nature of this exchange whether as trade, or as “gifts” in ancient or primitive economies in the first half of this chapter. The second half of Chapter 2 on travel and distance uses archaeology and some texts to explore how far back in time contact between India and the Greater Mediterranean can be reliably dated. A number of archaeological finds from Europe and Asia give evidence of exchange between the Indian Ocean and Europe, back to the fifth millennium BCE, or earlier. The earliest examples are shells originating from the Indian Ocean which show up across Europe as far north as Frankfurt, Germany in archaeological stratum dated to the Bronze Age or earlier. Beads originating in the Minoan Mediterranean are found in ancient Harappa on the Indus. Teeth from cemeteries in Harappa, Germany, and Denmark reveal long-distance movement of people.

With the earliest writing, the ancient exchange of women can be more closely understood, not just assumed from teeth and trade goods. Sumerian, Babylonian, and Egyptian cuneiform tablets speak of the movement of large numbers of female slaves either as war captives or as diplomatic pawns. Evidence that women, slave and free, were taken by force, gifted to, or exchanged between elites exists from the beginning of writing in the Bronze Age. All together, these artifacts and early texts speak to the very early, extensive, long-distance movement of goods and people in prehistory, including between the Mediterranean and India. Slave trade remains invisible in the archaeological records of this era but the first cuneiform texts or Homeric oral traditions from the Bronze Age show the gifting or capture of women.

Chapter 3, **Greek Women Taken to India: From the Achaemenid Persians to the Ptolemies**, focuses on the connections or spokes that grow between the Greek and Indian worlds. This chapter argues that Indian sources mention Greek slave women because the Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Seleucid/Ptolemaic dynasties used Greek slave women to promote their relations with India. Persian and Sanskrit stele, Sanskrit epics and dramas, Greco-Roman histories of the era, and geography books all speak of war, diplomatic relations, and trade which moved Greek women to Indian harems in this period.

Ancient Indian texts show that Vedic, Brahmin, Buddhist, and Jain societies all practiced slavery and gifting of slave women. Jain texts from the sixth or fifth century BCE list Greek women as one of the ethnicities of the multicultural residents in royal Jain harems. The question of how Greeks known as Yavana or Yona ended up in Indian texts and harems gains some possible answers by juxtaposing Herodotus's description of Persian slavers and other descriptions of Persian wars in the Mediterranean against the Prakrit Jain and Sanskrit texts.

After examining the institution of female slavery in ancient India, this chapter focuses on three different migrations of Greeks to India. Cyrus's Persian conquest and occupation of the eastern Mediterranean basin caused the first recorded and, most likely, involuntary Greek diaspora in Asia which appears to have included Greek women sold or gifted to elites in Indian, or at least to Jain royal houses. Alexander the Great spurred the second migration when he conquered the Persian Empire, including the Persian satraps in North-west India. Since his conquest possibly included a number of anti-Macedonian Greek diaspora communities who had been resettled in Bactria or India, Alexander's

wars could have thrown many more second- or third-generation Greek slaves into the slave markets of Central Asia and India. Alexander's successors, the Seleucids and Ptolemies, gave up on the conquest of India and turned to diplomacy and trade with Mauryan India which provided them the elephants they needed to rule in the Mediterranean. At least one Hellenistic princess and her female attendants, as well as other groups of female entertainers, concubines, and harem slaves probably moved long-distances across the Mediterranean, through the Near Eastern hub, and into the Indian sub-continent, in this era of cultural mixing.

Chapter 4, **The Eurasian Slave Trade Stretches from Rome to China**, expands the story of Eurasian slave trade by showing how the slave trade expanded in numbers and distance, finally with spokes stretching from Spain to South India and China. This chapter demonstrates that the wealth, peace, and convergence of the Roman and Han dynasties with Parthia and India as the hubs between them brought an early “globalization.” Rome's attempt to acquire Asia's spices, medicines, and silk involved the export of a huge amount of gold but also the export of slaves, a common Mediterranean commodity provided by war, pirates, and corrupt officials.

Tamil poetry and Chinese chronicles join the Latin, Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit sources and artifacts of the period describing the human trade. The nature of texts mentioning slave women differs from west to east, each creating its own difficulties. On the western side of this trade, the export of European slave women merits little more mention than inclusion on a bill of lading as “beautiful women for concubines” or “flute women” listed as one of many exports sent to India by ship. One crucial surviving text, a Greco-Egyptian shipping manual, describes the infrastructure of western Indian Ocean

trade, including the trading of slaves from Egypt to East Africa, Iran, and India.

On the eastern receiving side, however, these women, individually, or as part of a “Yavana” presence in Greater India, appear in a number of Indian genres in Classical Antiquity.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty comes in pinning these events to a date. The Greeks invented historiography, especially Herodotus who served as a witness to the Persian menace to the Greeks in the Mediterranean. No corresponding equivalent exists on the eastern side except for the Chinese chronicles.<sup>8</sup> In India, historiography does not exist in the Western sense. The world was conceived in terms of mythical rather than historical events. Sources remain flexible or fluid through the centuries and individual events or beginnings of eras are datable only when they are connected to an occidental event.<sup>9</sup> The Indian sources, however, speak to the long-distance movement of western slaves to and within Asia, but whether they date to the Greek or the Roman period is difficult to gauge since the word for Greek, *Yavana*, evolved to include all westerners.

A number of scholars have written on the Yavana phenomena in India. The orientalist<sup>10</sup> of the last century saw their colonial ambitions mirrored in Alexander’s conquest of Asia. They used sources on Yavanas to prove how European influence brought civilization to India. Post-Independence Indian scholars then used the sources on the Yavana to argue that “They came, they saw, but India conquered.”<sup>11</sup> The next generation of Indian scholars revisited the Yavana issue with less nationalistic agendas or fervor and more awe of the scale of India’s involvement in intercourse, globalization, and

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<sup>7</sup> Indian writers called Greeks either *Yona* or, more often, *Yavana* from old Persian *Yauna*. Over time the term evolved to mean anyone from the West. For a fuller explanation, see Chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Schmitthenner, “Rome and India; Aspects of Universal History During the Principate,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): 94.

<sup>9</sup> Schmitthenner, “Rome and India,” 99-100.

<sup>10</sup> Tarn, Max Weber, etc.

<sup>11</sup> A.K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 11. See also “Obituary, A. K. Narain (28 May 1925-10 July 2013),” *Indian Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (2014): 144.

cultural mixing evident in Antiquity. One example of this recent Indian scholarship is Himanshu R. Ray, writing from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, who summarized the long list of Indian texts and artifacts that reference a Yavana presence in India.<sup>12</sup> He used this canon of Yavana evidence to argue that, “an effective barometer of the prosperity and economic power” of the Yavanas could be measured by the change in social status *vis-à-vis* their upgrade in caste ranking.<sup>13</sup> While Ray assembled one of the most succinct but inclusive catalogues of Yavana texts available in one place, ironically, he missed three of the four texts<sup>14</sup> that mention Yavana women in India society.

The dissertation then turns to the second question, “Why did Asian elites desire western slaves?” to re-examine many of these same texts to discuss how culture affected how Indians, Chinese, and Abbasids used these women in their societies, which in turn, caused the demand for western slaves. These three chapters provide the evidence showing desire and demand for western slaves that made it profitable to bring them such long-distances.

The fifth chapter argues it was **The Cultural Values of India which Caused Demand for Mediterranean Slave Women**. It turns to Indian sources describing western women in India in Antiquity and the medieval period. This chapter examines descriptions of Indian retinues, several Sanskrit dramas, and a Syriac hagiography that

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<sup>12</sup> Himanshu R. Ray, “The Yavana Presence in Ancient India,” in Marie-Françoise Boussac and Jean-François Salles, ed., *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu: Essays on the Interrelations between India, Arabia, and the Eastern Mediterranean* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1995), 75-95. Previously published without the addendum as “The Yavana Presence in Ancient India,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 31, no. 3 (1988): 311-25.

<sup>13</sup> See this argument in Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> The one text that he listed is “of the Yavana (feminine)” found on two clay bullae probably meant to be worn around the neck. A. Ghosh, “Mathura,” *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990,) 2: 283-86, A. Ghosh, “Ujjain,” *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990,) 2: 447-49. See Chapter 4 for a discussion on the possible use of these bullae in the slave market. For the three texts that he missed referencing Greek women as body guards and courtesans, see Chapter 5.

mention Greek, Roman, and/or Hebrew slave women showing the three “careers” in which Mediterranean women appear in Indian sources.

Indian rulers desired retinues of women in mind-boggling numbers to mirror the gods. Greek women initially were mentioned in these entourages just for their foreignness, but in the late Roman era, they are mentioned in specific roles in these retinues. The Shakespeare of India, Kalidasa, writing in the fourth or fifth century CE wrote Greek women into his plays as armed bodyguards for the prince, showing how their ethnicity or foreignness branded them. A Greek courtesan also appears in another drama as a worker in a multiracial brothel. A Palestinian or Syrian Jewish Hebrew girl also works in the sex and entertainment field, appearing in the hagiography of St. Thomas as a musician who breaks her flute to become his first convert in India.

These roles seen in texts from Antiquity and Late Antiquity continue into the Medieval period in India although the term, Yavana, no longer identifies only Greek or Roman slaves. It appears that changes in India in the medieval era increased the numbers of women used in retinue and in sex work because of the rising role of huge temples and temple prostitution. Analyzing these descriptions of Mediterranean women within the context of Indian gendered slavery and culture paints a picture of the demand fulfilled by providers of western slave women to India.

Chapter 6, **China: Magnet of the World**, the last destination in Ibn Khurdadhbih’s text, continues the analyses of motivation of the Asian consumers to acquire western slaves. It explains the reasons for the most distant spoke from the Middle Eastern hub. This chapter argues that it is the outsized role that entertainers played in Chinese society that caused entertainers from the rest of the known world to be the gift of

choice sent to the Chinese emperors. Han court chronicles describe first Seleucid and later Roman entertainers who were gifted as tribute from Parthia/Iran and Shan/Burma. The Han developed an institution known as the “Hundred Entertainments,” similar to a circus on steroids, which the Han emperor sponsored and used to entertain royals and locals, but especially to impress the diplomats. A number of Chinese sources and art depictions describe the many different acts enjoyed by elite patrons and foreign diplomats.

Slavery in Chinese sources, especially of entertainers and concubines, tended to broaden the category since impoverished or indifferent parents sold their children into concubinage or entertainment professions. Other slaves, like the Seleucids and Romans, came to the courts as tribute gifts of trained performers sent from the neighboring courts of Parthia and Burma. Han, and later Sui and Tang emperors provided patronage and training for entertainers, sometimes numbering ten thousand strong. In time, the acts grew more and more amazing, covering tightrope dancing, balancing acts, animal acts, tricks on top of galloping horses, and especially, strong women who could balance a number of performers over their heads.

During the Tang era, the mention of European or Mediterranean slaves in China becomes problematic. In medieval Chinese sources, all slaves or visitors from the west were called Persian or black, obscuring the identities of European or Mediterranean slaves. Yet Tang sources show that the most popular acts, for example, girls dancing on rolling wooden balls that thundered across the stage in unison, came from the west. Poetry and lamentations by Chinese conservatives reveal that the westerners were so abundant and popular that music forms, the instruments, dances, fashions, and the modes



of transport all followed western styles. These slave girls and their “Persian” traders were so ubiquitous that they appear as Chinese grave figurines showing that their presence is a necessary accrument for a pleasant afterlife.

The definitive evidence of European slaves in China in the medieval period comes from abundant Arabic sources. The earliest was Ibn Khurdadhbih. Other diplomatic and geographic sources show the Rus or Slavic traders bringing European slave women to trade in Central Asia accessing the Silk Roads. Huge numbers of Islamic coins in Europe testify to massive trade volume of white women, furs, or both. Because of the Norse traders being able to sell to Silk Road traders, it is possible that some of their northern blonds were traded further into Central Asia or onto China.

Chapter 7, **Harem Culture in Baghdad: Forces that Drove Demand for European Concubines and Eunuchs in Elite Abbasid Culture**, brings Ibn Khurdadhbih’s description back from China to the hub at Baghdad where his audience resided. It asks why the Abbasids wanted slaves and suggests that harem size is responsible. This chapter goes against common assumptions that caliphal harem numbers were pure hyperbole by comparing the Abbasid court culture and harems with those of their peers and competition on the Asian scene. It argues that the Abbasids needed to collect extremely large numbers of harem slaves to prove their right to rule an empire within the traditions of Asian shared court culture. First, references to caliphal harem sizes in Arab primary sources undergo analysis. After a definition of courts and their functions, a survey of court culture shows possible influences. The Prophet Mohammed, surprisingly, had little influence on Islamic courts. The Abbasid caliph’s courts shared more characteristics of earlier Arab courts, the long-standing Persian court culture, and

finally the huge courts of Tang China.

In 750 CE, when the militants that became the Abbasids defeated the Umayyads, they were a group of mixed blood and Persian rebels from the far eastern regions of the empire. To rule, they needed more than just a blood bath. They needed to establish a court that would gain them respect as regional, if not global players. The Persian emperors had weakened and been defeated by the Byzantines and the Arabs. Their courts had not been renowned since the death of Khosrow II (d. 628), and the dissolution of his famous harem of 12,000 women over a century earlier.<sup>15</sup> The Abbasid's main contender for power or prestige was the Tang Chinese emperor at the peak of his power and with a harem of 40,000 women to prove it. Even though the Abbasids defeated a Tang alliance in their last war of conquest in Central Asia, they soon established diplomatic, trade, and cultural ties with the Tang capital. The end of this chapter examines Abbasid – Tang diplomatic ties, trade, and literature to find the avenues of connection between the two giants. A look at the stupendous Chinese harems and multiple ties between the empires suggests that the Tang may have been a greater influence on the Abbasid court and harem than the previous Arab and Persian courts.

The concluding and eighth chapter, **The Longevity of Abbasid Harem Formation across Eurasia**, argues that the shared Asian court form using slaves to project status was imitated and propagated across the Muslim world for over a millennium in courts from Cordoba to Delhi. This court pattern, which used slave women and eunuchs as décor and demonstration of prestige, ended in the Mediterranean only with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Uncounted Europeans entered slavery to fill these halls. Much more study needs to be done to uncover their stories.

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<sup>15</sup> For Tabari's description of this harem, see Chapter 7.

## CHAPTER 2

### LONG-DISTANCE EXCHANGE ACROSS BRONZE AGE EURASIA

Here are presented the results of the enquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and...in particular, the cause of hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks.

[1] According to the learned Persian, it was the Phoenicians who caused the conflict.....Once, then, the Phoenicians came to Argos and began to dispose of their cargo. Five or six days after they had arrived, when they had sold almost everything, a number of women came down to the shore, including the king's daughter, whose name (as the Greeks agree too) was Io, the daughter of Inachus. These women were standing around the stern of the ship, buying any items which particularly caught their fancy, when the Phoenicians gave the word and suddenly charged at them. Most of the women got away, but Io and some others were captured. The Phoenicians took them on to their ship and sailed away.... [2] that was the original crime. Later, some Greeks landed at Tyre in Phoenicia and abducted the king's daughter, Europa.... then, according to the Persian, the Greeks were responsible for a second crime. They sailed in a long ship to Aea.... and once they had completed the business that had brought them there, they abducted the king's daughter Medea.... [3] A generation later, the Persians say, Alexander the son of Priam heard about this and decided to steal himself a wife from Greece....and that is how he came to abduct Helen. (Herodotus, *Histories* 1-3) <sup>16</sup>

Io, Europa, Medea, and finally the beautiful Helen. Four ancient Mediterranean women at the dawn of Greek historiography. Their abduction was blamed as the cause of the enmity between the Greeks and their rivals to the east. Their captivity was the reason that the Persians “think of Asia and the non-Greek peoples living there as their own, but

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<sup>16</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998/2008) 1-3.

regard Europe and the Greeks as separate from themselves.”<sup>17</sup> These women lived out their lives as captives in distant lands where their distant origins, royal birth, or beauty made them valuable as a prize, a sexual conquest, and a mate. Their abductions not only began Herodotus’s history of the world, but symbolize a crucial element of long-distance relations between ancient peoples, the kidnapping, exchange, or trade of women. In this chapter, these women stand as the first named forerunners of generations of Mediterranean women who were torn from their homes and transported eastwards.

The theme of feminine abduction and captivity grew such deep roots into the foundations of Western culture that eventually, the entire continent would be named for the kidnapped and raped maiden, Europa. In Antiquity, Strabo described Europa as only part of Thrace, “comprised within the interior and exterior seas...as far as the Don and a small part of Greece.”<sup>18</sup> The Hispanic *Latin Chronicle of 754* holds the first reference to a broader view of Europeans, used as a term for the Christian opposition to Muslim advance. The Latin chronicler chose the name “Europe” to describe the region where the troops of Charles Martel, founder of the Carolingian Empire and victor at the Battle of Tours, stopping the Muslim armies pillaging France from Iberia.<sup>19</sup>

How far back into time has the transport of women existed between Europe and what we now call the Near and Far East? Human remains, artifacts, and very early texts show evidence of long-distance diplomacy, travel, and trade in the Bronze Age. These different fragments of information from the distant past show that women, slave and free,

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<sup>17</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 4. The original Greek uses the terms, Asia, Europe, and Greeks.

<sup>18</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, VII. I. I. Strabo also described Asia, “Asia is contiguous to Europe...reckoning from the continent opposite to Rhodes to the eastern extremities of India and Scythia.” *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (1929, repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 6.327-28/XI.I.1-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Chronicle of 754*, 80, in Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1990), 144. The term Europe in the Middle Ages meant “Occidens” as opposed to “Oriens” where Constantinople and Jerusalem reigned.

were or could have been items of exchange, as captives, gifts, or luxury trade goods. This chapter argues that slave trading of Europeans to Mesopotamia, India, and China, similar to the description of medieval trade patterns, products, and slaves described by Ibn Khurdadhbih, existed since Antiquity.

The extant sections of Ibn Khurdadhbih's ninth century geography text describe commercial networks which transported European slaves and products to Baghdad, India,<sup>20</sup> and China with luxury goods from the East traveling back to Europe. If true, then European youth, albeit in shackles, traveled as far as India and China four centuries or more before the intrepid Marco Polo's expedition. This Venetian trader's trip to China was one result of the *Pax Mongolia* which united Europe and China. European slaves, however, had been making the journey to Asia long before Marco Polo or Ibn Khurdadhbih.

Greek texts describe the trade of Roman era slaves to India. Even earlier texts from India describe Greek women in Indian harems. The presence of Greek slaves in India as early as the Achaemenid Persian era (550–330 BC) poses the question, "How far back could human traffic and trafficking between Europe and Asia extend?" This chapter uses the sources of the Bronze Age: human remains, artifacts, and ancient texts, as well as the work of previous generations of scholars, to argue that human exchange over long-distances, not just of goods, but of women, has existed since the dawn of

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<sup>20</sup> The term "India" originally meant the Indus basin the same as the term "Mesopotamia" referred to the land between the two rivers. In this paper, the term expands from that meaning to shorthand for Greater India or the Indian sub-continent, a region that now hosts the modern nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. During Harappan, Mauryan, and Mogul rule, the reach of Indian-based government and cultural influence extended into Afghanistan. The term "India" in ancient Greek and Roman sources is problematic. Some writers conflated the term to include Ethiopia and other areas bordering the Indian Ocean. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 255. Ancient writers used both India and Ethiopia to signify any remote, uncivilized country. Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper* (London: Duckworth, 2008), 23-4. Ibn Khurdadhbah used the terms "as-Sind and as-Hind." Sind is the "S" in the modern word Pakistan.

civilization. The capture, gifting, or exchange of women, whether princesses or slave women, appears to be intrinsic to the organization of human society.

To better understand archaic long-distance exchange, it is essential to use archaeology to understand when Europe and Asia started to exchange goods. Artifacts show that long-distance exchange between Asia and Europe started before the Bronze Age. Teeth recovered from later Bronze Age burials in India and Europe show that not only goods, but young people, traveled long-distances. Slaves remained indiscernible in this archaeological record. An early symbol from proto-writing used on tokens, probably used for recording trade items, perhaps hints at the presence of women among the trade goods.<sup>21</sup> Later, with the development of alphabetic cuneiform, the long-distance exchange of women and groups of slaves becomes definitive. More recent scholars using new scientific techniques to identify origins of clays, teeth, etc. have refined our knowledge of long-distance travel of products and people in Antiquity.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Archaic Exchange**

To lay a foundation for the understanding of exchange and the roles of slaves as “moveable property” in the Bronze Age and Classical Antiquity, three modern historical assumptions must be challenged. The first is that exchange was predominantly market based. A second assumption in academia is that premodern contact and influence between cultures was rare and relatively unimportant. The third assumption is that archaic conditions impeded the ability of people to travel long-distances, meaning that only products, not humans, traversed the long-distances involved in east-west trade

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<sup>21</sup> Denise Schmandt-Besserat, “The Earliest Precursor of Writing,” *Scientific American* 238, no. 6 (June 1978): 50-54, 59.

before the Mongol unification of Asia. In contrast, this chapter will argue that long-distance diplomatic, economic, and cultural contact, including the exchange of women, especially slave women, reaches back into the Bronze Age. The lure of profit from transporting luxury goods, including slaves, over long-distances made traders risk the hardships required for European-Asian trade.

### The form of ancient trade

The first assumption is that ancient trade resembled a basic form of our own market economy, based on a supply-demand-price and profit mechanism. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, pioneer economic historian and anthropologist, Karl Polanyi, rejected the existence of markets in the Bronze Age and Classical Antiquity. For him, trade was synonymous with exchange which he defined as “the mutual appropriative movement of goods between hands.”<sup>22</sup> He theorizes that only the modern era, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, produced competitive markets complete with money, fluctuating prices, and private property. He claims that through most of human history, the market method of providing for material means was absent or played a subordinate role.<sup>23</sup> Rather “reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange” through different nonmarket institutional frameworks provided needs and wants, especially in Bronze Age Mesopotamia.<sup>24</sup> For him, basic exchange resulted from kinship, political, and religious obligations.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Polanyi, “The Economy as Instituted Process,” in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires*, ed. Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg, and Harry W. Pearson (New York: Free Press, 1957), 266.

<sup>23</sup> Harry W. Pearson, ed. “Editor’s Introduction,” in Karl Polanyi, *The Livelihood of Man* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), xxix.

<sup>24</sup> Pearson, “Intro,” xxxiii.

<sup>25</sup> George Dalton, ed., *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), xii.

In later Iron Age Greek society post 1200 BCE, Polanyi discusses a form of market used for the sale of war captives into slavery. He recognized from Greek histories that the disposal of booty gained in war (cattle, slaves, and treasure) was “perhaps the greatest single means of enrichment throughout the classical period”(480-323 BCE).<sup>26</sup> Captives were subordinate, powerless, and easily movable property, thus a profitable item for trade.<sup>27</sup> Herodotus and Thucydides record numerous incidents in which captivity led to slavery.<sup>28</sup> The administrative problems for an army created by the safekeeping, health, transport, and distribution of slaves, added to the tactical problem of enemy survivors shackled near vulnerable camps in enemy territory, required money and traders as a solution to dispose of booty. Transporting the slaves and other booty to an emporium in a nearby city seems to have been preferred by Athenians for the higher prices available compared to selling the spoils on the site of the battlefield. In contrast, Spartans auctioned captives either to soldiers or to merchants who followed the army.<sup>29</sup> Polanyi defined “emporium” from the classic Greece usage, a sector of a coastal town devoted to foreign commerce. This area, separated from the rest of the city, contained a harbor, quay, warehouses, mariners’ hostel, administrative buildings, and its own food markets.<sup>30</sup> The taking of war captives to sell or barter at a port shows, already, the long-distance aspect of slave trade in this era. Putting distance between a slave and their native land reduced opportunities for slaves to escape and melt back into the society or to be protected by

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<sup>26</sup> Polanyi, *Livelihood*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine M. Cameron, *Invisible Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>28</sup> For Athenian examples, see Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* VI. 62.

<sup>29</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis* VI. 6. For Spartan examples, see Xenophon, *Agésilas* I. 18ff, or *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* XII. 11, in Polanyi, *Livelihood*, 127-29.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Polanyi, “Ports of Trade in Early Societies,” *Journal of Economic History* 23, no. 1 (March 1963): 34. The separation mentioned by Polanyi may well have been imposed by the locals to protect themselves from looting, their children from rape or kidnapping, and their gardens from pilfering by sailors.



fellow countrymen.

Marcel Mauss provides a scenario of exchange different from Polanyi and Greek money-based economies but not different from Polanyi's gift-giving during the Bronze Age. He posits that gift giving was the basis of early economies.<sup>31</sup> Gift giving promoted status. The giver gained power and controlled others by winning followers, and obligating those who accepted a gift. Elites used gifts to maintain political relationships and ranking. Indirectly, the gifting process provided the same services of a market; it put goods into circulation by distributing them from producer to consumer.<sup>32</sup> Indian historians confirm that ancient Vedic literature (ca. 1500–500 BCE) shows that the Brahmins and princes exchanged gifts as part of their economic system.<sup>33</sup> The most prized gifts given by Indian elite were objects of wealth: cattle and horses, followed by wagons, chariots, maidens, camels, treasure chests, garments, gold, and cauldrons of metal.<sup>34</sup> Women were thus a part of this early gift economy.

Claude Lévi-Strauss adds another layer of understanding to Mauss's theory of gift exchange. He observed that the object of primordial, social exchange between groups was women.<sup>35</sup> While a material gift, in contrast to a gift of a human, can only earn temporary reciprocity, the gift of a female, at least for marriage or concubinage, creates

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<sup>31</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift; Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Studies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954) A new translation is *The Gift; The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Studies*, trans. W. D. Halls, forward by Mary Douglas (New York: Norton, 1990). The French original is *Essai sur le Don* published by Presses Universitaires de France in 1950.

<sup>32</sup> Mauss, *The Gift* (1954) 45ff, 53ff, 71ff or (1990), 46ff, 54ff, 72ff.

<sup>33</sup> The Vedic Era is difficult to date because the epic literature is not pegged to historically datable events. It ended approximately 500 BCE with Buddhism and Jainism as reformation movements. Romila Thapar, "Dana and Daksina as Forms of Exchange," in *Cultural Pasts; Essays in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 522, Mauss, *The Gift*, 53-4.

<sup>34</sup> Thapar, "Dana," 524.

<sup>35</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham, trans. James Harle Bell, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 61-3. Originally published as *Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté* in 1949.

permanent kinship through her reproductive ability.<sup>36</sup> The woman is the conduit of the relationship. The men who give and receive the woman are linked through her and her offspring.<sup>37</sup> Lévi-Strauss thought that the underlying reason to exchange daughters or sisters was not creating kinship loyalties but to avoid incest. Pharaohs who married their sisters and refused to send their daughters out to other royals would be an exception that argues against Lévi-Strauss's incest avoidance theory in that instance. Egyptian texts to and from pharaohs provide examples of the political motivations behind the offering of a princess or a slave woman, only one of which was to create kinship with a stronger partner.<sup>38</sup> The difference in giving a slave woman compared to a female relative is that you forego creating kinship in contrast to the supposed family ties that develop when providing a daughter or sister for a wife. The gift of a woman certainly proved multifaceted.

In contrast to the theoreticians of a gift economy, other economists, like Morris Silver, challenge Mauss and Polanyi on the issue of the existence or importance of markets in ancient economies. Silver, a critic of the theory of a nonmarket exchange system, uses a number of Near Eastern texts excavated from Anatolia, Assyria, Ugarit, Egypt, and elsewhere as evidence that Bronze Age trade had sophisticated elements which would be essential for a market economy separate from the distribution or gifts of emperors, kings, priests, or tribal chief and rulers. Ancient texts mention grain loans, promissory notes, price fluctuations, supply and demand issues, partnerships dividing profits, speculative trading voyages backed by guarantees, accounting houses that

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<sup>36</sup>Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structure*, 481.

<sup>37</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women; Notes on the 'political economy' of sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 174.

<sup>38</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structure*, 29-41. See the discussion on the Amarna texts further on in this chapter for examples.

functioned like banks, purchases on credit to buy land, animals or slaves purchased over time with receipts for partial payment, and third party co-signers guaranteeing loans.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Polanyi posits that foreign trade was conducted at “ports of trade” where kings determined prices, supply, and demand.<sup>40</sup> Silver responds that kings participated in international trade but they did not set the prices. Their “ports of trade” seem to have acted more like custom houses that facilitated the collection of the required “gifts” from traders resembling modern toll booths or custom houses.<sup>41</sup>

The weakness of Polanyi’s argument is that he did not recognize nuances over the two millennia of the Bronze Age. Even in the Neolithic Age, the long-distance dispersion of resources like obsidian necessary for cutting and lapis lazuli used for decoration shows that the movement of goods preceded the existence of stratified and centralized society and did not depend on any formally organized trading system.<sup>42</sup> Ancient Mesopotamia experienced lengthy and significant periods of market activity as well as times of state administered distribution of food and fiber.<sup>43</sup> Polanyi’s theories of administered trade, the absence of markets, and merchants’ lack of concern for profit and loss are not supported by the cuneiform business records. Rulers did send out expeditions or agents to bring back luxury goods and raw materials or exchanged these items with their allies and vassals but at other times, or concurrently, merchants and the large estates traded for profit.<sup>44</sup> Markets and trade existed, waxing and waning from

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<sup>39</sup> Morris Silver, “Karl Polanyi and Markets in the Ancient Near East: The Challenge of the Evidence,” *The Journal of Economic History* 43, no. 4 (Dec 1983): 797ff.

<sup>40</sup> Polanyi, *Livelihood*, 78-9, 94-5.

<sup>41</sup> Silver, “Challenge,” 797. For an example of these tolls, specifically on slaves in the Roman period, see Chapter 4.

<sup>42</sup> Norman Yoffee, *Explaining Trade in Ancient Western Asia: Monographs on the Ancient Near East* 2, (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981), fascicle 2, 14-15.

<sup>43</sup> Silver, “Challenge,” 795.

<sup>44</sup> Silver, “Challenge,” 797, Yoffee, *Ancient Western Asia*, 5, 11, 23.

direct competition with distribution of staples or luxuries from the state or even its competitors.<sup>45</sup> Slaves were part of both economic systems. They were given as gifts and tribute (especially young women) or sold as moveable property.<sup>46</sup>

Polanyi's and Mauss's arguments for an economy based on gift exchange and/or distributions find validation, at least on the level of sophisticated royal exchange, in an archive of Bronze Age diplomatic letters, the Amarna letters. An Egyptian *fallaha* (peasant woman) discovered this cache of 382 clay cuneiform tablets in 1887 while digging for the fertile soil found in the mud bricks of ancient ruins of Akhetaten on the east bank of the Nile about 190 miles south of Cairo.<sup>47</sup> The majority of these tablets proved to be letters between Egypt's northern allies in Greater Syria and Mesopotamia and Pharaoh Akhenaten, the religious rebel, of the late 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty dating between the 1350's and 1332 BCE. Written in Babylonian Akkadian, the lingua franca of the fourteenth century, they contrast with the twenty-fourth century Elba archives and Mari eighteenth century tablets by showing the evolution of Mesopotamian statecraft.<sup>48</sup> The giving of royal princesses and/or slave women appears in the texts as standard procedure in diplomatic relationships, at least from the vassals or less powerful allies to the emperor.

In order to understand these ancient diplomatic references to sending women as "gifts," it is important to understand the Bronze Age concept of the responsibilities of a ruler's subjects. The ancient Near East was hierarchical, based on the household, which

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<sup>45</sup> A mixed economy still exists in the modern Middle East where states subsidize bread and gas. Rival political or religious institutions compete for influence by providing housing, schools, religious scholars, houses of worship, and/or medical care.

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 5 for a discussion on slaves as tribute in Asia during the Han and Roman eras.

<sup>47</sup> Alternative spelling – Akhetaten.

<sup>48</sup> Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, "Introduction: The Amarna System," in *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations*, ed. Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 11-12.

consisted of family members, clients, and slaves, all ruled by the patriarch of the family. Rulers were regarded as the head of a larger scale household consisting of the population of a state. Their property and their selves, by law, belonged to the ruler. He was their master and, at least in the area of obedience and loyalty, they were his slaves. For vassal kings, they and their people were considered “slaves” owned by the emperor. An ally or other “Great King” was called “brother” by the emperor but in the case of the Egyptian pharaoh, the allies were made to understand that they were subservient brothers of lower rank. The emperors only answered to the gods or saw themselves as gods.<sup>49</sup> This paradigm explains the ironic fact that through most of history, some of the most elite women of the realm, the young royal daughters or sisters of the ruler, perhaps possessed no more “freedom” to choose their destiny than poor villagers or slaves sent to foreign destinations as a result of negotiations and political expediency of the men over them. Usually, only when women became queen mothers did they gain power to influence the actions of the rulers.

The “gift” of women, both princesses and commoners, came with a great deal of expectation on the part of the giver and the recipient. Quotes from the Bronze Age Amarna letters express nuances and tension because the money or goods received in return for the woman/women were deemed too late or too little.<sup>50</sup> I have summarized the passages in this archive that speak to the long-distance movement of women, slave or royal, and the economic expectations of their exchange in Table 2.1.

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<sup>49</sup>Raymond Westbrook, “International Law in the Amarna Age,” in Cohen and Westbrook, *Amarna Diplomacy*, 28.

<sup>50</sup> All quotes are from *The Amarna Letters*, ed. and trans. William L. Moran (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Table 2.1

## The Exchange of Women in the Amarna Letters

Reference	Writer of the Tablet	Description of Females Exchanged	Reason for Writing
EA 74,75, 81, 85	Rib-Hadda of Gubla/Byblos	daughters (and sons) sold for food	This vassal repeatedly writes that he has lost all of his villages to the "Apiru and is in dire straits, 'Our sons and daughters are gone since they have been sold in the land of Yarimuta for provisions to keep us alive.' He asks the "Great King" Pharaoh to send military help and provisions.
EA 369	from Pharaoh to vassal king of Gazru/Gezer	Pharaoh orders the vassal to send "40 extremely beautiful female cup bearers in whom there is no defect"	The Pharaoh has sent a military overseer with "Silver, gold, linen garments, <i>ma-al-ba-si</i> , carnelian, all sorts of precious stones, an ebony chair, all alike, fine things. Total 160 <i>diban</i> . [in return] Total: 40 female cupbearers, 40 (shekels of) silver being the price of a female cupbearer..."
EA 99	from Pharaoh to unknown vassal	Pharaoh requests daughter of the vassal and first class slaves to accompany the daughter.	"Prepare your daughter for the king, your lord, and prepare the contributions: 20 first-class slaves, silver, chariots... as contributions to accompany your daughter."

Table 2.1 Continued

Reference	Writer of the Tablet	Description of Females Exchanged	Reason for Writing
EA 1	from Pharaoh to his ally, the Babylonian king, Kadeshman-Enlil I	Messengers sent by the Babylonian king had gone to Egypt and seen the wives of the Pharaoh "standing gathered" in his presence but the Babylonian men did not recognize the king's sister.	The Pharaoh is responding to a complaint written by the Babylonian king that no one knows if his sister sent by his father to Egypt is alive or dead as the messengers did not recognize their countrywoman.
EA 2	a second letter from Kadeshman Enlil I to Pharaoh	The Babylonian king accepts the Pharaoh's marriage proposal for his daughter.	"With regard to my brother's writing me saying.... why should you not marry (her)...My daughters are available."
EA 3	a third letter from Kadeshman Enlil I to Pharaoh	The Babylonian king writes to the Pharaoh that the promised daughter is now old enough for marriage. Later he mentions 25 women sent to Pharaoh as a gift.	"With regard to the girl, my daughter, about whom you wrote to me in view of marriage, she has become a woman; she is nubile. Just send a delegation to fetch her." The gift of 30 minas of gold that "looked like silver" is not adequate, in view of his father's gifts or his corresponding gift of 25 men and 25 women.

Table 2.1 Continued

Reference	Writer of the Tablet	Descriptions of Females Exchanged	Reason for Writing
EA 4	Since the greeting section of this tablet is missing, it is assumed based on the content to be a further letter from Kadashman Enlis I to Pharaoh.	Pharaoh refuses to reciprocate with his daughter. The Babylonian king suggests a commoner be substituted for the Egyptian princess. He threatens not to send his daughter if the gold does not arrive on time.	"Beautiful women must be available. Send me a beautiful woman as if she were your daughter. Who is going to say, 'She is no daughter of the king!' ...as to the gold I wrote you about, send me much....in haste this summer..." If the gold does not arrive then he will not give his "daughter in marriage".
EA 11	From king Burra-Buriyas, Babylon, (This king was the successor of the frustrated Kadashman Enlis I.)	Complaint that his princess needed proper escort to Pharaoh's palace, the lack of which dishonors him before the neighboring rulers.	"They poured oil on the head of my daughter.... Are they going to take her to you in [only] 5 chariots? Should I in these circumstances allow her to be brought to you from my house, my neighboring kings would say, 'They have transported the daughter of a Great King to Egypt in 5 chariots.' When my father allowed his daughter to be brought to your father, 3,000 soldiers with him.... and... [Send] much gold."

The references to women in these letters reveal Bronze Age customs and values regarding the long-distance exchange of women between royals. Although these women were technically gifts, tribute, evidence of submission, guarantors of good behavior on the part of the minor ruler, or even diplomatic representatives of their father's dynasty, the letters show that the minor vassal rulers and especially, the allied kings expected to have a "brideprice": gifts or precious metals sent in return for the "gift" of their



daughters. They complain vehemently if they feel that Pharaoh's reciprocal gifts are inadequate, of poor quality, or tardy in arriving.

One critical element in the royal relationships between rulers indicates a further commercial aspect of their relationships, the identity of the diplomats. The messengers who would have carried the cuneiform letters between rulers were sometimes called *tamkarum* meaning merchant.<sup>51</sup> Merchants were so enmeshed in the business of conducting royal diplomatic affairs that one Ugaritic cuneiform tablet lists them among those who received rations and salaries from the palace.<sup>52</sup> The variety of gifts locally produced and sent as gifts worked also as an advertisement for native products. Using merchants as diplomatic envoys to carry messages, using gifts of local products perhaps as samples of potential trade goods, and complaining about reciprocity by the royals in exchange for their daughters in the Amarna texts, are all clues pointing to expectations of profit from the exchange, underlying the sometimes less than free gift of a princess. All reflect an undercurrent of expected reciprocity. The common theme of complaint in the letters from Pharaoh's vassals and allies over the payback for sending their daughters and/or slaves could reflect the need that caused the coming transition in the economy from predominantly gifting between royals to something more approximating trade between merchants.

The debates whether the mechanics of the Bronze Age economy were predominantly royal gifting/distribution or merchant based or a combination of both are

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<sup>51</sup> Y. Lynn Homes, "The Messengers of the Amarna Letters," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 3 (July-September 1975): 379, Anson F. Rainey, "Foreign Business Agents in Ugarit," *Israel Exploration Journal* 13, no. 4 (1963): 315.

<sup>52</sup> Rainey, "Agents in Ugarit," 314.

on-going. The Amarna diplomatic letters show that women, free and enslaved, predominated the list of items gifted by elites. The assumption that women and other luxury goods were exchanged predominantly through markets or traders proves inadequate for most of ancient history, but especially in the Bronze Age.

### Long-distance contact in the premodern age

The second problematic assumption lies in the common attitude held by scholars outside of world history that early cross-cultural transmission is insignificant or did not exist before the modern era. Samuel P. Huntington declares, “During most of human existence, contacts between civilizations were intermittent or non-existent.”<sup>53</sup> Non-specialist historians are also guilty of this near-sighted view. An example of this common misconception appears in Jack Weatherford’s biography of Genghis Khan. “At the time of his (Genghis Khan’s) birth in 1162.... No one in China had heard of Europe, and no one in Europe had heard of China, and, so far as is known, no person had made the journey from one to the other.”<sup>54</sup> Han Chinese sources describing Rome, Seleucid and Roman Slaves, and Roman merchants at their court refute Weatherford, but his view is still common in the West.<sup>55</sup>

World historians, Victor H. Mair and Jerry H. Bentley, have analyzed the reasons for this myopic view point of the past. Mair claims that despite empirical evidence that demonstrates cross-cultural adoption and adaption in the distant past, that there still

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<sup>53</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 21.

<sup>54</sup> Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown Publishers/Random House, 2004), xix.

<sup>55</sup> See Chapter 6.

remains “a strong intellectual bias in favor of the independent invention of cultures....”<sup>56</sup> China is usually assumed to be the supreme example of a major civilization that grew up in utter isolation from the rest of the civilized world despite scholarship that traces continental cross-fertilization as early as the Bronze Age. Chariots and bronze metallurgy’s late appearance in China, a number of Indo-European loan words in Chinese, as well as a borrowed goddess, the popular Chinese deity known as “Queen Mother of the West” (Xiwangmu), all testify to early contacts across Eurasia.<sup>57</sup>

Mair blames two factors for the disregard of premodern long-distance contacts. The first reason is political, a result of the surge of nationalism since the end of World War II. As empires disappeared and liberated colonial people established their own identities, “It became impolitic to assert that any significant element of culture needed to be borrowed.”<sup>58</sup> Bentley further explores this idea by his reminder that modern historiography was used to legitimize and lionize national states of Western Europe, showing them as the principal agents of history and historical development. Later as historians beyond Europe adapted European-style history to their own purposes, they kept the model of nation as boundary for historical analysis.<sup>59</sup>

Academia also hardened into regional boundaries, even anachronistically projecting these modern boundaries back into the Neolithic era.<sup>60</sup> The “Grand narrative”

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<sup>56</sup> Victor H. Mair, “Introduction; Kinesis versus Stasis, Interaction versus Independent Invention,” in *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Mair, “Kinesis,” 8. Mair’s edited book has a chapter on each of these cultural contributions to China from the west.

<sup>58</sup> Mair, “Kinesis,” 3.

<sup>59</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, “Beyond Modernocentrism; Toward Fresh Visions of the Global Past,” in Mair, *Contact*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Mair, “Kinesis,” 3, 5.

came under siege in postmodern and postcolonial scholarship.<sup>61</sup> The resulting specialization in one region during one era resulted in scholars who had no information or interest in cultures other than their own focus, a result which Mair describes as “blinded scholarship.”

In trying to understand why scholars discount or ignore the significance of cross-cultural interactions before the modern era, Bentley also points to the overemphasis on the distinctiveness of modern people. He labels these prejudices in historical scholarship as “moderncentrism” which he defines as “an enchantment with the modern world that has blinded scholars and the general public alike to continuities between premodern and modern times.....a belief that the modern era is so radically different as to be wholly incomparable to earlier ages.”<sup>62</sup>

Bentley calls for alternative visions of the larger global past that make a place for significant cross-cultural interaction in premodern times.<sup>63</sup> Mair says that some historical patterns come into clear view only when historians take very long-term perspectives on the past. He urges more study of premodern connections with the goal that reigning intellectual prejudices will fall in the face of hard data gathered from the patient amassing of data proving long-term, long-distance relations.<sup>64</sup> This dissertation will rise to the challenge presented by Mair and Bentley, as a metanarrative showing the long-distance gifting or trade in women, especially European women, from the Bronze Age up to the Carolingian, Abbasid, and Tang convergence in the ninth century.

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<sup>61</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, “World History and Grand Narrative,” in *Writing World History 1800-2000*, ed. Benedikt Stuchey and Eckhardt Fuchs (London: German Historical Institute/Oxford University Press, 2003), 47.

<sup>62</sup> Bentley, “Modernocentrism,” 17.

<sup>63</sup> Bentley, “Modernocentrism,” 23.

<sup>64</sup> Mair, “Kinesis,” 7.

### The supposed difficulty of long-distance travel in the distant past

The third assumption distorting our view of slave trade in antiquity and the medieval period is the belief that the difficulty of premodern travel prevented people from traveling the long-distance between Europe and East Asia especially before the Mongol unification of these two continents. Scholars perhaps underestimate the ancient and early medieval contact between Europe and Asia on the basis of the isolation of the tenth through twelfth centuries. During that period, the political dissolution of the Abbasid and Tang dynasties resulted in the Silk Road divided into dangerous segments where too many local rulers and bandits exacted tolls, causing traders to abandon the overland route. The Muslims, Jews, Indians, and for a time, the Chinese utilized the Indian Ocean maritime routes, no one group gaining hegemony. The Europeans, however, were bottlenecked in the Levant and Egypt fighting the Crusades at the critical land junctures to the Red Sea leading to the Indian Ocean. For European powers like the Italian city states, the coming of the Mongol Empire represented new opportunities to reach Asian markets.

The Mongols ruled from the Pacific to the Mediterranean. World historians such as S.A.M. Adshead describe their empire as the “big bang of world history.”<sup>65</sup> Their unification of Asia reopened the Silk Road which increased knowledge of geography and history of the other between China and Europe through trade and travel. Chinese imports of the “black death” and gunpowder weapons changed Europe dramatically.<sup>66</sup> Mongol passports and protection of traders and diplomats created an era when Europeans traders could get involved in Eurasian trade, travel, and cultural exchange. Marco Polo, (d.

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<sup>65</sup> Samuel Adrian M. Adshead, *Tang China; the Rise of the East in World History* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), xiii.

<sup>66</sup> Adshead, *Tang*, xiii.

1324) is one of those traders took advantage of the *Pax Mongolica* unification of China and western Eurasia. This Venetian trader traveled 15,000 miles over the course of 24 years, living in China many years, and coming back with abundant jewels sewed into his padded coat and even more stories. Marco Polo was not the first European even of his era to reach China, but his *Book of the Marvels of the World*, also known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, (ca. 1300) retelling his travels gave his trip long-lived prominence and influence compared to those who went before or after him. Two centuries later, Columbus carried an annotated copy of the book about Polo's travels to serve as a travel guide in China.

While it appears that Europeans had lost their knowledge of Asia before Marco Polo, the diminished trade between east and west was limited to the centuries following the decline of the Abbasid and Tang Empires. European contact with India and East Asia, including the mutual exchange of a few slaves, had peaked during the Roman-Han Empires and continued sporadically via middle men through Late Antiquity and peaked again in the early medieval era.<sup>67</sup> Ibn Khurdadhbih witnessed Asian-European trade via Jewish and Norse networks during the *Pax Islamica* of the ninth century. Marco Polo was not the first European to reach China. Before him, European slaves had sailed, rode, or walked the long routes from the Mediterranean to India or China. Unlike Marco Polo, these slaves did not return to Europe to tell their tales of life in Asia. Their lives and stories are forgotten in Europe but remembered in Indian and Chinese texts.

Some part of the assumption that before the *Pax Mongolica*, travel between

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<sup>67</sup> The Roman archaeological finds in India and South East Asia affirm Greek, Sanskrit, and Chinese sources which describe Roman traders, products, and slaves. See Chapters 4 and 5. Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communication and Commerce, A.D. 300-900* (New York; Cambridge University Press, 2001) argues that the European elite experienced an abundance of Muslim gold and silver coins and Asian silks, drugs, and spices in the ninth century, paid for with the export of European slaves.

Europe to China was too difficult could stem from the modern experience of travel becoming increasingly easier, faster, and more frequent. Technological changes resulting from the invention of the steam engine has made travel on land and sea increasingly faster in the last two centuries, resulting in an expansion of trade, travel, and cross-cultural influence. Looking backwards through the centuries, moderns assume that if travel and trade is becoming increasingly faster for them in every generation, then it would be increasingly rarer, slower, more difficult, and piecemeal the further back into the past that you traveled. The flip side of this faulty assumption is physical change in human mobility. After three generations of motored vehicles, most modern people cannot imagine having the physical stamina to walk to the local supermarket, never mind the next city, country, or continent. It is, therefore, easy to assume that global contacts were limited to material goods that passed slowly from trader to trader becoming fewer in number and volume further back in history.

Slaves' and traders' speed in walking or riding a beast of burden to the market, however, did not get progressively slower going back in time. Major breakthroughs in transportation enabling long-distance exchange occurred before or during the Bronze Age. One Bronze Age technological innovation which increased the volume and speed of European-Asian trade was the domestication of Bactrian camels. Camel bones found at man-made mounds from the fourth millennium B.C. in Turkmenistan date the use of the camel for food and transportation to that time.<sup>68</sup> Scholars point to another innovation, carts with axles, assumed to have been introduced more or less simultaneously in Mesopotamia (Sumer), the northern Caucasus, and Central Europe (Romania/Ukraine),

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<sup>68</sup> E. E. Kuzmina, *Prehistory of the Silk Road*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 66ff.

ca. 3500-3000 BCE from origins in Central Asia.<sup>69</sup>

Geographic reasons could have made travel across the forbidding deserts of Central Asia easier in the Bronze Age and Antiquity than later in the medieval period. The receding glaciers from the last Ice Age watered the oasis caravan towns that supported the trade route across the eastern section of the Silk Road, the Taklamakan Desert,<sup>70</sup> now 85% shifting sand dunes. Initially, oasis cities could conserve their water supplies through elaborate irrigation channels but when political chaos caused neglect to the water system, added to the increasing desertification, whole cities were lost. The oasis town of Niya was swallowed up by the Taklamakan when the Han dynasty lost control in the third century CE. Rivers silted up. Ancient Khotan lies buried under alluvium.<sup>71</sup> Local legends tell of 360 cities that were buried in a single day by sand with no time to remove their valuables. Today locals still dig in these ruins for gold and trade goods, even bales of tea, so well protected by the sand and the desiccated environment that the tea can be drunk.<sup>72</sup>

The desert buried the communities and agriculture essential for feeding and watering caravan animals. As this Ice Age source of water receded and then disappeared in the fourth century CE in the Tarim Basin, so did the cities, caravan stops, and routes that the rivers supported.<sup>73</sup> The scarcity of food and water made the trip so much more dangerous that later travelers could use skeletons of travelers and beasts of burden half

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<sup>69</sup> See David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> Some geographers regard the Taklamakan Desert as part of the Gobi Desert located to the east.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 31.

<sup>72</sup> Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> Zhang Hong et al., "A Preliminary Study of Oasis Evolution in the Tarim Basin, Xinjiang, China" *Journal of Arid Environments* 55, no. 3 (November 2003): 545-53. Charles Holcombe, *Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C.-A.D. 907* (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 87.



buried in the sand as road markers. Travel, at least across the Tarim Basin section of the Silk Route to the end of the Roman and Han era, was less difficult before increasing desertification.<sup>74</sup> In Antiquity, it would have been easier and safer to transport slaves along with other east-west trade products listed in the sources, when many more oasis cities existed in the Tarim Basin to provide the essential food and water. Overland trade depended on the feet of humans and animals until the Industrial Revolution. It took no more time to walk overland across Asia in the Bronze Age and Antiquity than it did during the medieval period, or even Napoleon's Early Modern Empire—and perhaps with even less hardship.

A second innovation in the Bronze Age was maritime travel. A number of archaeological finds from Harappa sites around the region could indicate that open sea sailing and long-distance maritime exchange in the Indian Ocean was accomplished by the second millennium BCE. Once Asian sailors harnessed the monsoon winds, their ships could leave shore hopping and cross the Indian Ocean quickly during the windy seasons. The monsoon changed directions seasonally, allowing return travel.<sup>75</sup> The swift and safe passage from most coasts of the Indian Ocean and back again within the course of less than a year was utilized by Indian and Arab sailors long before Greeks and Romans learned the secret of the winds.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Further west, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent continued to thrive from irrigation provided by the streams flowing from the Hindukush, Karakorum, and Pamir mountains, making that part of the route less daunting.

<sup>75</sup> Shereen Ratnagar, *Trading Encounters; From the Euphrates to the Indus in the Bronze Age* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 230-31. The earliest depiction of a sail dates to Egypt in the late fourth millennium and appears in India in the late third millennium. Atholl Anderson, James H. Barrett and Katherine V. Boyle, *The Global Origins and Development of Seafaring* (Cambridge, UK: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2010), 7.

<sup>76</sup> Anders Bjorkelo, Jorgen Christian Meyer, and Eivind Heldaas Seland, "Definite Places, Translocal Exchange" in *The Indian Ocean in the Ancient Period; Definite Places, Translocal Exchange*, ed. Eivind Heldaas Seland (Oxford, England: British Archaeological Reports, 2007), 6.

The three faulty assumptions: that archaic exchange required or resembled a market economy, that the ancients lacked cross-cultural contacts and that long-distances impeded the ancient's ability to travel, all lack foundational support. The vital travel technology available in the Bronze Age—caravan stops with agriculture, domesticated animals, carts, and boats—implies that long-distance travel was already valued. The sea winds blew and people and their beasts of burden walked at the same speed throughout time. Bronze Age skeletons found in cemeteries located hundreds of miles from their origins show that people and their cultural knowledge, not just goods, traveled widely.<sup>77</sup>

Finding what it is possible to know about long-distance slave trade in the Bronze Age requires interpreting artifacts and early texts. A number of Neolithic and Bronze Age artifacts outline long-distance trade contacts. The wide distribution of these artifacts such as Indian Ocean shells, Chinese jade ax heads, beads, and clay bulls show that long-distance trade connected Europe and Asia in the Bronze Age. With long-distance trade proven, the existence of organic trade goods, such as slaves who left no remains in the archaeological record, cannot be discounted.

Early texts give information on the exchange of women and slaves impossible to see in archaeology. Bronze Age pictographs, cuneiform texts, and oral traditions that became the Biblical text mention the gifting of women or use of slaves. Pre-cuneiform pictographs incised onto clay pieces, probably used for accounting in early Mesopotamia, possibly reference female slaves as a trade product. The Amarna tablets speak of Bronze Age princesses and slave women “gifted” to the Pharaoh by allies in the Levant and

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<sup>77</sup> For a European example, see K. G. Sjogren, T. D. Price, K. Kristiansen, “Diet and Mobility in the Corded Ware of Central Europe,” *PLoS ONE* 11 5: e0155083 (2016). <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155083> Accessed June 1, 2015. British, Danish, and Indian examples further in the chapter.

Mesopotamia. Cuneiform tablets inform us of captives brought to Mesopotamia from the frontiers. The textual history of the slave trade contributes to the history of writing, money, exchange, diplomacy, and war among Bronze Age peoples.

### **Bronze Age Developments Affecting Trade**

In archaeological digs, the stage of human development known as the Bronze Age is identified by the development of the technical ability to smelt copper with tin or arsenic to create a harder metal. It was the social and intellectual gains of this era, however, that enhanced long-distance trade. Simultaneously, or by borrowing, societies around the Mediterranean, and in Mesopotamia, Central Asia, India, and China developed intensified agriculture, which provided for cities, centralized government, social stratification, and slavery. Human society grew increasingly sophisticated. All the requirements for long-distance trade became part of the human repertoire during this period: the domestication of beasts of burden, the invention of the wheel leading to carts, crafts, mathematics, law codes, astronomy for navigation, and in some places, pictographic proto-writing developing into phonetic alphabets.<sup>78</sup>

The development of writing systems interweaves with archaic trade.<sup>79</sup> Archaeologists found clay tokens with a variety of shapes and markings throughout Mesopotamia and West Asia at sites dating from the early Neolithic, ninth millennium BCE to the second millennium.<sup>80</sup> These clay “bullae” appear to be the prototypes for later

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<sup>78</sup> The Egyptians developed hieroglyphics around 3300-3200 BCE., roughly at the same time the Mesopotamian Sumerians pressed wedged reeds into wet clay tablets for cuneiform. The Chinese wrote on oracle bones from around 1250 BCE in the late Shang dynasty, but their Neolithic proto-writing appearing much earlier and the Harappans stamped seals with a still undeciphered Indus script from around 3000 BCE.

<sup>79</sup> Yoffee, *Ancient Western Asia*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Schmandt-Besserat, “Precursor of Writing,” *Scientific American* 238 (1978): 50-4, 59.

Sumerian ideographs, numerals, and pictographs.<sup>81</sup> These small tokens are assumed to be counters used for bills of lading rather than toys or amulets due to being sometimes found sealed into a clay “envelope.” Although most of the inscriptions are still un-deciphered, a few of the incised marks match later Sumerian pictographs, especially for the symbols used for commodities. I believe that a possible indication of early trade in concubines is that one of these counters has the same sign as the later pictograph for “heart or womb.”<sup>82</sup> Interpreting that symbol as slave concubine is one interpretation that allows for that counter to fit in with other trade products. A slave woman seems to be the only commodity that would provide either a heart and/or a womb

The Elba tablets (dated 2350 BCE) preserved in the burnt palace archives of the ancient city of Ebla, Syria show two languages, Sumerian cuneiform and a phonetic use of the Sumerian script used to portray the Eblaite language. In 1993-4, archaeologists identified the evolution from pictographs to the Semitic alphabet in graffiti found near roads in the desert of southern Egypt, which they dated between 1900 and 1800 BCE.<sup>83</sup> Semitic speakers residing or trading in Egypt appear to have used Egyptian hieroglyphics as inspiration to develop languages known as proto-Sinaitic<sup>84</sup> and Proto-Canaanite.<sup>85</sup> The implications of phonetic alphabets for trading were enormous. A professional scribe needed years to learn all the pictographic symbols where a common man could learn the approximately 30 symbols for each sound of the alphabet in hours. Herodotus (d. ca 425

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<sup>81</sup> Schmandt-Besserat, “Precursor,” 59.

<sup>82</sup> For an entire chart of these symbols, see Schmandt-Besserat, “Precursor,” 56.

<sup>83</sup> John Noble Wilford, “Finds in Egypt Date Alphabet In Earlier Era: Discovery of Egyptian Inscriptions Indicates an Earlier Date for Origin of the Alphabet ‘This is fresh meat for the alphabet people,’” *New York Times* (New York, N.Y) 14 Nov 1999. 1. Please note that the writer of this NYT article believes that this is the first phonetic alphabet in existence. The Ebla Tablets, however, predate the dating of this discovery by over half a millennium to 2350 BCE.

<sup>84</sup> This is named from the alphabet’s initial discovery in the Sinai Peninsula dated to about 1600 BCE.

<sup>85</sup> Found in Syria-Palestine.

BCE) credits the Phoenician traders with introducing their Semitic alphabet into Greece which then became our own.

The Late Bronze Age also saw the development of the concept that metal measured by weight was equal to a measured amount of grain, cloth, oxen, etc. to replace barter. By 3000 BCE, Mesopotamians were using a standardized weight of metal, silver, bronze, or copper called a “shekel” for an equivalent value in barley. The Biblical texts referencing Abraham carry the memory of metal used as currency for buying slaves or exchanging women.<sup>86</sup>

The first coins were struck in Lydia (Anatolia) in gold around 700 BCE with the ruler’s stamp guaranteeing the weight and later the purity of the metal. The idea spread eastwards to India and China, places which did not have abundant gold and silver mines. With value to weight higher than bronze, copper, or iron, the reduced bulk meant that these coins could be carried in pouches.<sup>87</sup> Traders ran with the idea. Within 200 years, metal coinage shows up from the Aegean Sea to India and China. China was an exception to the use of silver and gold introduced in Lydia. By 1100 B.C., the Chinese made bronze pieces in the shape of tools with a hole to string many “tools” together to carry on a string. The bulkiness of the bronze and the value of silk made rolls of silk a secondary currency from earliest times.

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<sup>86</sup>In Genesis 17:13, God commands Abraham to circumcise all his slaves “bought with your ‘keseph’” meaning “silver” but translated into English as “money”. Slightly later, in Genesis 20:16, when Abimelech returns Sarai to Abraham, the ruler pays “a thousand shekels of silver” to cover the offense against his guest’s wife. Even if the text of Genesis was transcribed in a much later era, the difference in means of payment between eras remains and may show the adoption of the use of metal as currency in this earlier period or the uneven adoption of metal as an exchange item. Another example appears in Genesis 12, when the Pharaoh of Egypt also took Sarai into his palace a few years earlier. Her husband, Abram, is paid off for the royal abduction of his wife, not with silver, but with sheep, oxen, asses, camels, and male and female slaves. These early mentions of silver in the exchange for slaves and the gifting of women bolsters the underlying argument of this chapter that the slave trade and especially the exchange of women constituted a significant economic factor in the Bronze Age.

<sup>87</sup> Nayef G. Goussous, *Origin and Development of Money* (Amman, Jordan: Arab Bank, 1998), 75-7.

## Evidence of Bronze Age Exchange between Near East and India

Harappan seals map the extent of trade or even colonization by the Indus peoples. Archaeologists identify Harappan seals, most often with the bull and manger motif, from the Indus to Mesopotamia, Nubia, Anatolia, Afghanistan, along the Arabian Peninsula and in Syria by the end of the third millennium BCE<sup>88</sup> The Indus civilization traded not only prestigious and exotic products but also plants, wood, textiles, and animals.<sup>89</sup>

Material remains found in the nineteenth century digs on the Tigris-Euphrates and the Indus Rivers tell us that contact between Harappan and Mesopotamia existed but was neither intense nor continuous. Relations between these two civilizations seem to have been initiated shortly after 2400 BCE along a maritime route utilizing the Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea and connecting rivers. Material goods like pottery had already been moving between earlier peoples by sea.<sup>90</sup> Scholars estimate that circumnavigation of the Indian Ocean on its northern rim had been accomplished by 5000 BCE.<sup>91</sup> Evidence of travel by sea became explicit in the emerging Bronze Age cities. Boats with planks and sails show up in Harappan clay models, bronzes, and on seals. Mesopotamian cuneiform inscriptions mention “great boats” and “master mariners” from Meluhha (the Indian sub-continent) as early as the Early Dynasty III. King Sargon I, the founder of the Akkadian dynasty, brags that he had ships in his port bringing cargo from Dilmun/Bahrain, Magan/Oman, and Meluhha/India-Pakistan. On a cuneiform tablet, he lists imports of woods, copper, gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, exotic Indian birds, and animals but does not

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<sup>88</sup> Maurizio Tosi, “Harappan Civilization beyond the Indian Subcontinent” in Ranabir Chakravarti, ed. *Trade in Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135. This same article appeared seven years earlier in *Harappan Civilization; A Recent Perspective*, ed. Gregory L. Possehl, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies and Oxford & IBH Publication, 1993), 365-78.

<sup>89</sup> Tosi, “Harappan Civilization,” 136.

<sup>90</sup> Ratnagar, *Trading Encounters*, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Tosi, “Harappan Civilization,” 147.

mention slaves unless “birds whose call will fill the palace”<sup>92</sup> is a euphemism like the modern “chick” or “hen” for women, perhaps singers.<sup>93</sup>

Very early texts from Mesopotamia reference slavery as an already full-blown institution. The extensive cuneiform texts of the Ur III period in the twenty-first century BCE show that while the state and temples owned slaves, the majority of slaves were owned by elite and middle class families.<sup>94</sup> Ur III economic studies show that female weavers of semifree status worked in the massive weaving factories that provided the wool garments needed for export to trade for minerals from Anatolia. In just Ur alone, “12,000 female weavers of semi-free status worked,” producing wool garments with similar numbers of women weaving in other cities.<sup>95</sup> Cuneiform tablets from Larsa (1790-80) and Sippar (1785-1600) show slaves included in commodity lists with imports of slaves from the Zagros region.<sup>96</sup> Of 50,000 persons mentioned in the corpus of Neo-Babylonian texts, 2% are women but three fourths of them are slaves.<sup>97</sup> Slave women also show up in royal harems as servants. For example, a princess from Mitanni arrived to her new husband’s home with 317 female slaves to accompany her.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>92</sup> Ratnagar, *Trading Encounters*, 98-101.

<sup>93</sup> Rita Wright, *The Ancient Indus; Urbanism, Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 216. Dr. Tosi (see above) lists slaves as one of the trade goods shipped from India but they are not mentioned in Dr. Ratnagar’s *Trading Encounters*, a detailed study of Indus exports to Mesopotamia.

<sup>94</sup> Hans Neumann and Westfälische Wilhelms, “Slavery in Private Households Toward the End of the Third Millennium B.C.” in *Slaves and Households in the Near East*, ed. Laura Culbertson (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2011), 21. Thank you to Dr. Bradley Parker for this source. The cuneiform term “slave of the god” could mark devotion or high ranking rather than actual slavery.

<sup>95</sup> Mogens Trolle Larsen, “Commercial Networks in the Ancient Near East,” in *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World*, ed. Michael Rowlands, Mogens Larsen, and Kristian Kristiansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 51.

<sup>96</sup> Larsen, “Commercial Networks,” 48.

<sup>97</sup> Martha T. Roth, “Marriage and Matrimonial Prestations in First Millennium BCE Babylonia,” in *Women’s Earliest Records from Ancient Egypt and Western Asia: Proceedings of the Conference on Women in the ancient Near East, Brown University, Providence Rhode Island November 5 - 7, 1987*, ed. Barbara S. Lesko (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 246.

<sup>98</sup> Ilse Seibert, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Marianne Herzfeld (New York: Abner Schram, 1974,) 50.

Mesopotamian sources show the abundant use of slaves and mention enslaving prisoners of war, including those from India,<sup>99</sup> but evidence of peaceful long-distance slave trade between India and Mesopotamia proves elusive.

### **Bronze Age Relations between India and the Mediterranean/Europe**

Archaeological finds serve as guides to reconstruct the time, place, and content of Bronze Age contact between Europe and the Mediterranean basin with Asia, especially the civilizations of the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus, and the Chinese Yangtze, Yellow, and Pearl River Valleys. The Indus River civilization centered at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro was the largest continuous cultural system in the Bronze Age, from the Neolithic period, (end of the eighth millennium BCE) to the beginning of the second millennium BCE.<sup>100</sup> The material culture of the Harappan civilization extends continuously from the Arabian Sea to the Himalayas in a region larger than modern Pakistan. Evidence of Indian Ocean or Harappan long-distance trade shows up in artifacts thousands of miles from India, including Europe.

The Harappan cultural longevity and reach only partially explains the presence and significance of artifacts found in the Mediterranean basin since some of these items predate the Harappans. Sea shells from the Indian Ocean found across Europe, two matching faience beads found in Crete and Pakistan, and clay figures of humped Brahmani bulls and carts found in southern Palestine/Israel serve as evidence that at least small items from India or the Indian Ocean traveled as far as the Mediterranean as early as the fifth millennium BCE.

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<sup>99</sup> Wright, *The Ancient Indus*, 220.

<sup>100</sup> Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.



The earliest finds revealing long-distance contact between Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean are sea shells that only thrived in the Red Sea or the Indian Ocean.<sup>101</sup> For instance, archaeologist Max Mallowan, funded by his famous wife, Agatha Christie, found a single decorative bead made from a sea shell of the genus/variety known as *Cypraea Vitellus*. This well-traveled bead was at least a thousand miles from its Indian Ocean origins in a Northeastern Syrian site called Chagar Bazar located on the Dara River “satisfactorily stratified” to the fifth millennium.<sup>102</sup>

Indian Ocean sea shells, decorated, pierced, or unmodified continue to be found, most abundantly in the Levant, but also further north across the Mediterranean and Europe in Pre-Iron-Age layers in Turkey, Russia, Crete, Germany, Monaco, Portugal, and England.<sup>103</sup> The even more numerous shells found in later layers could also have had an earlier arrival date having been lost and reused by new generations. Most of the shells had manmade holes showing use as ornaments. The most common of the imported Indian Ocean shells are cowries. Due to the cowrie shell’s resemblance to female genitalia, women have often used them as a prophylactic against the evil eye to ward off infertility since sterility has often been blamed on the envy emanating from the “eye.” The fear of the “eye” and the use of similar protection devices against it form a folk religious system that reaches from India to shores of the Mediterranean and into

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<sup>101</sup>After the opening of the Suez Canal, these shell species migrated and became part of the Mediterranean eco-system.

<sup>102</sup> M. E. L. Mallowan, “The Mechanics of Ancient Trade in Western Asia; Reflections on the Location of Magan and Meluhha,” *Iran* 3 (1965): 1, Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Culture Trade in World History* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1984), 64.

<sup>103</sup> David. S. Reese, “The Trade of Indo-Pacific Shells into the Mediterranean Basin,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 2 (July 1991): Turkey-Neolithic, p. 169, Southern Russia between the Black and Caspian Seas-LB/early IA cemetery, p. 169, Crete-Late Minoan IB 1500-1450, p. 170, Germany-prehistoric, p. 176, Monaco-Paleolithic/Mesolithic, p. 177, Portugal-Chalcolithic, p. 179, England-prehistoric, p. 180. The prehistoric designations come from archaeological digs that were done in 1888 (England) and 1911 (Germany). p. 188.

Europe.<sup>104</sup> The eye motifs found in Sumerian incantations, Egyptian boats, Etruscan pottery, and on Indian Mauryan amulets provide just four examples that show wide spread dispersion of either the belief or of the people who held the belief. This shared ideology could be evidence of cultural influence spread by travelers or by slaves or women traded between Indian and European peoples before the dawn of writing.

Besides sea shells, beads provide further evidence of Bronze Age trade between the Indus and the Mediterranean. Beads are easy to transport and even easier to lose. Identically etched carnelian beads found in both Akkadian and Indus River sites are used by specialists to prove early trade contact between the Akkadians and Harappans, but two faience beads show that even European products reached India.

Faience beads are “manufactured” from finely ground quartz grains thermally cemented with other materials such as alkali or lime and glazed with colored glass, usually blue. The manufacturing process and varied combinations of ingredients and impurities makes possible an identification of beads from the same source by a spectrographic analysis of the beads. Two blue glazed faience beads with identical motifs utilizing a character of the Minoan script were found 3500 miles apart, buried deep in archaeological digs in Crete and Pakistan.<sup>105</sup> Comparing the qualitative and quantitative traces of elements and impurities<sup>106</sup> proved that the bead with the Minoan motif found in Harappa had the same origin as the matching one in Crete, found in Minoan layers at Knossos from the temple repositories of the Middle Minoan III horizon

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<sup>104</sup> Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye; The Origins and Practices of Superstition* (New York: Collier Books, 1958), ix.

<sup>105</sup> Ernest John Henry Mackay, *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro: Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-daro Carried out by the Government of India between the Years, 1927 and 1931* (New Delhi: Indological Book Corporation, 1976), 1:511.

<sup>106</sup> The matching elements were Na, Ca, Cu, Mg, Fe, Al, Si, and V. J. F. S. Stone, “A Second Fixed Point in the Chronology of the Harappa Culture,” *Antiquity; A Quarterly Review of Archaeology* 92, ed. O. G. S. Crawford, (December 1949): chart on p. 205.

circa 1600 BCE.<sup>107</sup> Archaeologist J. F. S. Stone believes that the beads originated in the Mediterranean, probably due to their Minoan motif. Most likely, the bead passed through dozens of hands between the sites. Less likely, an Indian trader came to the Mediterranean or the Minoan trader traveled to the Indus River. Not known is if the traders carried other goods, including slaves, whose remains vanished. All that can be known is that the two Bronze Age civilizations interacted to some extent.

One enigmatic group of artifacts, 18 pottery bulls and some carts, dated between 930 and 970 BCE (see Figure 2.1) could be interpreted as evidence of Indian-Mediterranean trade on the cusp of the Iron Age. Sir Flinders Petrie, famous early twentieth century Egyptologist and originator of the system of surveying archaeological digs and identifying strata by pottery finds, uncovered figures of humped oxen and Asian carts or chariots<sup>108</sup> from Tel Gemme (Biblical Gerar) located 8 miles south of Gaza in Southern Israel/Palestine. Although this species of humped bovines and the figurines of them originated in India, by this time, their representations were also plentiful in Mesopotamian art, meaning that these figurines could have come to Ancient Judah from either the Tigris/Euphrates or the Indus Rivers. This species of cattle was not, however, to be found west of Mesopotamia.

Sir Flinders Petrie surmised that these clay bullocks and carts were “toys” left behind by an assumed migration of Sheshenq (d. 970) interpreted as “man of Susa” and his Turkoman mercenaries who were “looking for an opening.”<sup>109</sup> In 952 B.C., this ruler appears in the sources as king of Tanis, a throne he gained by marrying the heiress of the

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<sup>107</sup> Stone, “Fixed Point,” 201-04.

<sup>108</sup> For a full discussion of carts in both Mesopotamia and Harappa and the differences between them, see Ratnagar, *Trading Encounters*, 238-42.

<sup>109</sup> Petrie, *Gerar*, 30.

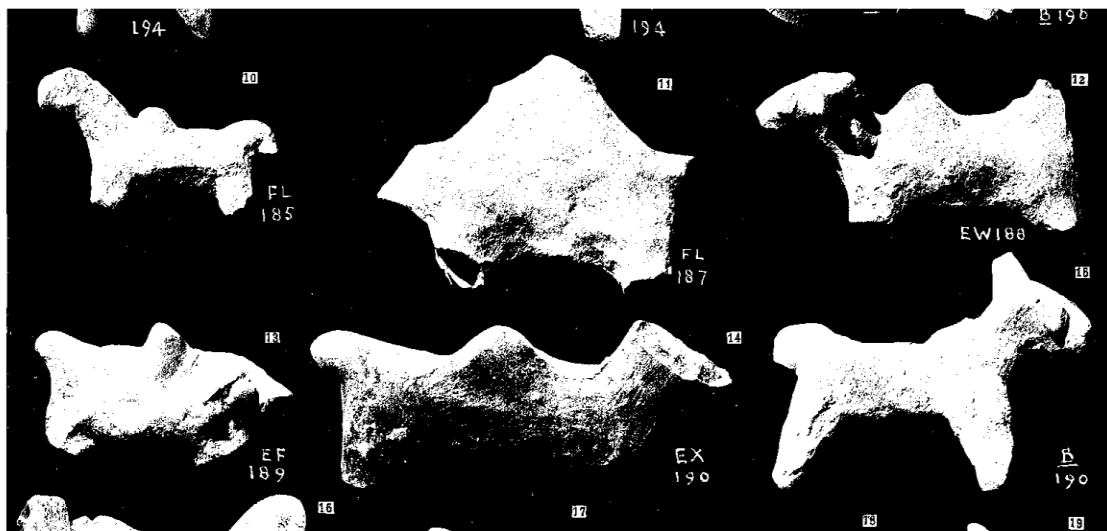


Figure 2.1

Humped Back Pottery Oxen.

From Tel Gemeh (Biblical Gerar), dated 930-970 BCE. W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Gerar*, (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1928), Plate XXXVII.

Tanite Kingdom<sup>110</sup> and later becoming the Pharaoh Sheshonk noted in the Old Testament chronicles.<sup>111</sup> According to Petrie's interpretation, the models serve as evidence of this warlord's one-time migration from Susa to Egypt because the figures disappear after 930 B.C.<sup>112</sup> Petrie (d. 1942) might have revised his interpretation of the find of the clay bullocks if he had lived long enough to incorporate into his work the previously mentioned discoveries of the sea shells, beads, and Harappan seals that showed the range

<sup>110</sup> Part of the Twenty-first Dynasty in Egypt, ruling from Tanis.

<sup>111</sup> According to the Biblical text, Sheshenq (Shishak, alternative spelling) provided the rebel, Jeroboam, refuge during the last years of Solomon's reign. He also invaded the kingdom of Judah to support his ally, Jeroboam, during the reign of his rival, King Rehoboam, heir of Solomon's kingdom, commonly dated between 926 and 917 BCE. *1 Kings* 14:25, *2 Chronicles* 12:1-12.

<sup>112</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Ancient Egypt Part IV* (London: Macmillan, 1928), pt. iv, 101.

of early trade from India.

The Biblical mention of a tenth century B.C Judean-Phoenician maritime expedition is critical to the argument identifying the origin of the bullock figurines as Indian. Did this expedition happen and did it reach India? The royal chronicles state that Solomon provided a port that could access the Indian Ocean, “Ezion-geber, which is beside Eloth, on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom.”<sup>113</sup> His ships are recorded as sailing for three years and reaching “Ophir” which could be in Arabia, Africa, or India.<sup>114</sup> Evidence of an Indian location for Ophir abounds in Coptic, Greek, and Sanskrit sources. These sources include Ophir’s Indian identification by the Roman Jewish historian, Josephus using the Greek *Sofira*.<sup>115</sup> This matches the Greek and oldest version of the *Tanakh*/Old Testament, the Septuagint, which uses the word *Sophara* for Ophir.<sup>116</sup> A possible geographical origin for this ancient word lies in Sopara, in the Thana district, north of today’s Mumbai, a port which was a “royal seat and a great centre of commerce during the lifetime of Gautama Buddha.”<sup>117</sup> This west coast Indian port was still important several centuries later, important enough to warrant the Indian Mauryan emperor, Asoka, installing a rock edict here promulgating his laws.<sup>118</sup>

Despite the uncertainty of Ophir’s location, the etymological derivation of the product’s names that returned to Solomon from this destination were clearly of Indian

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<sup>113</sup> I Kings 9:26 KJB

<sup>114</sup> G. R. Tibbetts, “Pre-Islamic Arabia & South-East Asia,” *Journal Malayan Branch* 29, no. 3 (1956 Royal Asiatic Society): 185.

<sup>115</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston (Toronto: Musson Book Col. Ltd. 1911), 6: 49.

<sup>116</sup> Dipakranjan Das, *Economic History of the Deccan: From the First to the Sixth Century, AD* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 228, Brian Weinstein, “Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade between India and the Land of Israel,” *Indian Historical Review* 27 (Jan. 2000): 17-18.

<sup>117</sup> Das, *Deccan*, 228.

<sup>118</sup> Romilla Thapar, “Indo-Hellenistic Contacts During the Mauryan Period” in Romilla Thapar, *Cultural Pasts; Essays in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 455. Originally printed in S. K. Maity and U. Thadur, ed. *Indological Studies* (New Delhi: 1987).

origin, rendered into Greek and Hebrew<sup>119</sup>: gold,<sup>120</sup> almug trees, “there came no such almug trees, nor were seen unto this day,”<sup>121</sup> precious stones, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.<sup>122</sup> The ships returned with their goods after three years.<sup>123</sup>

The clay oxen and wagons found in Gerar might not be “toys” left behind by a Mesopotamian migration passing through, as proposed by Petrie, but rather, they could be figurines advertising potential trade items sent by Indian traders to Solomon and his Phoenician partner, Hiram, who provided the naval know-how and staff.<sup>124</sup> Besides the Sanskrit terms in the Biblical text, further clues for an Indian origin for the clay figurines found by Sir Petrie lie in the era of the stratum, the location of the tell deposition, and the portrayal of a species of humped bullocks that originated in India.

The first piece of extra-Biblical evidence<sup>125</sup> supporting Indian origins is that the stratum where the oxen and carts were found matches chronologically to the same Petrie era in which the royal chronicles in the Biblical text describe trade relations with Ophir. Petrie’s dating of the stratum (between 970-930 B.C.) coincides with the reign of Jerusalem’s monarch, Solomon (reigned ca 970-931 BCE), who built ships in cooperation with the Phoenician ruler, Hiram I, in an attempt to enter Red Sea trade.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>119</sup>Tibbetts, “Pre-Islamic,” 186.

<sup>120</sup> First trip, I Kings 9:28.

<sup>121</sup> Second trip, I Kings 10:11. Indian timber was found in the ruins of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar (d. 581 B.C.) in Babylon and in the Temple of the Moon of Nabodinus (d. 538 B.C.) at Ur, rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar. Moti Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), 45. For a discussion of wood exported from India see Ratnagar, *Trading Encounters*, 128-40.

<sup>122</sup> I Kings 10:22.

<sup>123</sup> I Kings 10:22.

<sup>124</sup> The Biblical text places Hiram’s kingdom on the Lebanese coast or ancient Phoenicia. Herodotus, *Histories* 4.42 claims that a Phoenician expedition circumnavigated Africa around 600 BCE and came back with the information that the sun was north of them, showing that they did sail south of the equator.

<sup>125</sup>The Biblical text supports the Sanskrit origins of the product names.

<sup>126</sup> Josephus in *Against Apion* 1.17.106-21 used Phoenician sources to affirm the relationship of Solomon and Hiram but does not mention any joint shipping enterprise. Archaeological remains in modern Aqaba,

According to the Biblical record, Hiram from Tyre, king of a Phoenician city, provided the naval experience, “shipmen that had knowledge of the sea.”<sup>127</sup> Mediterranean marine archaeologists attribute Phoenician mariners when they uncover Bronze Age shipwrecks that have residues of pepper, imported into the Mediterranean as early as the second millennium BCE.<sup>128</sup>

Second, the location of the findings at Gerar, near the modern and ancient port of Gaza, also fit this Mediterranean-Indian trade scenario. Gerar is located on the closest land route between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean port of Gaza. Gaza was the port of choice for centuries because of its proximity to land routes from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. An alternative explanation for these clay figures of oxen and carts is that they were part of the shipment meant for Hiram, the co-sponsor of the expedition. Perhaps, they were lost en route to the Mediterranean, where they were slated to be reloaded on a ship headed north to the Phoenicians in Tyre, modern Lebanon.

The third piece of evidence is the species of bovine. Indian humped oxen were not indigenous to the Levant.<sup>129</sup> Indian cattle had been exported west to Mesopotamia and adopted there by this time, possibly making Mesopotamia a competitor, but no longer

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Jordan (probably ancient Eloth) indicate an Iron Age site. Overlaying the Iron Age ruins is Aila, one of the Roman Red Sea ports used for Indian-Levantine shipping.

<sup>127</sup> I Kings 9:27.

<sup>128</sup> Grant Parker, “Ex Oriente Luxuria: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 1 (2002): 43.

<sup>129</sup> Bringing Indian livestock to the Eastern Mediterranean was not an impossible proposition. A millennium later, 8,000 Indian water buffalo and their Indian Jutt handlers were transported by the Abbasid caliph Mu’awiya (d. 680) from Sindh/Pakistan to Antioch, Syria. The goal was to stomp out an encroaching lion problem so that the military could safely send soldiers and the *bariid*/post through their depopulated frontiers. Al-Baladhuri, *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan*, 162, 166, 376. Water buffalo are formidable opponents for lions because instead of running from an attack, the entire herd will attack, knock down, and stomp to death any animal or human who threatens them. More sources in Paul Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together; Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 44, 378.

a destination for Indian livestock that it had been.<sup>130</sup> Perhaps the Indian traders coming from the post-Harappan economy based on cattle were looking for new markets.<sup>131</sup> These clay models may not be toys carried by mercenaries on the move but models meant to serve as advertisements of what could be imported if there was a market, a will, and a way. Until the clay that makes up these models undergoes ceramic petrography<sup>132</sup> to identify their provenance, all that can be known for sure is that these pottery oxen were a long way from their Indian origins.

The clay oxen find and the Biblical text only indicate possible trade relations with India. They do not speak to the issue of slave trade. There could be a number of cultural reasons for not including slaves in the lists of imports brought back from India to Jerusalem. Biblical writers were certainly not discrete in describing Solomon's harem, as "many strange women"<sup>133</sup> and "seven hundred wives, princesses and three hundred concubines,"<sup>134</sup> references which seem to indicate his imitation of the large multi-ethnic harems of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian rulers who preceded him, as shown above in the Amarna letters. Aspirations of empire required imitating an emperor's trappings: building a palace to fill with collections of exotic birds, animals, and women (both slave concubines and royal wives), along with acquiring luxury goods from increasingly distant lands. India could provide the ultimate in exotica for the Davidic dynasty attempting to project grandeur, including women for the royal harem.

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<sup>130</sup> Prakash Charan Prasad, *Foreign Trade and Commerce in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), 18.

<sup>131</sup> The Rig Vedic texts (1500-600 B.C.) have five times more references to cattle than to agriculture and represent a sharp break from the agrarian-urban Harappan economy. Ranabir Chakravarti, "Introduction," in Chakravarti, *Trade*, 43.

<sup>132</sup> Thanks to Dr. Paul Wright, Jerusalem University College, for help with this term and reference articles dealing with West Asian trade during the Bronze Age.

<sup>133</sup> I Kings 11:1.

<sup>134</sup> I Kings 11:3.



The shells, beads, and clay bulls all serve as witness that Bronze Age civilizations engaged in long-distance exchange and travel. The possibility of the early transport of slaves with these nonperishable items can only be guessed until later periods when cuneiform tablets speak of slave women present in royal gift exchanges and war spoils. One place where possible clues to long-distance slave trade in the Bronze Age might be found is in Indian archaeological finds.

### **Archaeology of Possible Slavery in India**

One enigmatic artifact uncovered from deep under the dirt in a dig in Sindh, Pakistan, on the banks of the Indus, portrays a young, nude, female dancer who may represent a slave and possibly long-distance slave trade in the Bronze Age (see Figure 2.2). Archaeologists found her at Mohenjo-Daro (c. 2500-1800 BCE), six feet four inches below the surface in a stratum identified as the Intermediate Period, making her approximately 4000-4500 years old.<sup>135</sup> Her profession of dance in later contexts implied slavery and sometimes, distant origins.<sup>136</sup>

Across Asia, female dancers, singers, musicians, and courtesans were traditionally highly trained women, often owned by others. Their artistic performance required sexual seduction and therefore, slavery freed them and their clients from the demands of

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<sup>135</sup> Sir John Marshall, ed., *Mohenjo-Daro And the Indus Civilization; Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-daro Carried out by the Government of India between the Years 1922 and 1927* (Delhi and Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1973), 1:345. This statue now has its own web page at the National Museum of New Delhi.

<http://nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/prodCollections.asp?pid=44&id=1&lk=dp1>

<sup>136</sup> One scholar argues that even though the statue resembles a dancer with her “akimbo pose” and “rhythmic movement of the limbs,” that she represents the Great Mother Goddess. Haran Chandra Neogi, “The Dancing Girl of Mohenjodara,” *Journal of Indian History* 48, no. 3 (December 1970): 564, 561. I disagree. Full breasts, hips, and buttocks were pronounced in Bronze Age fertility figurines and later Indian art. The thinness of the figure much more resembles the youth of prepubescent adolescents, the age when they started their training to entertain.



Figure 2.2

Dancer from Mohenjo-Daro (c. 2500-1800 BCE)  
From National Museum, New Delhi, India

modesty, prestige, and sexual morality required of free women. Slave status also meant that entertainers could be sold or “gifted” from place to place when audiences or royals tired of their performance. If these royal Asian cultural practices were established in the Bronze Age, the Mohenjo-Daro dancer is a slave girl, a girl who was possibly brought from a long distance.

This bronze casting of a nude girl on the left with her right hand resting on her hip, gazes at us with her eyes half closed, her leg thrust forward as if in a dance. Her hair style reveals short crimped curls with a long thick lock brought across the back of her head to the right shoulder. The ten-centimeter-high girl is clothed only in necklace and bangles on her left arm which stretch from wrist to shoulder, perhaps to provide tinkling percussion to her dance.<sup>137</sup> The little dancer’s haughty attitude and nudity could hint at distant origins that made entertainers and concubines more exotic and erotic.

As soon as Sanskrit supported a literary culture in India and the first epics appeared, we learn of cases of large numbers of slave entertainers being exchanged as gifts among the royal households. For example, as we shall see below in Chapter 3, Prakrit Jain texts (ca. 500 BCE) demonstrate how royal prestige accrued from owning many women of different nationalities including Greeks.<sup>138</sup>

The problem with trying to discover evidence of slaves brought from long-distances in the archaeological remnants of ancient cities is that slaves leave no definitive archaeological footprint. In households, they leave few hints of their presence other than the occasional shackles or the bones of a young person showing excessive muscle wear, although even this could have other causes. Scholars point to small rooms attached to

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<sup>137</sup> This Harappan affinity for arm bangles continued throughout Indian art history and into the streets of modern India.

<sup>138</sup> See Chapter 3.

some of the big houses at Mohenjo-Daro or the barrack-like living quarters near the granaries at Harappa as possible evidence that a low servile class was a permanent part of the society, but their status is unknown.<sup>139</sup> Female slaves for elite household use would make even less of an imprint in the archaeological record.

### **Long-distance Bronze Age Travel**

Long-distance slave trade requires long-distance travel even if the slaves are passed from trader to trader to the point of final sale. One way to determine whether long-distance travelers were present at an ancient site is to study the skeletons, although whether the individuals studied had free or slave origins is harder to discern. Early archaeologists from the first half of the twentieth century believed that measuring skull bones could determine racial types. According to their theory and measurements, the skulls found at Mohenjo-Daro showed that four racial types were present which they identified as: Proto-Australoid, Mediterranean, Mongolian Branch of Alpine stock, and Alpine race.<sup>140</sup> The heinous use of these early methods for racist policies discredited them.

Today, scientists determine origins by comparing strontium, oxygen, and carbon isotope ratios in human tooth enamel with that from the teeth of local, nonmigratory animals like pigs and sheep.<sup>141</sup> Isotope ratios in bone collagen change throughout the lifespan as the bone renews itself, revealing changes in digested protein and therefore

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<sup>139</sup> Uma Chakravarti, "Of Dasas and Karmakaras; Servile Labour in Ancient India," in *Chains of Servitude; Bondage and Slavery in India*, ed. Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (Madras: Sangam Books (India) Pvt. Ltd., 1985), 42.

<sup>140</sup> Marshall, *Mohenjo-Daro*, 599-645.

<sup>141</sup> Note that only geographical origins, not race is determined by teeth. DNA tests are needed to determine race. J. Mark Kenoyer, T. Douglas Price, and James H. Burton, "A New Approach to Tracking Connections between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia: Initial Results of Strontium Isotope Analyses from Harappa and Ur," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 40, no. 5 (May 2013): 2286-2297.

showing geographical mobility, or the absence thereof, during a lifetime.<sup>142</sup> Isotopes from strontium, oxygen, carbon, and lead found in tooth enamel, however, are laid down permanently in early childhood, showing geographical origin. If the ratio found in the enamel of a human tooth is different from that found in the teeth of small, domesticated animals, this difference is an indication of long-distance origins. New tests of the composition of the isotopes in the tooth enamel of the skulls from the Harappa cemetery show that those who did not have local isotopes had originated from a number of distant places, exactly where still unknown.<sup>143</sup>

Whether the “foreign” skeletons belonged to slaves, soldiers, migrants, or traders cannot be determined. One clue, however, suggests that these outsiders were not foreign female slaves; it was male skeletons which contained foreign isotopes revealing distant origins.<sup>144</sup> These men were usually buried next to a female skeleton of local origin. If the women had been foreign slaves or relocated war captives, it would have been the female skeletons which registered the nonlocal isotopes. Rather, the teeth tell that men born in a different region had married or purchased local women for their mates. None of the foreign skeletons analyzed have yet turned up with Mediterranean isotope signatures.<sup>145</sup>

While the small selection of skeletons examined in the Harappan cemetery does not yet prove the movement of people from the Mediterranean to India, a Danish burial gives evidence that females, not just males, traveled long-distances in the Bronze Age.

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<sup>142</sup> Kenoyer, “New Approach,” 2292.

<sup>143</sup> Kenoyer, “New Approach,” 2287.

<sup>144</sup> Kenoyer, “New Approach,” 2295.

<sup>145</sup> Thank you to Dr. J. Mark Kenoyer, University of Wisconsin, for this, as yet, unpublished new finding. Correspondence, November 10, 2015. Finding a Mediterranean skeleton or in, this case, tooth, would be equivalent with studying 40 bodies out of a New York cemetery to determine if Portuguese settlers had lived and died in New York. Just digging in a Protestant cemetery, rather than a Catholic or Jewish cemetery, could skew the results even more than the random sampling. Much less is known about social or ethnic identity of the Harappan cemetery that was studied.

The Egtved girl, a 16-18-year-old blond teenager excavated in 1921 near the village of Egtved, has long been a local star in the National Museum of Denmark. She and a small, cremated child were entombed within a series of monumental elite burial barrows dated to 1500-1100 BCE. Her hair, tooth enamel, nails, parts of her brain, skin, and wool clothes were preserved in the acidity of an oak coffin. It turns out that neither the girl nor her wool ensemble were Danish at all, but heralded from the Black Forest Region of Germany. An isotope analysis of the enamel from her left molar tooth and the animal fibers in her clothing revealed her foreign origins. Her hair and nails told more of her itinerary. An elevated strontium isotope signature in her hair and nails revealed that in the last 23 months before her death, she had traveled to Denmark, out again, and back, at times suffering from lack of protein.<sup>146</sup> Her careful burial and disc-shaped bronze belt symbolizing the sun speak to her elite status, but why she left her birthplace and moved quite rapidly over hundreds of miles in the last months of her life can only be conjectured.

The Egtved girl is not unique. A 3550-year-old skeleton of a teenage boy with an amber necklace from the Baltic Sea region and teeth showing Mediterranean coastal origins was buried by a Bronze Age burial mound near Stonehenge. Dated even older, a skeleton known as the “Amesbury Archer” underwent tooth analysis showing that the man traveled from the foothills of the German Alps around 4,400 years ago. Both of these travelers would have had to utilize some form of boats to cross the English Channel.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> K. M. Frei, et al., “Tracing the Dynamic Life Story of a Bronze Age Female,” *Scientific Reports* 5, (May, 2015): 10431. doi: 10.1038/srep10431.

<sup>147</sup> Paul Rincon, “Stonehenge Boy ‘was from the Med,’” *BBC NEWS* (September 28, 2010), <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-11421593> K Kate Ravilious, “Bejeweled Stonehenge Boy Came from the Mediterranean?” *National Geographic News* (October 13, 2010) Accessed December 3, 2016.

Bronze Age cemeteries in Germany establish routine long-distance travel by archaic women. Excavation of Corded Ware Culture cemeteries (2800-2200 BCE) suggest that women were more mobile over several generations, perhaps showing female exogamy. Analysis of the teeth in these larger cemeteries showed that many of the women (between 28-42% in the regions studied) had a more vegetable-based diet during childhood than the local men and children. The scientists believe that they came from a more intensely agriculturally-based society in Central Europe rather than the nomadic pastoral peoples of Western Europe.<sup>148</sup> What the teeth do not and cannot tell is whether the women moved because they were kidnapped, gifted, traded, enslaved, or moved of their own volition as distant tribe members following the migration west from of the Central Asian plains.

It appears that Bronze Age young people, especially females, traipsed around Europe like students with backpacks and Eurail passes. More archaeological findings and isotope study needs done to know if any reached India. These preliminary findings support the hypothesis that Bronze Age humans, not just trade goods, traveled long-distances. The specific nature of Harappan slavery and any possible long-distance Bronze Age slave trade, however, remains inconclusive until the Harappan language is decoded,<sup>149</sup> more finds are made, or more precise archaeological methods are developed.

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<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/10/101013-stonehenge-burials-boy-science-mediterranean/>  
 Accessed December 3, 2016.

<sup>148</sup>Corded Ware peoples provide much of the genetic material for contemporary Europeans. Sjogren, *Diet and Mobility*.

<sup>149</sup> The Indus civilization had a written language shown on seals, but it remains mute to scholars until its Behistun Inscription or Rosetta Stone is found to unlock the meaning of Harappa pictographs.

## Bronze Age Trade between China and Europe

China was not left out of long-distance trade during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age despite its distance and scholar's ideas of its pristine development. Neolithic settlements along the Yellow and Yantze River valleys coalesced into what was later called the Xia Dynasty c. 2100-1600 BCE concurrent with Mohenjo-Daro and the Minoans. The Shang Dynasty, (1600-1046 BCE) which developed Chinese writing, (1600-1046 BCE) existed concurrently in the same era as the last of the Minoans and Troy.

Trade products traveled between China and the Mediterranean. Thirteen ax heads made of jade (nephrite), one of them white jade, were found by Schliemann in his trench which uncovered Troy.<sup>150</sup> During the Neolithic period, this jade originated in the Yangtze River Delta and in Inner Mongolia. Later, during dynastic China, white jade deposits from Khotan in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang were mined. These jade pieces match other jade implements that have been found across Europe, showing that very early trade products on the Silk Road penetrated Europe as far as Brittany.<sup>151</sup> Glass beads produced only in the Mediterranean were found in east-central China dated to the early Zhou dynasty, Spring and Autumn eras (722-479 BCE).<sup>152</sup> Thus, one can see that trade went both ways.

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<sup>150</sup> Schliemann found the white axhead two meters down from the surface in what he called the "Homeric locality," several meters above the burnt level assumed to be Troy. Dating levels, however, prove to be problematic because of Schliemann's haphazard digging, lack of formal training, and the absence of the later practice of documenting and dating levels. Heinrich Schliemann, *Ilios: The City and Country of the Trojans: The Results of Researches and Discoveries on the Site of Troy...* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881), 240.

<sup>151</sup> Schliemann, *Ilios*, 241.

<sup>152</sup> Gao Zhixi, *Chu wenhua de nan jian* (Wohan: Hubei Jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995) 316-7, 389 in Holcombe, *Genesis*, 86.



## Conclusion

These examples of Bronze Age exchange: shells, beads, clay bovines, and perhaps jade ax heads, show trade relations that could have also carried slaves between India, China, and Europe. Teeth show that people traveled long-distances as well as products. With the advent of writing, the movement of slaves and exchange of women, free and slave, is documented. The Amarna diplomatic letter archive is just one example that shows how relationships and communications between rulers, whether allies or vassals, required an exchange of gifts. Women served as an essential “object of exchange” whether as a royal daughter whose womb could bring peace by joining dynasties by producing a heir, a slave disguised as a bride, the slave attendants accompanying the bride to provide her with a household and staff, or numbers of slave women who might serve as “cupbearers.”<sup>153</sup> These examples of Bronze Age trade, travel, and either gifting or trade of women reveal the long history of slavery and the slave trade. Orlando Patterson, author of the seminal *Slavery and Social Death*, proposes that the exchange of slaves was one of the earliest forms of trade.<sup>154</sup>

This gifting of women or slaves continued in the Iron Age era, when market trade in the full sense, complete with coinage, emerged. Chapters 3 and 4 show how the emperors in Antiquity: Cyrus and Darius of Persia, the Macedonian Alexander and his successors, the Hellene Greek Seleucid and the Ptolemaic rulers, Chandragupta and Asoka of Mauryan India, the Han Chinese emperors, and the Caesars of Rome, all continued to practice reciprocity in the giving or receiving of daughters and/or slaves as

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<sup>153</sup>Mario Liverani, “‘Irrational’ Elements in the Amarna Trade,” in *Three Amarna Essays; Sources and Monographs on the Ancient Near East*, trans. Matthew L. Jaffee (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1979): 1: 31, fascicle 5.

<sup>154</sup>Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 113.

part of diplomacy between rival royals.<sup>155</sup> Greek sources show western traders who are instructed to give “gifts” of beautiful concubines and slave musicians to the Indian rulers in Gujarat, gifts required to gain access to local markets.<sup>156</sup> Chinese and Indian sources describe the many ethnicities of slaves, including Greek and Roman, present in their societies. The human balance of trade appears to have favored Asia in Antiquity and the early medieval period with the sources showing Greek or Greco-Roman slave women in Indian harems<sup>157</sup> and Chinese courts serving in a multitude of roles.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Probably all royals in this period used slave women in this manner but these are the rulers used as examples in this paper. The exchange of daughters between royals and aristocrats continued, and still exists today.

<sup>156</sup> PME 49, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, ed. and trans. Lionel Casson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 81.

<sup>157</sup> For a history of the harem across cultures see Mary Ann Fay, *Unveiling the Harem: Elite Women and the Paradox of Seclusion in Eighteenth-century Cairo* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

<sup>158</sup> See Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 3

### GREEK WOMEN TAKEN TO INDIA: FROM THE ACHAEMENID PERSIANS TO THE PTOLEMIES

Now little Goyame was attended by five nurses—to wit, a wet-nurse, a bath-nurse, a tiring nurse, a lap-nurse, and a play-nurse—also by many hunchback women, Kirata women, dwarf women, misshapen women,<sup>159</sup> women of Babbara, Pausaya (or Vausaya), **Greek**, Palhavaya (Pahlavi?) ..... women of divers lands.... Surrounded by this goodly throng of slave-girls and bands of maids ... *Antagada-Dasao*<sup>160</sup>

The ninth century Europeans described by Ibn Khurdadhbih were not the first occidentals to reach China and India; the females among them were not the first European girls to be taken east as slaves across Asia or the Indian Ocean. After noting the shells, beads, and clay bulls that traveled in the Bronze Age and early Iron Age between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, it is no surprise that the empires of classical antiquity—Persians, Hellenistic Greeks, and Romans—aspired to acquire the exotic luxury goods available in the East. All initiated conquest and/or trade with India. This chapter argues that European slaves, especially young women, were a component of the western exports in this exchange. From very early dates, Pali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit sources describe slave women, including Greek slave women in Indian harems.

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<sup>159</sup> Footnote by the translator “In Hindu literature dwarfs and monsters are regular attendants of harems.” 28.

<sup>160</sup> *The Antagada-Dasao and Anuttarovavaiya-Dasao* trans. L.D. Barnett (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1907), 28-9. The *Antagada-dasio* in the language, Magadhi Prakrit is part of the Jain Canon of the Svetambara branch. Combined with the *Bhagavati-sutra*, Book x, the text relates the life of the prince, Goyame.

## Slavery in Ancient India

The Greek culture emerged in the Archaic Era in the Mediterranean (800-480 BCE), during the same time that Indian urban civilization was reasserting itself. The Harappan civilization had ceased around 1750 BCE,<sup>161</sup> leaving only a few cultural survivals, such as a leaf motif and figure identified as either a proto Shiva or a yogi.<sup>162</sup>

Urban life in India reappeared further southeast and away from the coast. Scholars disagree on the date of the appearance of this urbanism in the Ganges Valley. John Keay argues for an early rise of cities by 900 BCE.<sup>163</sup> Romila Thapar argues for a “thicker urbanism” evident by the luxury ware known as the Northern Black Polish Ware from the mid-millennium.<sup>164</sup> The dating is problematic until archaeologists can undertake horizontal excavations of urban sites instead of just vertical sections which do not mark the genesis and growth of towns.<sup>165</sup> With the coming of iron axes and plows, the jungle surrounding the Ganges River system was turned into plowed agricultural land, supporting this second phase of urbanization with the requisite rulers competing for prestige, palaces, diplomats, and traders, all infrastructure underlying long-distance slave gifts or trade.<sup>166</sup> The languages of this era have been deciphered, providing texts which document female slaves from Europe in India.

Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and Greek inscriptions and histories reveal the nature of slavery in India. A few of these texts mention Greek women serving as personal

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<sup>161</sup>Romila Thapar, *Early India from the Origins to AD 1300* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 80. Warburton gives an earlier date of 1900 BCE. D. A. Warburton, “What happened in the Near East ca 2000 BC?” in *The Indian Ocean in the Ancient Period; Definite Places, Translocal Exchange*, ed. Eivind Heldaas Seland (Oxford, England: Archaeopress/British Archaeological Reports, 2007), 10.

<sup>162</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 85-86.

<sup>163</sup> John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Grove, 2000), 47-55.

<sup>164</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 140, Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), 36.

<sup>165</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 139.

<sup>166</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 139.

attendants, tribute, gifts, booty, or trade products. Before India's feminine slavery and slave trade can be examined, one obstacle stands in the way—the first Western historian of India—Megasthenes. A number of Western scholars over the last two millennia argue that slavery did not exist in India, arguments based on the cheap, permanent labor provided by either the caste system or by debt bondage.

This Western argument against slavery in India can be traced back to the writings of Megasthenes. His book, *Indica*, survived only through fragments quoted in later Greek and Latin work, the earliest being that by Diodorus Siculus, followed by Strabo, Arrian, and Pliny. Seleucus sent Megasthenes, as his ambassador, to serve 302-291 BCE in the court of Sandracottus, as Chandragupta was known in Greek. Megasthenes's observations, as filtered through Diodorus Siculus two centuries later, posited that slavery did not exist in India, arguing that “now among the Indians there exist some extraordinary customs...it has been ordained by law that no one among them is a slave; and all being free, they respect the equality of all...”<sup>167</sup>

If Megasthenes via Diodorus is correct that slavery did not exist in India, then my argument falls apart that slave trade from this early date existed from Europe to India. Diodorus has been accused of error, plagiarism, and contradictions.<sup>168</sup> Robert Drews, however, defends Diodorus's “source confusion” with an argument that Diodorus manipulated his sources to create a clear, concise, chronological account of history as a morality tale, able to preserve the nobility of distinguished men, to proclaim the

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<sup>167</sup>Diodorus, II. 39, *The Antiquities of Asia; A Translation with Notes of Book II of the Library of History of Diodorus Siculus* trans. Edwin Murphy (New Brunswick, USA: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 52.

<sup>168</sup> Diodorus, *Antiquities*, ix, Romilla Thapar, “The Mauryas Revisited,” in Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 510-11.

wickedness of the base, and to provide or produce evidence for heavenly justice.<sup>169</sup>

While Diodorus's similarities to Arrian's *Indica* and Strabo's *Geography* show that all three authors relied on Megasthenes, his peers both disagree with him. Onesicritus in Strabo claimed that slavery existed, even though only in parts of India.<sup>170</sup> Arrian, again relying on Megasthenes for his source, implied that only foreigners were enslaved,<sup>171</sup> an observation which, nonetheless, validates the point that slaves were brought long-distances to India.

Modern scholars analyze Megasthenes's view and suggest other explanations for his inability to see slavery. Perhaps he could only see or explain the Indian society to his Greek audience in Greek terms. Slavery was not yet common in Greece. Perhaps the Indian slaves and *shudra* "untouchable" castes were so integrated into society that they were not individually identifiable to an outsider. Perhaps he saw them only as docile serfs, similar to the Helots or Helot type serfs who lived in Sparta, Thessaly, Argos, etc.<sup>172</sup> Another interpretation of his observations is that he may not have been describing the Indian situation at all but making a moral criticism of the Greek system, a conjecture made from his remark, "It is foolish to make laws the same for everybody and yet keep the status unequal," inferring that an equality in laws and the existence of a subservient class is incompatible.<sup>173</sup>

Even while denying the existence of slavery, Megasthenes contradicted himself

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<sup>169</sup> Robert Drews, "Diodorus and His Sources," *The American Journal of Philology* 83, no. 4 (October 1962): 383-85.

<sup>170</sup> *Strabo* XV.1.54.

<sup>171</sup> Diodorus, *Antiquities* 53.120. Arrian also relates that Indians do not leave their land which could be one explanation why references to Greek and Roman slaves in India outnumber those of Indian slaves in the Mediterranean.

<sup>172</sup> A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East; The Tragedy of Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 84.

<sup>173</sup> Romila Thapar, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 90.

when he served as a witness to female palace slaves or “servants” during his tenure in the Indian court: “The king was waited upon by women purchased from their parents.”<sup>174</sup>

The institution of slavery in India might have been considered an unimportant topic to the ancient Greco-Roman geographers and historians describing India, but ancient and modern Indian scholars show that slaves, especially slave women, are apparent in Indian texts from the earliest dates.

The literary works of ancient India: Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali, prove to be the main detractors to Megasthenes’s claim that India did not have slaves. The term *dasa* (*dasi*-fem.) in all three languages translates as “slave” but also encompasses a wide range of definitions of bondage over time. The term originally labeled an indigenous people defeated by the Aryans with their divine commander, Indra, referencing the conquered *dasan* ethnicity, darker “black” color, and outlier status but evolved over time to mean all of those in bondage because of war, debt, gambling and sale, self-enslavement during famine, apostasy from asceticism, criminal sentences, or birth to a *dasi* slave mother.<sup>175</sup> The etymological evolution of “*dasa*” is mirrored by the word “slave” in English and French or “*saqlab* (sing.), *saqaliba* (pl.)” in Arabic which originally came from the ethnic term “Slav,” the ethnicity from the Balkans which provided abundant slaves in early medieval times prior to Christianization in the ninth to twelfth centuries.

Early Sanskrit texts reveal not only the existence of slavery but the gendered

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<sup>174</sup> Strabo XV. 1.53.6. in Dev Raj Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India as depicted in Pali and Sanskrit Texts* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1990), 103.

<sup>175</sup> Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 641, Uma Chakravarti, “Of Dasas and Karmakaras; Servile Labour in Ancient India,” in *Chains of Servitude; Bondage and Slavery in India*, ed. Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (Madras: Sangam Books, 1985), 35-42, R. C. Majumdar, ed. *The History and Culture of the Indian People; The Age of Imperial Unity* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951), 570. For the role of Indra in enslaving *dasa*/*dasi*, see *Rig Veda* IV. 28.4; V. 34.6; VI 27.8.

nature of early Indian slavery. In the *Rig Veda*, earliest of all Indo-European epics, male slaves are rarely mentioned. This early literary reference describes Aryans enslaving large numbers of women after killing the men, a common practice of war in antiquity.<sup>176</sup> Often, the motivation for wars between Aryans and Dasas appears to be the procurement of women, war being the main method of acquiring more slaves.<sup>177</sup>

In early Vedic literature, female slaves (but rarely male slaves) were listed as booty taken in war, as “moveable property” along with gold or cattle, or they appear as *dana* (ritual gifts given by kings to the gods or priests).<sup>178</sup> Evidence that slave women were valued as booty appears in a *Rig Veda* account of ten chariots carrying abducted women.<sup>179</sup> Slave girls played the part of transferable wealth in the story where Yudisthira gambled away his possessions in a game of dice. After the pearls, the hundred jars of gold pieces, a chariot and horses, and 9,000 elephants, came the “100,000 slave girls and 100,000 male slaves who fed and entertained guests.”<sup>180</sup> These slaves, who obviously knew palace protocol or performance skills, were more than just recent war captives. Their roles imply investment in training.

Slave women played an even more important role in the economy of *dana* or ritualized gift-giving. During a huge sacrifice for which admittance required a generous gift, slave women alongside the horses, sheep, and elephants figure predominantly in the gift lists: “100,000 slave girls from Karpasika” or “14,000 slave girls along with 10,000

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<sup>176</sup>R.S. Sharma, “Conflict Distribution and Differentiation in RgVedic Society,” *The Indian Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (July 1977): 3.

<sup>177</sup>*Rig Veda* X.62.10, Chakravarti, *Servile Labour*, 43-44, 56-57.

<sup>178</sup> Examples in *Rig Veda* V.30.15 and VI. 47. Also Thapar, *Cultural Past*, 525, Chakravarti, *Servile Labour*, 57, and Prakash Charan Prasad, *Foreign Trade and Commerce in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), 24.

<sup>179</sup> *Rig Veda* X. 86.5.

<sup>180</sup> *Mahabharata*, II 53.22-25, 54:1-29, 58:1-43 in Romila Thapar, “Some Aspects of the Economic Data in the *Mahabharata*,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 58/59, (1977-78): 997.



slaves with their wives” given by Yajnasena.<sup>181</sup> Ritual gifts in the context of the gift culture described by Indian literature carried the spirit of the person and obligated the recipient. Incumbent was the belief shared in ancient India and Greece, that if wealth was given, it returned in a larger amount.<sup>182</sup>

The importance of slave women used by royals as currency in the Vedic economy to buy influence shows in the number of times they are present in lists of gifts for the Brahmin priests.<sup>183</sup> For instance, the king of Anga gave 10,000 female slaves to his chief priest along with cattle, wealth, and gold.<sup>184</sup> The numbers, most likely inflated, are common in this genre and function as hyperbolic symbols of generosity.<sup>185</sup> In oral cultures, impossibly huge numbers are meant to convey the concept of many.<sup>186</sup> For example, Bhagirathi gave a gift of a million women covered with gold ornaments along with the chariots, horses, elephants, cattle, goats and sheep.<sup>187</sup> These accounts suggest that slaves, usually female, were used as a luxury product and signifier of wealth in addition to slaves used for domestic labor or agricultural production who also exist in Indian sources.

Whether luxury product or physical laborer, texts relate that the lives of slave girls were often filled with grueling or filthy labor and/or demeaning sexual exploitation. Most female slaves appear to have been used domestically for the drudgery of housework: removing latrine wastes, husking rice, grinding grain into flour, cooking, and especially,

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<sup>181</sup> Thapar, “*Mahabharata*,” 996.

<sup>182</sup> Thapar, “*Mahabharata*,” 995.

<sup>183</sup> *Rig Veda* VII. 56.3.

<sup>184</sup> *Aitareya Brahmana* VII.22 in Chakravarti, *Servile Labour*, 57, f.126.

<sup>185</sup> Thapar, *Some Aspects*, 993-1007, Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 635, 641 For a discussion of systematic exaggerated numbers in ancient India, see Chanana, *Slavery*, 123-8.

<sup>186</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 132.

<sup>187</sup> *Mahabharata* XII.29.56 ff.

fetching water in large quantities and often over long-distances.<sup>188</sup> Dasi tasks also included agricultural work in the fields or pastoral responsibilities of herding and milking cows. Slave women of all ranks were vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Slaves were always concubines, never legally married wives. Their children, by their owners, were also counted as slaves (although freed in later times), inventoried as part of the master's possessions.<sup>189</sup>

A few slave women did escape physical labor, at least while they were young and nubile. Elite slaves known as *nataka itthis*, women chosen because of their beauty, charm, or foreign allure, served in the royal harems.<sup>190</sup> Constant surveillance was kept over the queen, courtesans, and female slaves who had access to the king because of their potential danger...and the stories remembered of many previous kings who had been assassinated by their wives or concubines<sup>191</sup>

Not all harem slave women were on the "sexual staff" of the palace or elite household. Female slaves also served in royal households as bath attendants, masseurs, preparers of beds, washerwomen, nurses for children, and garland-makers who needed to touch their own eyes and arms with the garlands and garments to protect the king against poisons or dangers<sup>192</sup> in the same manner that a food taster protected the royal family from poisoned culinary offerings.

Royal wives also arrived with their own retinue of slaves. Buddhist traditions tell of rich brides who were given hundreds of slave girls as their dowry to serve as

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<sup>188</sup> Chakravarti, *Servile Labour*, 59.

<sup>189</sup> Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 106.

<sup>190</sup> Olivelle and McClish, *Arthasastra*, 15. Chandragupta's tutor, Kautilya, pen name of Chanakya (c 350-283 BCE), is credited with the *Arthasastra* which is an ancient Sanskrit text on government: bureaucratic administration, economic policy, and military strategy.

<sup>191</sup> Olivelle and McClish, *Arthasastra*, 25-27, Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 56.

<sup>192</sup> Kautilya, *Arthasastra*, First Book, Chapter XXI, section 44, 42-3.

companions to accompany them to their new homes.<sup>193</sup> Poorer households might send only one slave with their daughter.<sup>194</sup> When the “sell by date” of a concubine’s physical charms expired, Kautilya’s pragmatic *Arthashastra* ruled that the older harem concubines,<sup>195</sup> as well as the outdated, worn out slaves working in the state-run brothels, would be useful in a second career of preparing wool, cotton, or flax or weaving in the state workshops<sup>196</sup> or serving the government as wandering spies.<sup>197</sup>

The arrival of the more egalitarian Buddhist and Jain reformations of Brahmanism did not dislodge the institution of slavery from India. By this time, the end of the Vedic Era, the term, *dasa/dasi* was strictly a definition of human property, no longer referring to a defeated ethnic group.<sup>198</sup> Female slaves, however, gained some protections as time passed. The *Arthashastra* prescribed manumission for women who gave birth to a son for their masters. The child also gained a right of inheritance instead of the inherited slavery of the previous centuries. Rules protected wet-nurses and maid servants from sexual violation, although nothing is known concerning the effectiveness of these rules.<sup>199</sup>

The ethics of owning another soul, however, did not extend as far as prohibiting monks or monasteries from owning slaves. Monks bought, owned, and sold their own slaves, including slave women.<sup>200</sup> The Brahmins had demanded fees for rituals but

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<sup>193</sup> E. W. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), Vol. 29, Pt. II.

<sup>194</sup> This custom still existed among Hindu and Muslim families in East India when I attended a wedding in Orissa in 1977. The Muslim bride arrived with an elderly “auntie” who kept her company, escorted her to the outside latrine, washed her saris, and made sure that the bride cooperated in the consummation of the marriage.

<sup>195</sup> For harem girls, *Arthashastra* II. 23.2.

<sup>196</sup> For retired prostitutes, *Arthashastra* II. 27. 8.

<sup>197</sup> For spies, *Arthashastra*, I. 12.13.

<sup>198</sup> Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 107.

<sup>199</sup> Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 109.

<sup>200</sup> Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 149.

Buddhist institutions and clergy emphasized donations. Inscriptions of donations made to monasteries, gifts which often included slaves, provide another genre of texts identifying slaves.<sup>201</sup> Both Buddhist and Hindu temples and their agricultural lands were cared for by slaves across India and South East Asia.

Indian sources also reveal the presence of foreign female slaves. Harem slaves usually only warrant a passing mention in the sources. A Jain hagiography quoted at the beginning of this chapter, however, pulls back the *purdah* (curtain) shielding from view the many slaves making up a sixth or fifth century BCE royal household. The new son of King Andhaga-vanhi, in Champa, now the city of Champapur, Bihar, Central India was born into a world made diverse by slave physicality and ethnicity.

A detail relevant to the study of early long-distance trade or exchange of women is that the status symbol of this harem seems NOT to be the beauty, number, or expensive dress and jewels of the women but the physical and ethnic diversity of its inhabitants, including a Greek woman. The cultural diversity was emphasized by the text in the description of national dress and use of sign language which could allow for communication among a group speaking many individual languages.

### **The Persian Empire Connects the Greeks and India**

In this description of a harem in East-Central India, with its multifaceted, multi-ethnic collection of slave women, a Greek attendant, among the women identified and included in the list of ethnicities, gives us perhaps the earliest evidence of Greek slave women in India. Indian writers called Greeks either *Yona* in Prakrit or more often,

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<sup>201</sup> Eighteen examples of slaves listed with donations appear in To' Cin' Khui. Emanuel Forchhammer, *Inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya, and Ava: translation with Notes* (Burma: Archaeological Survey of India: 1899).

*Yavana*, the Sanskrit adaption of the term *Yauna* from Old Persian.<sup>202</sup> Indian contact with Greeks probably increased after Cyrus's (r. 559–530 BCE) conquest of Northern India (530 BCE) and the Eastern Mediterranean (545 BCE), although perhaps, knowledge of previous contacts remains hindered by lack of texts.

The Persian term, *Yauna*, appears in Darius's *Behistan*, a mountain side description of his reign inscribed into three languages (ca 519 BCE) which became the Rosetta stone of cuneiform.<sup>203</sup> The terms *Yavana* and *Yona* continue to show up in a number of genres of early Indian literature for over a millennium: the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, grammar books, lists of Buddhist missionaries, Edicts of Ashoka and other stone inscriptions, court dramas, etc. The term kept evolving as it moved further south out of Sanskrit-speaking regions. The Tamils in the south added another adaption in *Yavanar*, the Tamilized form of the Sanskritized Persian word.<sup>204</sup> Indians used the term "Yavana" to first label foreign Greeks but by the Christian era, *Yavana* meant any Greeks: Eastern Mediterranean, Indo or Bactrian Hellenes, and the Roman traders (who were probably ethnically Greek) who settled in ports in the South. Finally, the term came to mean all westerners: Syrians, Arabs, Africans, and finally Europeans and British until the last century.<sup>205</sup>

In the second half of the first millennium BCE, Indians considered *Yavana* as

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<sup>202</sup> This is the general understanding of Indian historians but this interpretation can be questioned since the Prakrit "Yona" or Persian "Yauna" is used in the later *Mahabharata* XII.207.43. For a full discussion on alternative meanings, see Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *The Achaemenids and India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1974), 38-41, A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks* (London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1957), Appendix I, 165-9.

<sup>203</sup> Ray, "Yavana Presence," 312.

<sup>204</sup> *Yavanar* first shows up in Tamil poetry around 350 CE describing traders who come in boats with wine to trade for pepper. For a discussion of the Tamilized use, see Martha Ann Selby, "Representations of the Foreign in Classical Tamil Literature," in *Ancient India in Its Wider World*, ed. Grant Parker and Carla M. Sinopoli (Ann Arbor, MI: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies/University of Michigan, 2008), 83.

<sup>205</sup> Thapar, Romila, "The Image of the Barbarian in Early India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 4 (October 1971): 4.

among the *mleccha desa*, a word which stood for outsiders, those impure because of their garbled speech but also among *desa* who could be sold into permanent slavery because of their exclusion from the *arya* or higher castes.<sup>206</sup> Their growing status, wealth, and later importance in the economy as traders could be surmised in that they lost their untouchable status and were adopted into the caste system in later Indian literature. The Gautama Dharma Sutra elevated them to “half castes,” being the progeny of *ksatriya* (warrior caste) and *sudra* (lowest caste but still not untouchable) women.<sup>207</sup> The *Mahabharata* mentions several origins for Yavanas: sons of an important ancient tribe in north India, sprung from Vasistha’s cow, and a topic of conversation for Indra who said that they could be admitted into society if they followed the *dharma*. These contradictions probably stem from trying to compromise political status with ritual status within an evolving Varna-caste hierarchy. The references show the growing importance of the Yavana population in Hindu India.<sup>208</sup>

The question remains, “When and how did Greeks or Greek slaves enter India?” The earlier description of a Greek slave women serving in a Jain harem in Central India is dated two or three centuries before Alexander the Great moved the borders of his Greek empire into India, before he forced an intermixing of Mediterranean, Persian, and Indian peoples, and before regular trade and diplomatic relations between the Seleucid and the Mauryan kingdoms.

A number of different scenarios could explain the very early appearance of Greek slave women in this sixth or fifth century BCE Indian harem. The first explanation,

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<sup>206</sup> Romila Thapar, “Indian Views of Europe: Representations of the Yavanas in Early Indian History,” in Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 539.

<sup>207</sup> *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, IV. 21 found in Ray, *Ancient India* 321-2, 325. Republished in Ray, *Athens*, 75-95.

<sup>208</sup> *Mahabharata*, I.80.26, I.165, XII.65.13, XIII.33.21-3. In Ray, *Ancient India*, 321-2.

interpolation, falls on the side of those who believe that oral traditions do not remain static and that each generation recasts or adjusts the stories to fit the innovations and issues of their own age. The origins and dating of the Jain religion remains obscure, but it is assumed that the earliest traditions of the Jain movement existed orally for generations. Possibly, later reciters inserted Greeks into the Jain royal harem due to cultural adjustment caused by the Greek women arriving after Alexander via the Seleucid-Mauryan wars and the peace treaty which led to a Hellenistic cultural and economic contribution to India. The theory of interpolation posits that copyists updated Jain literature to reflect their improved knowledge from an evolving political situation that eventually included Greeks.

Historians of Alexander the Great, who do not recognize a Greek presence in NW India before the fourth century, would agree with the updating or interpolation theory to explain the Greek woman in the Jain harem. For example, W.W. Tarn, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century scholar of Hellenism in Central Asia, argued against a Greek presence in or even near India before Alexander. He credits the beginnings of a Greek presence in India to Alexander the Great and his Seleucid successors.<sup>209</sup> Tarn asserts that the import of Greek girls into India can only go back as far as the period of Greek rule in India.<sup>210</sup>

This Alexander-centric view of the Greek arrival in India continues in some Western scholarship as evinced by a 2006 article where Rachel R. Mairs states “Direct contact between Greeks and Indians is largely limited to the period between the third

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<sup>209</sup> An observation made by Narain, *The Indo-Greeks*, B (I), W.W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria & India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 71-128.

<sup>210</sup> Tarn, *Bactria*, 374.

century BCE and first century CE.”<sup>211</sup>

The problem with Tarn’s doubts that communities of fellow Greeks lived on the far side of the Persian Empire in Bactria or India lies in the eyewitness accounts of Herodotus.<sup>212</sup> This Greek witness of the Persian conquest of Anatolia and the Aegean Sea claims that Persians threatened the populations of conquered Greek city states in Anatolia with deportation into exile and used Bactria as a type of Siberian gulag. Herodotus gave accounts of the capture of Greek slaves and whole cities who were deported and re-settled on the far eastern side of the Persian Empire.<sup>213</sup> For example, the Persian suppression of an Ionian revolt during the reign of Darius I (d. 486 BCE), caused the destruction of Miletus and deportation of its people to either Bactria according to the accounts of three classical historians<sup>214</sup> or to Susa according to Tarn and Herodotus.<sup>215</sup>

Resettlement in Bactria places Greeks on the land route over the Himalayan Mountains to India. A Greek diaspora in Susa on the Persian Gulf lies on the maritime route to Indian ports. The presence of the deported populations of Greek cities or Greek captives settled in cities of the Persian Empire on the routes to India weakens the interpolation theory that Greeks were added to pre-Alexandrian Indian texts at a later date. By land or by sea, soldiers, diplomats, and traders could reach India before Alexander the Great, providing a number of possible routes to bring Greek women to a

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<sup>211</sup> Rachel R. Mairs, “Hellenistic India,” *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 1 (March 2006) ISSN 1750-6581. Accessed November 25, 2014. Peter Green and A.B. Bosworth provide excellent scholarship between Tarn and Mairs.

<sup>212</sup> Tarn, *Bactria*, 374, Narain, *Indo-Greeks*, 3-5.

<sup>213</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* lists (4.204) Libyans from Barca located in modern day Marj, Libya, (5.15) Paeonian Thracians from modern Turkey on the Gallipoli Peninsula and (6.20) Milesians of modern Anatolian Turkey as a few of these displaced communities. See in Narain, *Indo-Greeks*, 3, f. 5.

<sup>214</sup> Strabo XI.II.4, X.IV.1.5, Plutarch, *Moralia* 557B, and Curtius VII.5.28-35. Also see W.W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great, II, Sources and Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 67 and Narain, *Indo-Greeks*, 2-3.

<sup>215</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* VI.19. Tarn used an archaeological find in Susa in 1905 of an inscribed artifact dedicated to Apollo to back his view of Susa as a destination. Tarn, *Alexander*, 275.



Jain harem.

### Greeks in Persian Era India

One strong argument counters the interpolation theory: that Greeks already resided in India in the Persian period because of their professions as traders, mercenaries, courtesans, wandering “men of strange science,” and slaves.<sup>216</sup> Indian sources from the Persian era mention Greeks in contexts that belie the late date “insertion” or interpolation theory. Similar to the slavery issue where Indian texts defied the Western view that slavery was absent in Mauryan India as related by Megasthenes, so classical Indian writers of the Persian era challenge the belief that early Greek contact with India was initiated by Alexander the Great. The Indian term for Greeks, *Yavana*, appears in early Sanskrit texts, especially in one, the *Grammar of Panini*. Descriptive words in this grammar place the author Panini in what is now Pakistan from the fourth to the late sixth century BCE.<sup>217</sup> In the margins, Panini attempted to “Sanskritize” a foreign word. He wrote that the feminine form of *Yavana* is *Yavanani*, and mentioned their script—*Yavanallipyam* showing familiarity with Greeks and Greek languages during the Persian period.<sup>218</sup>

The Pali-Prakrit<sup>219</sup> literature of the Ganges and early Buddhism and Jainism also references Greeks. Dating the Buddha is problematic (circa 400 BCE) but the origins of

<sup>216</sup> George Woodcock, *The Greeks in India* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1966), 16-17.

<sup>217</sup> For a discussion of Panini’s dating, see Chattopadhyaya, *The Achaemenids*, 40. In contrast, Weber holds to a Panini dating in the second century CE. See Albrecht Weber, *The History of Indian Literature* trans. John Mann and Theodor Zachariae (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1961), 220-21.

<sup>218</sup> *Grammar of Panini* IV. I. 49.

<sup>219</sup> Pali and Prakrit are dialects of Sanskrit that were used in Jain and Buddhist literature.

Buddhism are still firmly in the Achaemenid Persian period (550-330 BCE).<sup>220</sup> Buddhist scriptures, attributed to Buddha and his chief disciple, Assalayana, state that a *Yona* (Ionic) state was flourishing during the life of Guatama Buddha.<sup>221</sup> The citizens of this Yona state were divided into two social grades, therefore preserving the structure of Greek society (*hoi polloi* and *hoi oligoi*)<sup>222</sup> in contrast to the four castes of Indian society.<sup>223</sup>

Western sources provide one possible identification of an Indian Yona state in Nysa, located in NW India. Arrian says that the Nysians were not Indian but descendants of the men who came to India with Dionysos which would have made them Thracians, showing that in Sanskrit, Yona stood for all Greeks, not just Ionians.<sup>224</sup> According to Arrian's sources, the thirty-one "envoys of the highest renown" from Nysa convinced Alexander to "leave the city in god's keeping" and not attack their city on the basis of their descent from Dionysos and Alexander's own repetition of Dionysos's feats and his claimed descent from Zeus.<sup>225</sup> Arrian questions the legends of Dionysos's divinity ("Whoever Dionysos may have been") and suggests that any story that sounds incredible gains credibility when an element of the divine is added.<sup>226</sup> Arrian makes clear that he doubts the Nysian elder's account: "The authenticity of these stories should remain an

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<sup>220</sup> L. S. Cousins, "The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3, no. 6.1 (1996): 57-63.

<sup>221</sup> *Majjhim Nikaya* II. 149 in Chattopadhyaya, *The Achaemenids*, 38, Narain, *Indo-Greeks*, 2. Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *Social Life in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1965), 4.

<sup>222</sup> *Hoi polloi* references the "masses" but in a pejorative, vulgar sense. *Hoi oligoi* literally means the few but usually refers to the aristocracy.

<sup>223</sup> George Woodcock, *The Greeks in India* (London: Faber and Faber, LTD, 1966), 24.

<sup>224</sup> The differences between Thracians and Ionians could have been lost on the Indians. Chattopadhyaya, *The Achaemenids*, 38.

<sup>225</sup> Arrian 5.1.3-4.

<sup>226</sup> Arrian 5.1.1-2.

open question.”<sup>227</sup> Neither the site of Nysa nor substantive evidence that Nysa in India was a Hellenistic settlement has been uncovered.<sup>228</sup>

As Alexander and his army approached, the city of Nysa needed a strategy to avoid the attack and enslavement that befell the nearby cities. In Alexander’s world, using battle to turn “barbarians” into slaves was the normal course of war.<sup>229</sup> Plato had taught that all barbarians were without law and enemies of the Greeks by nature so destruction or slavery was their proper end.<sup>230</sup> Aristotle, Alexander’s tutor for three years, taught him that treating barbarians as slaves was “essentially just.”<sup>231</sup> It was only when Alexander realized that the barbarian countries of Egypt and Persia were actually more sophisticated that he began to entertain the idea of a hybrid culture, Hellenism, joining Greek culture with that of the Egyptian and Iranian elite. This ideal, however, was not yet established enough to save Nysa on the road to the Indus. When Alexander crossed the Hindu Kush into India in 327 BCE, he commanded that all the men be killed and the women and children be enslaved.<sup>232</sup>

The city elders might have fabricated the Dionysos connections as a ploy for survival. What cannot be doubted, even if the elders of the city deliberately embellished their origins, is their detailed knowledge of Greek customs and religion.<sup>233</sup> The fabrication option, however, does not explain how they came to have Greek ivy growing on their mountain which they used to prove their Greek origins to Alexander.<sup>234</sup> The

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<sup>227</sup> Arrian 5.3.4b.

<sup>228</sup> Getzel M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in the East from Armenia and Mesopotamia to Bactria and India* (University of California Press, 2013), 319.

<sup>229</sup> Tarn, *Alexander*, 1: 9.

<sup>230</sup> Plato, *Rep.* 470 C-471 A.

<sup>231</sup> *Fusei Dikaion*, Pol. I, 8, 1256b, 25 in Tarn, *Alexander*, 1:9.

<sup>232</sup> Bosworth, *Alexander*, 145.

<sup>233</sup> Arrian 5.3.4.

<sup>234</sup> Arrian 5.1.6, 5.2.5-7.

differences between Herodotus and Arrian, between traditional Hellenistic scholars and Indian historians, on the extent of Greek settlement in or near India during the Persian period remain. More archaeology is needed to solve the incongruities in the textual sources.<sup>235</sup>

Even dismissing a Greek diaspora community in India during the Persian period does not eliminate the arrival of Greeks as captives.<sup>236</sup> Surviving women and children of the Persian conquest of the Greeks glutted slave markets, probably even as far away as India. The Persians battled the Greeks many times, but this western frontier's refusal to submit brought Persian armies and their allied soldiers, including Indians, into the Mediterranean region again and again.

In the war that Xerxes I fought to punish the Greeks, including the battle of Thermopylae, Indians were part of the Persian army, fighting with Assyrian, Phoenician, Babylonia, Egyptian, and Jewish troops. According to Herodotus, "These Indians wore cotton dress and carried bows of cane and arrows."<sup>237</sup> The Indian cavalry included riding horses and chariots drawn by both horses and wild asses followed by a large number of Indian dogs. These troops fought under an Indian commander, Pharrazathres, son of Artabates.

Some postindependence Indian historians tend to give more agency to Indians than traditional scholars of ancient India do. Prakash Charan Prasad argues that since the Indians fought under their own general, rather than as part of the Persian army, this

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<sup>235</sup> Tarn, *Alexander*, 1:54-55.

<sup>236</sup> W.W. Tarn argues against even the entry of Greeks to India in this period as slaves. "Earlier back than the period of Greek Rule in India, this particular traffic (Greek slave girls) can hardly go." He bases his statement on Megasthenes who said that Chandragupta's slave attendants were girls brought from their parents. Tarn, *Bactria*, 374.

<sup>237</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* VII. 65.

relationship indicates an existing commercial alliance to open up trade with the Mediterranean rather than a military conscription.<sup>238</sup> Other historians, like Ojha, Raychaudhuri, and Thapar, see the Indian units as proof of Persian control over a large part of the Indus valley from the reign of Xerxes to Darius III.<sup>239</sup> Either way, it seems certain that these generals would use the traditional method of rewarding their troops and allies with the human booty of women and children of defeated cities to pay for their services. If standard practice of ancient warfare was followed, these Indian allies either took home a good number of captured Greek women and children or sold them to slave traders who would transport their stock long-distances from the point of origin to avoid slaves running away or set free by locals.

War could carry Greeks to India as slaves, but so could slave traders. The presence of individual, independent dealers buying slaves in the Mediterranean Basin is documented although these texts are silent on the destination of the slaves. The only cuneiform tablet of the Achaemenid period found in Petra is a sales bill for two people with Aramaic names sold to a person with an Edomite/Idumean name.<sup>240</sup> Another text found in the Wadi Daliyah in Palestine 335 BCE is a bill of sale for a slave sold for 35 pieces of silver.<sup>241</sup> There is no way to know if the slaves mentioned in the bills of sale eventually were resold long-distances, but these few text survivals from the Persian Era in the Mediterranean speak to the importance and presence of slave procurement, an element you would expect to find when a large market or demand for slaves exists in

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<sup>238</sup> Prasad, *Foreign Trade*, 45.

<sup>239</sup> K.C. Ojha, *The History of Foreign Rule in Ancient India* (Allahabad: Gyan Prakashan, 1968), 21.

<sup>240</sup> Fergus Millar, "The Problem of Hellenistic Syria," in *Hellenism in the East; The Interaction of Greek and Non-Greek Civilizations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander*, ed. Amelie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1987), 111-12,

<sup>241</sup> Millar, "Hellenistic Syria," 113.

richer areas in the empire. Indian satraps<sup>242</sup> or vassal or allied kingdoms in places like Jain Bihar beyond the reach of Persian conquest could be one of these more prosperous areas of the Persian Empire that could afford long-distance slaves.

Herodotus, an eye-witness of the Persian rule of the Mediterranean during the reign of Darius the Great and Xerxes, records in his *Histories* that the Persians “trawled” the inhabitants of the Aegean Sea for slaves, “Taking the entire population like fish in a drag-net.”<sup>243</sup> Later in his text, he described how thorough the Persians were in their search for slaves.

Whenever the Persians took one of the islands, they trawled for the inhabitants. “Trawling” involves forming a chain of men with linked arms across the island from the northern coast to the southern coast, who then traverse the whole length of the island hunting people down. They also captured the Ionian settlements on the mainland just as easily...when they had conquered the settlements, they picked the best-looking boys and castrated them, cutting off their testicles and turning them into eunuchs; they also took the most attractive girls and sent them to the king as slaves. (Herodotus 6.31 ff)

The investment of sufficient manpower to cover an entire island or conquer a settlement in order to capture the young for slaves hints that Persians found “harvesting” the Mediterranean for slaves a profitable and prolific business even if the most beautiful of the female captives became the king’s share.<sup>244</sup>

The text is definitive that the attractive girls were sent to the king as slaves. The king could have kept these Greek slaves within the huge harems for which the Achaemenid Persians were famous.<sup>245</sup> He also could have sold the slaves as an income stream. The appearance, however, of a Greek girl in a royal harem in Bihar during the

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<sup>242</sup>*Esther* 1:1.

<sup>243</sup>Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.149 c.f. 6.31.

<sup>244</sup> Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell expand on this theme in other eras in *The Corrupting Sea; A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 630.

<sup>245</sup> See Chapter 7 for a description of some of these royal households.

Persian Era also makes possible the conjecture that she could have been part of a diplomatic package.

The Persian emperor had good reasons to establish relations with a ruler in the region of India that he had not conquered with the aim of making him an ally. The Persian conquest of what became the satrapy of Hindush encompassed the Indus River in the Punjab, today Pakistan.<sup>246</sup> In a listing of tribute payments of the twenty provinces in the Persian Empire, Herodotus states, “The Indians, the most populous nation in the known world, paid the largest sum: 360 talents of gold dust.”<sup>247</sup> The gold tribute and the Indian soldiers and elephants in the Persian army would have made the unconquered areas of India of interest to the Persian emperors. It is possible that they sent envoys to establish diplomatic relations with Indian rulers and regions that had not been conquered. Bihar, India, where the Jain harem with its Greek resident was located, sits north of the Ganges in central to east India. The trip between the two centers, Hindush in Punjab and Bihar, is over a thousand miles but easily accessible via the Yamuna-Ganges River system.

If the Persian rulers or vassal lords established diplomatic relations with the Bihari Indian rulers, then princesses with their numerous attendants and/or beautiful slave concubines could have been exchanged to seal the deal, an ancient practice as seen in the Amarna letters much earlier. Even one princess could affect the movement of a large numbers of slaves; a princess of Mitanni brought 317 female slaves to her new home.<sup>248</sup> It is within the realm of possibility that some of the Greek slave girls and eunuchs that

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<sup>246</sup> Scholars disagree on the dates of this conquest between 515 and 521. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1996), 154.

<sup>247</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 3:95.

<sup>248</sup> Ilse Seibert, *Women in the Ancient Near East* trans. Marianne Herzfeld (New York: Abner Schram, 1974,) 50.

Herodotus witnessed being captured and sent to the Persian ruler were used as diplomatic gifts sent to his allies, including Indian courts. Royal diplomacy is one possible route for the Greek girl in the sources to reach the Bihari harem. Trade was another.

### **The Persians and the Infrastructure for Slave Trade**

If the Greek woman mentioned arrived via traders on trade routes, it would require the Mediterranean, the Persian Empire, and India to be connected by trade routes. The Persian Empire, reaching further than any empire in the Near East,<sup>249</sup> reconfigured trade between Mesopotamia, India, Egypt, and the Mediterranean, consolidating the four regions into one trading unit. After the conquest of Babylon and Mesopotamia, the Persians followed the trade routes to invade both the Mediterranean and North India. Cyrus's conquests in Northern India, including its ports,<sup>250</sup> became the three satrapies of Gandhara, Thatagus (Sattagydia), and Hindush/Sindhu.<sup>251</sup> Indians and Greeks, both subjects of one empire, met in the Persian capital to present tribute. Stone reliefs in the northern part of the eastern staircase entering the reception hall of the Apadana audience hall in Persepolis, built by Darius and finished by Xerxes, show ambassadors in distinctive native dress with their regional goods. Twenty-three different delegations immortalized in stone bring gifts or tribute.<sup>252</sup> The figures identified as eight bearded Ionians carry beehive shaped containers, folded fabric, and bowls, contents unknown.<sup>253</sup> The six figures identified as Indians bring an ass, axes, and jars, perhaps holding the gold

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<sup>249</sup>Paul J. Ray, Jr., "Connectivity: Transjordan during the Persian Period," in *Connectivity in Antiquity: Globalization as Long-Term Historical Process*, ed. Oystein S. LaBianca and Sandra Arnold Scham (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2006), 76.

<sup>250</sup>Herodotus, *Histories* IV.44 from Prasad, *Foreign Trade*, 44.

<sup>251</sup>Bosworth, *Alexander*, 154.

<sup>252</sup>Yamauchi, *Persia*, 347.

<sup>253</sup>Yamauchi, *Persia*, 354, 356. List of scholars and each of their identifications of the groups on p. 355.



dust that Herodotus listed as their tribute.<sup>254</sup> These multiple, elaborate carvings witness to the predominate place the Persians gave to tribute brought by subjects from their many regions. The event also, however, could have served as an international trade show advertising what products were available if local leaders could utilize traders and routes between regions.

The Persians promoted long-distance trade. The empire provided merchants with infrastructure: roads equipped with the requisite post or rest stations about every 20 miles for a “pony express” from the Aegean Sea to the Persian Gulf,<sup>255</sup> central administration, the spread of the alphabetic script of the Aramaic language as *lingua franca* instead of the more cumbersome Akkadian cuneiform,<sup>256</sup> establishing or taking over ports in the Gulf, and their own newly minted coinage.<sup>257</sup> Evidence of Darius I’s desire to more closely link India and Mediterranean by maritime trade routes are four stelae (three extant) that he ordered erected to commemorate his attempt to surmount the desert barrier between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea by building or redigging the Suez Canal of Antiquity.<sup>258</sup> Persians managed to turn the traditional Fertile Crescent into a circle that encompassed the Tigris-Euphrates, Persian Gulf, Indus River, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Nile River, and Mediterranean Sea back to the Tigris-Euphrates. Merchants on this trade circle possibly transported slave women long-distances as hinted by the Persian Era Mediterranean bills of sale for slaves. Greek slaves could have reached rich Indian

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<sup>254</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia*, 355-56.

<sup>255</sup> Ray, “Connectivity,” 79.

<sup>256</sup> Ray, “Connectivity,” 84.

<sup>257</sup> Prasad, *Foreign Trade*, 43. Note that the tribute is paid by weight, not coins.

<sup>258</sup> Ancient historians mention the canal but disagree whether Darius was ever able to finish it. Due to the blowing sand in the region, the canal would quickly disappear without a strong central government to maintain it, making it difficult for historians two or three centuries later to accurately discern its earlier use. For a full discussion of the sources, see Carol A. Redmount, “The Wadi Tumilat and the ‘Canal of the Pharaohs,’” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 54, no. 2 (April 1995): 127-135.

markets as more definitively described in Indian texts.

Indian sources show a long-established slave trade. Buddhist texts refer to the sale of harem girls.<sup>259</sup> The slave trade in India, especially the sale of women, local or foreign, was visible enough to be censured in both Hindu and Buddhist sources. The *Mahabharata* condemns the purchase and sale of female slaves as an action that would lead to negative consequences after death.<sup>260</sup> The *Dharmasutras* forbid the trade to the Brahmins, the religious priestly caste of the Hindus, even in cases of dire necessity.<sup>261</sup> Buddha forbade his lay-followers from living on an income derived from trading slaves.<sup>262</sup> Kautilya put women who deal in slave women in a low status group.<sup>263</sup> Neither religious nor philosophical objections, however, could eliminate the human trade although the prohibitions may have made more room for foreign traders. A late first-millennium BCE Buddhist text reveals the high stakes involved in the slave trade, at least in that era. The price of a slave was 100 pieces of money, four times the price of a pair of oxen.<sup>264</sup> This trade in humans brought long-distances was expedited by the infrastructure provided by the Persian Empire.

Some scholars credit Alexander with linking Mediterranean trade to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>265</sup> It appears, however, that the Hellenistic Greeks built their trade on

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<sup>259</sup> *Dhammapada Atthakatha*, III.166; *Jataka*, v:278, v:259 in *Sacred Book of the East*, ed. V. Fausboll (Delhi, 1977), 523.

<sup>260</sup> *Mahabharata*, XXII, 44-46 in Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 73-74.

<sup>261</sup> *Apastamba*, I-720; II-2 in Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 73.

<sup>262</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya*, ed. E. Hardy (London, 1958), 3:208 (in Pali), *Atthakatha* XVIII.177.

<sup>263</sup> *Arthasastra* III.2.22-3, Suvira Jaiswal, "Female Images in the Arthasastra of Kautilya," *Social Scientist* 29, no. 3 / 4 (March-April 2001): 52.

<sup>264</sup> *Nanda Jataka* 1.98, *Gamani Canda Jataka*, II.207 from Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 859, 874-f. 4. Scholars debate what form this "money" took and when coinage became currency in India. Vedic literary sources mention gold dust or pieces used for barter. Silver was relatively rare in India until the Persian period. Archaeological finds show punch marked coins in use before the invasion of Alexander but how long before is yet unknown. M. K. Dhavalikar, "The Beginning of Coinage in India," special issue, *World Archaeology* 6, no. 3 (February 1975): 330-31.

<sup>265</sup> Prasad, *Foreign Trade*, 45.

foundations already established by the Persians.<sup>266</sup> The Persian conquest and use of the Indian ports in addition to their development of Egyptian canal routes to the Red Sea are evidence that the Persian Empire established or planned maritime routes between India and the Mediterranean markets. In the nature of multi-ethnic, multilingual empires, however, it may well have been the defeated living in their empire, Greeks under their rule in the Eastern Mediterranean or displaced in settlements in the eastern and southern borders of their empire, Indians, Phoenicians, and Arab mariners who, in cooperation or competition with each other, worked the routes. An Aramaic text from Elephantine from the eleventh year of Xerxes (475 BCE) shows that Phoenician ships paid 10% duty while Ionian ships had to pay 20% customs on their wares.<sup>267</sup> Phoenician maritime merchants carried the goods they picked up in the Levant and the Red Sea and carried them as far as Persia, Gibraltar, and Nubia, bringing back the native goods from these regions, almost certainly including female slaves to forward to Persian and Indian markets.<sup>268</sup> Alexander the Great or the Ptolemies often get the credit for erasing borders between the Mediterranean and Asia, but they had a Persian foundation on which to build.<sup>269</sup>

Whether the arrival of Greek slaves to Persia and India in the Persian period was via slave dealers traveling to rich markets or soldiers bringing home loot or Persian ambassadors carrying diplomatic gifts to allies, the best of the captive women would have ended up in the harems of royal and military elite across Central and South Asia,

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<sup>266</sup> Grant Parker, "Ex Oriente Luxuria: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 1 (2002): 70.

<sup>267</sup> A. Yardeni, "Maritime Trade and Royal Accountancy in Erased Customs Account from 475 BCE on the Ahiqar Scroll from Elephantine," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 293 (February 1994): 70-3, Table 3.

<sup>268</sup> Ray, "Connectivity," 82.

<sup>269</sup> Prasad, *Foreign Trade*, 45. The land routes were there from the Bronze Age but the Persian established or perhaps, reestablished a system of post or rest houses on the routes.

including the multi-ethnic Jain harem mentioned in the Magadhi Prakrit text.<sup>270</sup>

Assuming that there were no later interpolations, the list of the ethnicities of the slave women within this harem reveals the availability of Greek women and their contribution to the display of wealth, imperial ambitions, and sophistication that an international collection of women implied.

### **Alexander the Great: Moving the Mediterranean World to the Borders of India**

Alexander the Great pushed the Persians out of the Mediterranean when he humiliated Darius III in a number of battles across the eastern Levant. In a last-ditch effort to stop the juggernaut of Alexander the Great's army, the ill-fated Darius III rebuilt his shattered army with conquered subjects or allies, including military units of Indians, Bactrians, Sogdians, and Scythians. Indian archers, chariots, and fifteen elephants entered the fight. In the last major battle, the Persian cavalry (including Indian horses) cut through the Greek phalanx but gave up their advantage of attacking from the rear in a failed attempt to rescue the harem.<sup>271</sup> The Roman historian, Q. Curtius Rufus, described Darius II's traveling harem consisting of his mother, his wives, his two daughters, ladies-in-waiting, eunuchs used as women, and 365 luxuriously adorned concubines who all traveled like a mobile tent city with his army.<sup>272</sup> Alexander's army captured all of them in Syria. Darius offered a great reward to have them returned, but Alexander did not accept it. Darius's death two years later left them in Alexander's hands. The decision to

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<sup>270</sup>*The Antagada-Dasao and Anuttarovavaiya-Dasao*, 28-29, is quoted on the first page of this chapter.

<sup>271</sup>Tarn, *Alexander the Great*, 1:50.

<sup>272</sup> From *Historiarum Alexandri Magni* III, 3 and VI.6, Seibert, *Women*, 51. For more on women in Asian royal retinues, see Chapter 5.

save the women (and treasury) lost the Battle of Issus (333 BCE), the beginning of the end for the doomed Persians, although resistance continued until 327.<sup>273</sup>

Despite the problem of giving Darius enough time to build another army (which included the previously mentioned archers from the Indian contingent), Alexander deviated from the pursuit of the Persian army for another goal. He chose to conquer Egypt which the Persian satrap surrendered without a fight. This master of strategy took time to solidify his conquest by founding the city of Alexandria in 331 BCE, giving him control over the Egyptian Nile-maritime routes to India. On the site of Rhacotis, a fishing village, Alexander himself designed Alexandria as a model city with a double harbor, one port for war and one for merchants. This military-mercantile capital possessed wide avenues at right angles, drains, abundant drinking water, warehouses, and lighthouses that lit the harbors by night.<sup>274</sup>

The city of Alexandria replaced the recently conquered Tyre which had served as the entrepôt of the Mediterranean land route to Asia. The new port city, Alexandria, and whoever ruled it, grew rich off of maritime traffic to and from India and Africa. Its location perhaps shows that Alexander believed that future maritime trade coming from India, Africa, and Arabia, through the Red Sea, across the Sinai to the Nile, and then carried downstream down to Alexandria and the Mediterranean could exceed traffic on the Central Asian land cum river routes to the coast of Syria.<sup>275</sup>

This metropolis on the nexus of the Nile and the Mediterranean changed the

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<sup>273</sup> Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 3:8.3-14.5.

<sup>274</sup> Gustave Glotz, *Ancient Greece at Work; an Economic History of Greece from the Homeric Period to the Roman Conquest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 336-39.

<sup>275</sup> Tarn, *Alexander*, 42.

predominant direction of Egypt from the desert<sup>276</sup> to the Mediterranean Sea and extended Greek waterborne rule far beyond the Aegean Sea.<sup>277</sup> Eventually, Greek ships would reach not just India, but the Atlantic and sail far enough north to circle the British Isles, find Norway, and describe the Arctic Circle.<sup>278</sup> It is possible that they captured northern European girls to bring back to the Mediterranean. For those who doubt that girls could survive this long sea voyage, the recording of a polar bear in the Alexandrian zoo in this era serves as witness that denizens of the North could survive the long maritime route, at least as far as Egypt.<sup>279</sup> This expansion of trade contact implies that any slave girl from this time could have originated from northern or Western Europe even if she was labeled Greek or Yavana, “western” in the Indian sources. The presence of slaves from the far north can only be conjectured as the sources remain silent on the subject. Alexander’s decision that conquering Egypt and planting Alexandria was worth the risk of the Persians rebuilding their army paid off in the long run, at least for his successors, the Ptolemies who expanded maritime trade in all directions.

With the important Mediterranean-Nile-Red Sea trade corridor under his control, Alexander then turned to the final battle at Gaugameta (331) against the Persian army and the conquest of the rich underbelly of the Persian Empire left exposed after Darius’s assassination in 330 BCE. After conquering Mesopotamia and Central Asia, Alexander’s decision to turn south instead of further east, north, or back west perhaps is a sign that he saw India as a prize which promised wealth and luxury goods, even after considering the

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<sup>276</sup> The river route down the Nile from Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa remained important for bringing gold, ivory, archers, and black slaves. This traffic, however, was now joined by Indian Ocean goods brought across the desert from the Red Sea.

<sup>277</sup> Kostas Buraselis and Mary Stefanou, ed. *The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile: Studies in Waterborne Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>278</sup> Glotz, *Ancient Greece*, 362.

<sup>279</sup> *Athenaeus*. V. 201 C, in Tarn, *Bactria* 365.

difficulties imposed by the formidable barrier of the Hindu Kush. Alexander conquered the former Persian holdings up to the Indus before his troops encountered Indian armies mounted on the famous and formidable Indian elephants.

At this point, Alexander's most faithful Macedonian troops defied him and demanded to go home. He returned to Babylon with little time left to enjoy Darius's empire and harem. Across his new empire, he established new cities (seventy of them called Alexandria) by settling his veterans on prime trade routes. He sought to create a hybrid population by encouraging Greeks to produce children with native women, probably captives from the cities he conquered. Only a small number of his de-commissioned soldiers ever returned home. A number of his commanders remained behind in India to rule in his place. The twenty-month Greek conquest in northwest India left no impression in Indian literature,<sup>280</sup> but the Hellene Greeks that came behind Alexander infiltrated not just Indian harems, but Indian culture and texts.<sup>281</sup>

In the following centuries, more Macedonians and Greeks emigrated to Alexander's legacy, a hybridized "New World" of Greco-Egyptian-Persian-Indian cultures. Walter Scheidel hypothesizes that "Mass migration from the Aegean may have been the driving force of Hellenization" in Egypt and Asia.<sup>282</sup> Soldiers, traders, mercenaries, diplomats, courtesans, craftsmen, philosophers, scholars, and slave dealers with their stock all headed east overland to the Tigris or the Indus or south to Alexandria and maritime routes to India, moved by motives to defend the new frontiers and find

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<sup>280</sup>Thapar, *Early India*, 157-58, dating from Glotz, *Ancient Greece*, 323-33.

<sup>281</sup>The term "Hellenistic" was first used only to describe Greek speaking Jews but came to mean culture that was "Greek and something else" reflecting Alexander's attempt to meld eastern and Greek culture into a new civilization.

<sup>282</sup> Walter Scheidel, "Human Mobility in Roman Italy, I: The Free Population," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 94 (2004): 23.

wealth in the new cities.<sup>283</sup> Greater Greece grew poor, now removed from the new trade routes. The deserted cities became overgrown villages.<sup>284</sup> Some scholars claim that demographic loss to Macedonia meant that it never regained its military edge, making the Greek world vulnerable to Roman conquest.<sup>285</sup> In comparison, when the Mauryan Empire weakened, Bactrian Greek conquerors moved into the vacuum and gained hegemony over regions of Central Asia and northern India for two centuries.<sup>286</sup> One reason for their enduring success is that they ruled over many who retained Greek ethos: language. These Greek migrants--turned Persian, Indian, or Egyptian--created a new hybrid Hellenic world that did not quickly disappear when the empire faded. "They came, they saw, but India conquered."<sup>287</sup>

Textual, artistic, and DNA evidence demonstrates that many Greeks settled in India/Afghanistan and retained their culture even after their territory was ceded to Indian rulers. One of the textual evidences of a remaining Greek population is in Kandahar (one of the cities named after Alexandria-Iskandar), which is located on the main land route from the West to India. Ashoka (r. 268-232) ruled over this former Alexandrian-Seleucid colony that his grandfather, Chandragupta, had gained by a peace treaty with the Seleucid dynast. Almost a century after Alexander, Greeks were still dominant enough demographically that one of Ashoka's rock edicts (see Figure 3.1) was inscribed for his

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<sup>283</sup> Klaus Karttunen, *India and the Hellenistic World* (Helsinki: Studia Orientalia/Finnish Oriental Society, 1997): 348.

<sup>284</sup> Glotz, *Ancient Greece*, 323-33.

<sup>285</sup> A.B. Bosworth, "Alexander the Great and the Decline of Macedon," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106, (November 1986): 2. N.G.L. Hammond, however, rebuts Bosworth's claim of "Disastrous consequences for the military...within a generation her manpower was perceptibly lower," at least for the next generation of Macedonian fighting men, in his article, "Casualties and Reinforcements of Citizen Soldiers in Greece and Macedonia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (November, 1989): 56-78.

<sup>286</sup> Narain counts thirty-nine kings and two Queens ending with Hermaeus (d. 55 BCE) using mostly numismatic evidence. Narain, *Indo Greeks*, 162, 164.

<sup>287</sup> Narain, *Indo Greeks*, 11.



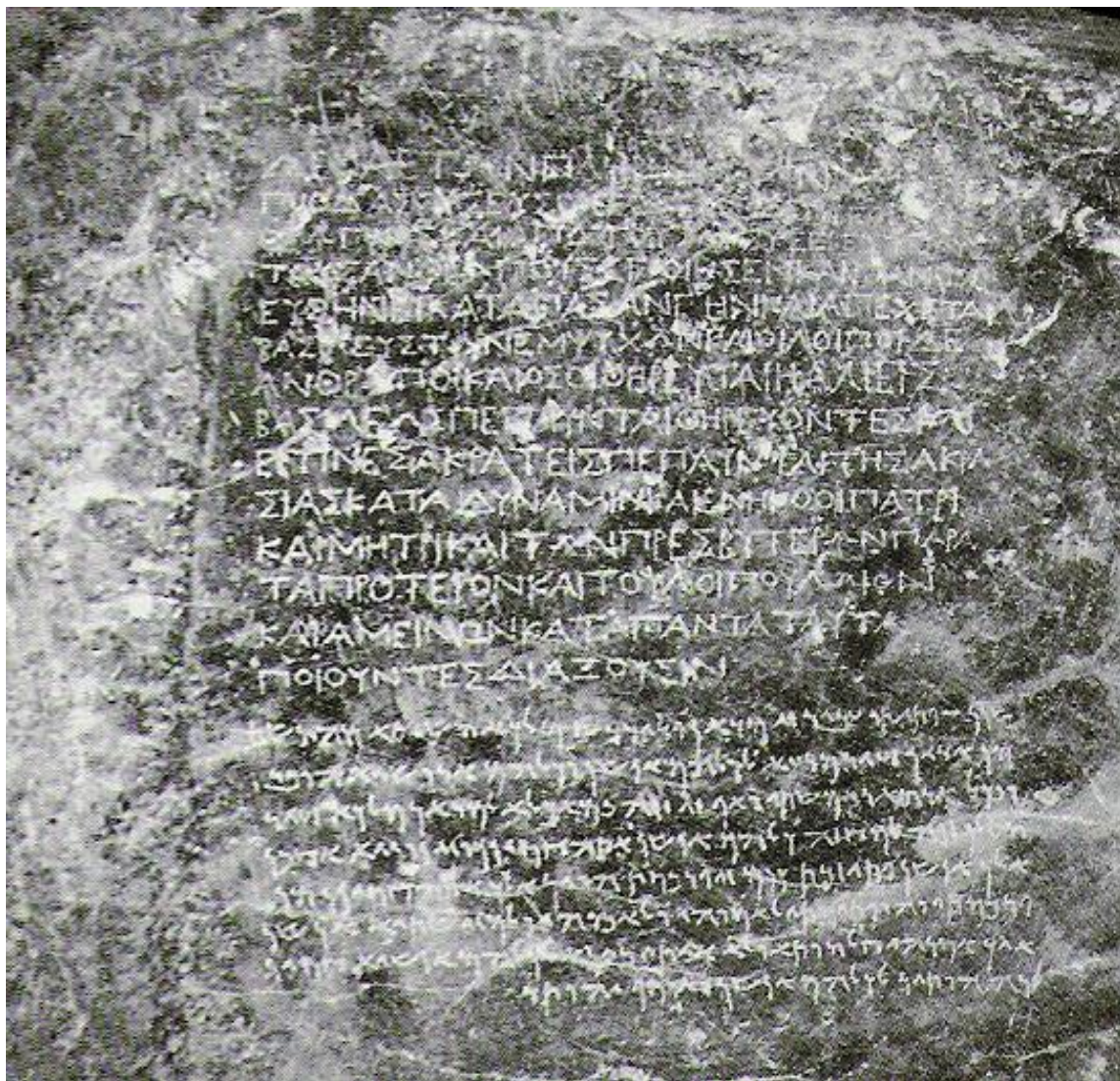


Figure 3.1

Ashoka's Rock Edict in Kandahar. Greek and Aramaic.  
Located in Kabul Museum. Public Domain.

Greek and Aramaic subjects, using not just their Greek language, but also interpreting his Buddhist ethical prescriptions using Greek cultural concepts. For example, the Prakrit *dhamma* or Sanskrit *dharma* is translated into Greek as *eusebeia* meaning "awesome respect accorded to God, devoutness, piety, godliness."<sup>288</sup> Similarly, coins of the Indo-Greeks, who ruled after the Mauryans, carried bilingual Greek and Prakrit inscriptions of the rulers proclaiming Buddhism.<sup>289</sup>

Another text revealing the long presence of Greeks in India is an inscription in Junagarh (modern Gujarat) which states that the area of Aparanta, the coastal trading region encompassing NW India from Gujarat to Sindh, is governed by Yonaraja Tusapa. While Tusapa is a Persian name, *Yonaraja*, is either a title or name meaning "Ionic/Greek king."<sup>290</sup>

Buddhist texts witness to Greek converts. Since the Brahman religion could not violate caste boundaries to receive individual converts, it appears that Greeks wishing to assimilate gravitated to more egalitarian Buddhism.<sup>291</sup> In 250 BCE, the Third Buddhist Council sent out missionaries. One Buddhist monk, a Greek by name, Yona Dhammarakhita, went to Aparantaka, a western Indian region, and converted 37,000 persons.<sup>292</sup> Another missionary, Maharakkhita, was sent to a region listed only as Yona.<sup>293</sup>

Many votive inscriptions describing donors and donations also prove a prosperous Greek Buddhist presence even in isolated areas of India. These lists of donors and

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<sup>288</sup> Thanks to Jason Steffenson for the translation. Thapar, *Indian Views*, 540. For a full discussion and translation of this edict, see Thapar, *Ashoka*, 260.

<sup>289</sup> Thapar, *Indian Views*, 541.

<sup>290</sup> Thapar, *Ashoka*, 128.

<sup>291</sup> Inscriptions on the Heliodoros pillar at Besnagar provides evidence that Greeks were also adherents of the Bhagavata cult of Krisna worship in the second century BCE. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy; A guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 240.

<sup>292</sup> *Mahavamsa*, XII. 1-8 in Thapar, *Ashoka*, 47.

<sup>293</sup> *Mahavamsa*, XII. 1-8 in Thapar, *Ashoka*, 47.

donations to Buddhist monasteries include donors with Greek names. Usual donations to Buddhist institutions were cave dwellings, tanks, gardens, and vessels, but one donation shows Greek influence because it included a gymnasium.<sup>294</sup>

Central Asian art also reveals a long-lasting influence from Greco art styles. Buddhist art across Central Asia, known as belonging to the Gandhara School, shows Greek forms and motifs, even showing Greek gods paying obeisance to the Buddha wearing robes with Greek style draping as seen in Figure 3.2.<sup>295</sup> Scholars contest the origin of portraying Buddha as a man. For many centuries, Indian Buddhist artists had represented Buddha as a symbol: the Bo-tree, the Wheel of Law, his footprints, umbrella, or empty throne. Those who argue for Greek influence in Buddhist art argue that after the influx of Greeks in Gandhara, artisans started portraying Buddha as a man.<sup>296</sup>

In addition to the texts and art, more evidence of a migration of Europeans to Asia is found in Asian DNA. The Burusho, Kalash, and Pashtun tribes, today located in Pakistan, have claimed Alexander's army and migrants as their ancestors. Now, DNA testing of their genomes backs up their legends of Hellenistic origins. One of these groups, which claims to be descended from Alexander's army, the Kalash in Pakistan, have been able to maintain their very unique ethnicity, religion, wine production skills, and European features high in the Hindu Kush Mountains.<sup>297</sup> The DNA genome study that confirms the Kalash origin legends shows that the arrival of European DNA can be

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<sup>294</sup> Pusa, son of Ayasaka, was a Greek donor at a Buddhist site. Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders*, 82-85.

<sup>295</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 260.

<sup>296</sup> Tarn, *Bactria*, 395-97.

<sup>297</sup> Professor Brian Glyn Williams wrote about a visit he made to study them. Brian Glyn Williams, "The Lost Children of Alexander the Great: A Journey to the Pagan Kalash People of Pakistan" Huff Post Travel, 02/21/2014, updated 04/23/2014 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-glyn-williams/pagan-kalash-people-of-pakistan\\_b\\_4811627.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-glyn-williams/pagan-kalash-people-of-pakistan_b_4811627.html) accessed October 30, 2015.





Figure 3.2  
Gandharan Buddha with Greek Style Draping.  
Photo by Raymond Hain. National Museum of Korea in Seoul

traced back sometime between 990-210 BCE.<sup>298</sup> Unexplained is the fact that the Kalash have more DNA matching Scotland than from Greece. The Pashtun also claim Greek migrants as their ancestors although their DNA reveals much more ethnic mixing.<sup>299</sup>

The individuals from these groups with light eyes and hair and European DNA<sup>300</sup> join the art and texts that remain from Alexander's dream of mixing East and West. After Alexander's quick visit to India, the Ptolemaic Egyptian-Seleucid Asian-Indo-Greek kingdoms with their pockets of Greek populations brought closer Euro-Indo contact than India would see again until colonization by the British.

### **The Seleucid-Ptolemaic Era: Slaves for Elephants?**

In this period, military superiority in the Mediterranean and across Asia depended on possessing elephants. Commanders used war elephants to launch cavalry charges. They put them in front of the infantry, to intimidate the opposing horses and infantry, storm lines of fieldworks, and tear down fortifications.<sup>301</sup> Elephants played such a prominent role in the Mediterranean that for three hundred years from Alexander to Caesar, there were no major battles around the Mediterranean which did not involve elephants.<sup>302</sup> The Ptolemies and the Seleucid rulers fought five wars over Greater Syria

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<sup>298</sup> Nicholas Wade, "Tracing Ancestry, Researchers Produce a Genetic Atlas of Human Mixing Events," *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/14/science/tracing-ancestry-team-produces-genetic-atlas-of-human-mixing-events.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/14/science/tracing-ancestry-team-produces-genetic-atlas-of-human-mixing-events.html?_r=1) accessed Oct. 30, 2015.

<sup>299</sup> Sadaf Firasat et al., "Y-chromosomal Evidence for a Limited Greek Contribution to the Pathan Population of Pakistan," *European Journal of Human Genetics* 15 (2007): 121-26. doi:10.1038/sj.ejhg.5201726; published online 18 October 2006.

<sup>300</sup> In the girls' hostel (dorm) in Delhi, I was called "Goldilocks Two" because of the Kashmiri girl, daughter of a raj, who looked like my twin. Her light hair and green eyes could have had Greek or Aryan origins, but also could have come from imported slave concubine ancestors from the Roman or Muslim eras.

<sup>301</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 230, H. H. Scullard, *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1947), 120-45.

<sup>302</sup> Trautmann, *Elephants*, 288.

in which elephants played decisive roles.<sup>303</sup>

Hellenistic coins reflect the primacy of elephant power in the portrayal of rulers during the Seleucid and Ptolemaic reigns (see Figure 3.3 for examples). Both of these Hellenistic rivals, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, valued elephants, not just for their military value but also as symbols of Alexander's invasion of India.<sup>304</sup> The evidence that Ptolemies valued elephants in Egypt was the stupendous cost they incurred in building the massive boats, docks, hunting and training facilities, and the number of staff in several places down the Red Sea coast of East Africa. As a region was emptied of elephants, the docks and training facilities were moved further south down the coast.<sup>305</sup>

Indian elephants, however, especially Sri Lankan elephants, were preferred over the African elephants not just because of their larger size but because they were also

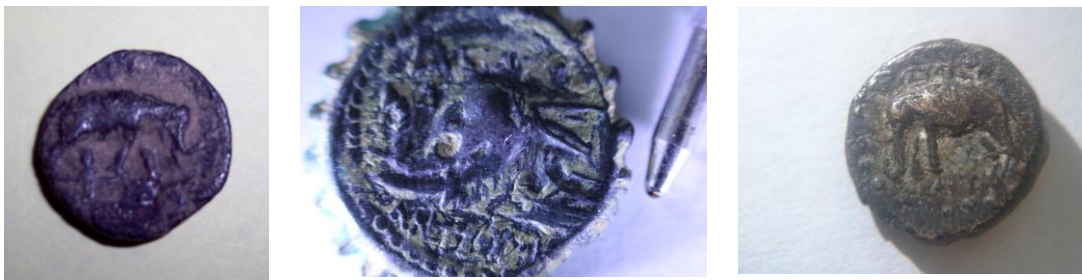


Figure 3.3

Seleucid Elephant Coins.

The elephants and elephantine headdresses on the portraits of the Hellenistic rulers on the Seleucid coins reveal the value they put on acquiring elephants. Photos by Raymond Hain from his personal collection.

<sup>303</sup> Scullard, *The Elephant*, 120-145.

<sup>304</sup> Karttunen, *India*, 195, Parker, "Ex Oriente," 51.

<sup>305</sup> Lionel Casson, "Ptolemy II and the Hunting of African Elephants," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 123 (1974): 239.

considered either more tractable or better trained at the hands of their Indian mahouts.<sup>306</sup>

Two species of elephants were native to Africa: the savanna and forest elephants. The savanna was larger and heavier than modern Indian elephants, but this sub-Saharan species was unknown in the ancient Mediterranean. Since the African elephants of the bush or savannah in modern times stand approximately one foot higher at the shoulders than an Indian elephant, it is assumed that Carthaginians<sup>307</sup> and the Ptolemies<sup>308</sup> used the African forest elephant (*Loxodonta Africana cyclotis*) which stands only 7-8 ft. tall and is native to Ethiopia and the Atlas forests of North Africa.<sup>309</sup>

Alexander the Great had invaded a divided India, hostile to the short-lived Nanda hegemony (Nanda Dynasty r. 345-321). Even so, resistance was stiff and the rebellion of his Macedonian veterans against continuing may have saved the Macedonian army. A description of the fierce Indian fighters on their massive elephants is given as one reason for the last of Alexander's conquests, but William H. McNeill argues that disease could have played a bigger role than elephants. He posits that a disease gradient assured severe losses to any army invading from beyond the Himalayas. Pathogens worked as guards more effectively than military obstacles.<sup>310</sup>

Twenty years later in 305 BCE, Seleucus Nikator, founder of the Seleucid Dynasty, invaded the region again in an attempt to claim Alexander's ephemeral conquests. He found the Hellene governors appointed by Alexander, killed or exiled. Greater India, for the first time, was united by the formidable Chandragupta (d. 298

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<sup>306</sup> Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 456.

<sup>307</sup> Hannibal did have one Indian elephant identified as Indian in art and known as "Surus" or the Syrian and famous for his energy in battle. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 246.

<sup>308</sup> Trautmann, *Elephants*, 22, 197.

<sup>309</sup> Karttunen, *India*, 196.

<sup>310</sup> William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 70.

BCE), founder of the Indian Mauryan dynasty. Other than noting two years of fighting, the sources do not give details of the Greco-Mauryan conflict, except Strabo, who records the peace treaty. The Greeks purchased an honorable retreat by a marriage agreement and by ceding Bactrian/Afghan regions whose capitals are now known as Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul.<sup>311</sup> As a token compensation for loosing this huge region (and its section of the overland Silk Road trade), Seleucus received 500 Indian war elephants. He was called *elephantarches*, “Ruler of Elephants.”<sup>312</sup> These beasts gave him the military edge he needed to win the internecine Battle of Ipsus in Phrygia (301 BCE), allowing him to claim Alexander’s Babylon and Persia.<sup>313</sup> Seleucid rulers continued bringing elephants overland to keep replacing the original 500 from Chandragupta.<sup>314</sup> Antiochus is recorded as bringing 150 more elephants from Bactria and India at the end of the third century BCE.<sup>315</sup>

The Ptolemies, in claiming their piece of the dismantled Alexandrian Empire, found that if they wanted to win Syria, they must compete with the Seleucids and their overland source of elephants. They also sent an ambassador, Dionysus, to India, the counterpart of Megasthenes, in the time of the Mauryan emperor Bindusara or Ashoka.<sup>316</sup> Although the dominant interpretation of the ambassador’s goal was to write a history of India, Casson believes that Ptolemy was seeking Indian mahouts, experts in hunting and training elephants that he could bring to Africa to set up his own elephant troops via

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<sup>311</sup> R. C. Munshi, *The Age of Imperial Unity*, 60.

<sup>312</sup> Plut. *Demetrius* 25 in Troutmann, *Elephants*, 235.

<sup>313</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 15.2.1.

<sup>314</sup> Thapar, “Indo-Hellenistic Contacts during the Mauryan Period,” in Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 457.

<sup>315</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, 11, 39 in Karttunen, *India*, 196-7. Diodorus, *Antiquities of Asia*, 21, Section 36, p. 47, Section 42, p. 55. “These beasts are far stronger than those native to Libya.”

<sup>316</sup> Troutmann, *Elephants*, 238.



Ethiopia and Sudan and the Red Sea ports.<sup>317</sup> Some earlier scholars argue that the Ptolemies brought some elephant trade with India. They did have huge ships designed to carry elephants by sea. Hannibal had managed to get an elephant army across the Mediterranean, but it appears to most scholars that the Ptolemies had a combination of captured Indian elephants and locally-grown African ones.<sup>318</sup>

The mahouts or Indian handlers were required (and privileged) as Greeks originally thought that elephants could only understand “Indish.” or what they assumed was one Indian language. Only towards the end of the Ptolemaic period did Greeks realize that elephants could be trained to understand Greek commands.<sup>319</sup> Evidence of this use of Indian mahouts on African elephants is contained in the dictionary of Hesychius where the word *Indos* or “India” is defined as “He who leads elephants from Aithiopia,” showing that Ptolemies had succeeded in their cross-cultural African elephant operation.<sup>320</sup>

A second piece of evidence that the Ptolemies were bringing African forest elephants and not the larger Indian or savanna bush African elephants is a description of one of the many battles between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. Polybius describes a battle in Raphia during the Fourth Syrian War in 217 BCE between Ptolemy’s seventy-three elephants supposedly trained and ridden by Indian mahouts or those riders trained by the mahouts against Antiochus’s 102 elephants.

Most of Ptolemy’s elephants were afraid to join the battle, as is the habit of African elephants.... terrified, I suppose, also by their great size

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<sup>317</sup> Casson, *Ptolemy II*, 251.

<sup>318</sup> E. H. Warmington, *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India* (London: Curzon Press, 1928; repr., New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 359, f 4.

<sup>319</sup> Aelianus N. An. LI.25, 4,24, and 13,22, Aelian *On the Characteristics of Animals, with an English translation* by A.F. Scholfield, (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1958-59) 1-3, in Karttunen, *India*, 197.f. 426.

<sup>320</sup> Troutmann, *Elephants*, 238.

and strength, they immediately run away from them before they get near them.... Ptolemy's elephants were thus thrown into confusion and driven back on their own lines. (Polybius)<sup>321</sup>

The Hellene Greeks, both the Seleucids and the Ptolemies, were looking to trade with India to gain either their elephants and their elephant expertise in the form of Indian mahouts in addition to the usual Indian exports of spices, gem stones, and silks. Both dynasties kept ambassadors at the Mauryan court in Pataliputra to make that possible.<sup>322</sup> Strabo tells us that the Ptolemies appointed a special officer, called *Epistrategus*, responsible for Red Sea trade including India in the second century BCE.<sup>323</sup>

Mauryans followed the example of the Persians in encouraging foreign trade by providing royal roads, punch marked coins, and officials to direct trade and the market place. Foreign traders were granted financial remissions and freedom from being sued in a court of law over financial transactions. The royal advisor, Kautiliya, in his treatise, *Arthasastra*, on how to govern a country, recommended that foreign merchandise earns a 10% profit over the fixed price set by the market rulers compared to the profit on local indigenous goods which was limited to 5%.<sup>324</sup> Greeks—ambassadors, mercenaries, and probably nongovernmental traders—seem to have found a welcome in the Indian courts, cities, and markets.

Did Greek diplomats and traders bring an abundant Mediterranean export product: slaves, especially slave women, to India to help pay for elephants, for the Indian mahouts, as well as for the usual Indian and Asian luxury goods? Very few Greek coins show up in Indian soil, yet Indian trade goods, elephants, mahouts, and Chinese silk appear in the

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<sup>321</sup> Quoted in Scullard, *Elephant*, 142-3.

<sup>322</sup> Thapar, *Ashoka*, 18.

<sup>323</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 11.3.4. ff. Thapar, *Indo-Hellenistic*, 456, Karttunen, *India*, 331.

<sup>324</sup> Kautiliya, *Arthasastra*, IV. 2. Discussed in Ranabir Chakravarti, "Introduction" in Chakravarti, *Trade*, 55.

Mediterranean. Indian sources, however, show Greek slave women in their society. Two types of western sources support this hypothesis that Greek women beyond Seleucus's daughter<sup>325</sup> might have played an important role in the elephant exchange: those that describe the place that slave exchanges had in Hellenistic diplomatic discourse and those that describe the prominent place that slave taking had in the Mediterranean economy.

A description of an Indian slave women and Indian animals in a procession in Alexandria shows that slave women may have been a regular part of diplomatic relations between Ptolomaic Egypt and India.<sup>326</sup> This is one of very few instances of Indian slaves coming to the Mediterranean, and the only source mentioning an Indian woman in the Mediterranean.<sup>327</sup> A 270 BCE text by Callixeinus describes a grand procession in honor of Ptolemy Philadelphus. This parade included pack animals, exotic animals, people, and products from regions influenced by or desired by the Ptolemaic emperor. India was represented by dogs, birds, cows, and "captive women."<sup>328</sup> "They were followed by carts drawn by mules; and these had on them barbaric palanquins, on which sat women from India and other countries, habited as prisoners."<sup>329</sup> Therein lies a problem. The Ptolemies were not at war with India. The Ptolemies had appointed the aforementioned diplomats and commercial officers to establish relations with India, but focused their military aggression against other Greeks. Therefore, it is probable that these "Indian women" clothed as prisoners, were not captives of war. If these women were truly from India, they and the birds, cows, and dogs might have been "gifts" brought by Indian diplomats.

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<sup>325</sup> See Chapter 5 for a full discussion of this royal daughter given as part of the "peace for elephants" deal between Selucus and the Mauryan emperor.

<sup>326</sup> Thapar, *Indo-Hellenistic*, 456.

<sup>327</sup> See Chapter 4 for the other references, all in the Roman period.

<sup>328</sup> Thapar, *Indo-Hellenistic*, 456, f.15, 461.

<sup>329</sup> This quote comes from a lost work of Callixenus of Rhodes in Athenaeus, *The Diepnosophists or Banquet of the Learned of Athenaeus*, trans. C.D.Yonge, (London: Henry G. Bohn, MDCCCLIV), Book V. 32, 320 p. iii. Athenaeus is an Egyptian writer who copied from ancient works around the year 228 CE.

Diplomatic embassies went both ways. Ashoka in his Thirteenth Major Rock Edict said that he sent missions to five “yona rajas” or Greek kings including Antiochus II Theos of Syria of the Seleucids, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, and Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt.<sup>330</sup> Or it is possible that the slave women had been brought by traders and purchased to play the part of submissive or allied foreigners in the propaganda parade. Their presence is not proof of slave trade, but at the very least, shows that Ptolemy Philadelphus wanted to publically portray the exchange of women between the two countries.

The texts that describe the Indian women in the procession in Alexandria could imply that Greek women were reciprocated, sent to India as part of trade for the elephant mahouts or sent as gifts. Perhaps, the Indian rulers interpreted these gifts as tribute. Albrecht Weber claims that Indian inscriptions specifically mention Yavana girls as tribute.<sup>331</sup> Other texts from the same era tell us that, within the Ptolemaic realm, it was standard diplomatic procedure to send slave women as gifts or tribute. For example, two letters from Tobias, the vassal sheikh of Transjordan, describe gifts he sent. He sent animals to Philadelphus and of another gift of four slaves to Apollonius (recipient of the letters).<sup>332</sup> The exchange seems to have changed little in the millennium that had passed since the Amara letters sent from Asia and the Levant to Egypt described the same exchanges: women sent from vassals as gifts or tribute to their ruler.

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<sup>330</sup> Thapur, *Ashoka*, 40-14, For a full discussion of the contents of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Major Rock Edicts referencing Greeks, see Romilla Thapar, “Indo-Hellenistic Contacts During the Mauryan Period” in S. K. Maity and U. Thadur, ed. *Indological Studies* (New Delhi: 1987) repr. in Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 453-461.

<sup>331</sup> Unfortunately, Weber (d. 1901), one of the earliest Orientalists writing in the mid-nineteenth century, did not cite the location of the inscriptions. Weber, *Indian Literature*, 251-2, f. 276.

<sup>332</sup> M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social & Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 1:227 f. 54 (59076 in P. Cairo Zen-Zenon Papyri (C. C. Edgar, *Catalogue général des Antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire, 1925-31*), 1370. or CPJ I, 5. *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, ed. V. A. Tcherikover and A. Fuks (Cambridge Mass, 1957-1964.), I.5, Millar, “Hellenistic Syria,” 119.

## Slave Trade in the Mediterranean Economy

In addition to the texts showing women used as diplomatic gifts, another reason to assume that female slaves were used to help procure the desired elephants or mahouts lies in the prominence of the slave trade in the Mediterranean economy. Scholar of Hellenistic economic history, Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff, concludes that traffic in slaves was one of the most profitable branches of trade and provided one of the chief features of long-distance trade in the late Hellenistic world.<sup>333</sup> This scholar notes that in the fourth and fifth centuries, the sources complain that the abundant slaves deprived free people of work.<sup>334</sup> The second century wars seems to have produced more slaves through kidnapping and battles than any other Hellenistic century. One explanation gleaned from the abundance of slaves in the Indian sources is that, perhaps, a large population of slaves no longer competed with free labor in the Mediterranean because slaves were worth more shipped long-distances to the more profitable Indian markets.

War, especially against the rising Roman Empire, created many slaves. Some scholars argue that one, if not a major Roman motivation for conquest, was the desire for more slaves. Victory in war in antiquity meant that the defeated survivors, mostly women and children, glutted the slave markets of the winners.<sup>335</sup> Caesar enslaved 53,000 *Advatuci* in 51 BCE, but the sources give up counting the captives in succeeding battles, describing slave hauls only as “a hundred myriads”<sup>336</sup> Violent conflict so commonly ended with the men dead and the women and children led off as slaves that this

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<sup>333</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Economic History*, 2-3: 806, 1258-62.

<sup>334</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Economic History*, 1: 97.

<sup>335</sup> For examples of the huge numbers of captives from the capture of various cities, see Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32-33.

<sup>336</sup> W. V. Harris, “Toward a Study of the Roman Slave Trade,” *Memoirs of the American Academy at Rome* 36, (1980): 122.

description for the end of a battle became stereotypic in ancient sources.<sup>337</sup> Walter Scheidel in his study of Roman demography says, “Successful imperialism....provided the muscle and cash for the acquisition of millions of foreign slaves.”<sup>338</sup> The connection between warfare and slavery was never broken in the Roman Empire.<sup>339</sup> When the wars of expansion ended, cross border raiders provided for the slave markets.

Even ending a war by treaty did not protect the inhabitants of the land. Not only did they have to provide tribute, but the texts show that the governors sent to rule had immunity to enslave and sell the best of the population for their own enrichment. Diodorus records the complaint of the Roman appointed king of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Nikomedes III (c. 127-94 BC). He was requested to send troops but complained that he had no one to send because the *publicani* (tax farmers) had seized the majority of his subjects and carried them off as slaves.<sup>340</sup> Ironically, Nikomedes was, himself, an active slave-dealer.

War, raiders, governors, and ambitious tax farmers were not the only sources of slaves. Scholars who study the demographics of Greek and Roman society assume from the low birthrate that many babies were exposed. Numerous families listed only one daughter. This may indicate that exposed infants were more likely to be female. Since abandoned babies were picked up and raised for slaves, this could indicate a higher percentage of female slaves entering the market from this source.<sup>341</sup> Abandoned babies would be an unrelenting source of slaves, but this provider of slave supply could not be

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<sup>337</sup>For over 30 examples, see footnote 56 in Walter Scheidel, “Human Mobility in Roman Italy, II: The Slave Population,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 95 (2005): 72.

<sup>338</sup> Scheidel, “The Free Population,” 26.

<sup>339</sup> Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, 33.

<sup>340</sup> Diodorus 36.3, Rostovtzeff, *Economic History*, 2:782.

<sup>341</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, “Infanticide in Hellenistic Greece.” In *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 207-19, William Harris, “Child Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 1-22.

rapidly increased in times of higher prices and market demand like the procurement of slaves provided by corrupt officials, war, or piracy.

Pirates, however, were considered a main scourge in the unrelenting harvest or “redistribution” of the population of the Mediterranean.<sup>342</sup> Keith Bradley states that these outliers were so successful at their business that at no time did Greek or Roman sources complain of a shortage of slaves.<sup>343</sup> Organized pirates had their own well-protected harbors,<sup>344</sup> but a steady flow of slaves also filled auctions in Mediterranean ports famous for their slave trade. Strabo describes one major slave market, the city of Delos, which was used by pirates to fence their goods.<sup>345</sup>

The exportation of slaves induced them most of all to engage in their evil business, since it proved most profitable; for not only were they easily captured, but the market, which was large and rich in property, was not extremely far away, I mean Delos, which could both admit and send away ten thousand slaves on the same day; when arose the proverb, “Merchant, sail in, unload your ship, everything has been sold.” (Strabo 14.5.2)<sup>346</sup>

Strabo blames the pirates who, seeing the easy profit, “bloomed forth in great numbers.... trafficking in slaves”<sup>347</sup>

Strabo also identified the political upheavals of the second century that allowed pirates access to vulnerable populations. He blamed the Ptolemies for the increase in Syrian captives entering the second century Eastern Mediterranean slave markets. During the Seleucid-Ptolemaic rivalries, pirates supported by the Ptolemies captured the subjects

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<sup>342</sup> Buraselis, *The Ptolemies*, 163.

<sup>343</sup> Keith R. Bradley. “Slavery,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1416.

<sup>344</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Economic History* 1:196.

<sup>345</sup> Jean Andraeu and Raymond Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, trans. Marion Leopold (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011) 64.

<sup>346</sup> Strabo 14.5.2, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (1929, repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 6.327-28.

<sup>347</sup> Strabo 14.5.2.

of the Seleucid frontiers across Greater Syria.<sup>348</sup> One source particularly mentions the “branding” that Lebanese women had for being beautiful, a reputation they still hold today. “Heliopolis near Mt. Lebanon breeds lovely women, called Lebanese.”<sup>349</sup> Sources specifically mention the export of girls from the Syrian coast.<sup>350</sup>

Evidence of the impact of this pirate scourge on local communities during this era lies in the inscriptions of the many treaties and individuals honored for ransoming captives.<sup>351</sup> Commoners, unable to afford ransoms, tried to protect themselves, as seen by a third century BCE law in Ceos, that any girl wandering alone on the island, inland, or on the coasts, would be fined due to the pirates.<sup>352</sup> Another text from the Aegean island of Amorgos in the same period describes a pirate attack inland and at night. “When pirates made an incursion into the countryside at night and captured a total of more than thirty girls, women, and other persons, free and slave... [they] captured the ship of Doreios, in which they sailed off with their captives”<sup>353</sup> Pirates would take any booty available, but, in the main, their business appears to be procuring slaves for the market.<sup>354</sup>

Part of the problem stemming from their “trade” was that slaves were too valuable a commodity for piracy to be seriously curbed for long by the Greeks or by the Romans, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, close to the trade routes to Asia.<sup>355</sup> The need for and profit from slaves was just too great. Cities made their fortunes providing the

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<sup>348</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 14.5.2, Rostovtzeff, *Economic History*, 284.

<sup>349</sup> *Totius Orbis Descriptio*, 22-39 in A. H. M. Jones, “Asian Trade in Antiquity,” in *Islam and the Trade of Asia; A Colloquium*, ed. D. S. Richards (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 6-7. This source is two centuries after the second century scourge but its reputation has proved long lived.

<sup>350</sup> Tarn, *Bactria*, 374 f. 3.

<sup>351</sup> Philip de Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>352</sup> Lina G. Mendoni, “More Inscriptions from Keos,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 84 (1989): 290-91.

<sup>353</sup> SIG 521 = IG XII. 7.386 in de Souza, *Piracy*, 61.

<sup>354</sup> Lionel Casson, *The Ancient Mariners; Seafarers and Sea Fighters of the Mediterranean in Ancient Times*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 45, 178 and de Souza, *Piracy*, 63.

<sup>355</sup> Casson, *The Ancient Mariners*, 181-83.



infrastructure for middlemen to buy and sell slaves.<sup>356</sup> Taxation on the slave sales helped fund governments. For the rulers, a cheap and abundant supply of slaves provided the export product they needed to exchange for imports.

Textual evidence of slave trade in antiquity is slim. This chapter has attempted to reconstruct Indian-Mediterranean relations from the Persian Era to the end of the Hellenistic Era. It has examined the intertwining of political, military, and demographic changes in the two regions, the maritime and overland/river trade routes and their major players connecting them, aspects of feminine slavery in India, the motivation for trade with India that came from the desire to use Indian elephants or mahouts, and the ubiquity in the Eastern Mediterranean of capturing women and using them for financial gain or political tribute. Perhaps the most convincing evidence that the movement of women from Europe to India either as diplomatic gifts or as a trade product helped provide for the acquisition of elephants is in Indian sources. In Indian texts, Yavana women were ubiquitous enough to be the stereotypic armed guards in Indian courts, and also appear as sex workers in harems and entertainment establishments.<sup>357</sup>

## Conclusion

The Ptolemies outlasted their Seleucid rivals, aided by their geographic distance from the growing power of Parthia and Rome. Ptolemaic control of the prosperous maritime route to India ceased as the Roman juggernaut rolled over their territory. The last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra, attempted to re-establish her forefather's reigns over the eastern Mediterranean by seducing two different Roman Caesars. She failed because

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<sup>356</sup> De Souza, *Piracy*, 58.

<sup>357</sup> See Chapter 5.

Romans were not yet ready to move their capitol nearer to the Asian trade routes.

Cleopatra's "Plan B" appears to have been India. She ordered her fleet to be dismantled and hauled over the Suez Isthmus to the Red Sea so she could flee and settle abroad.<sup>358</sup> Her plans were scuttled when Nabateans from Petra burned her ships.<sup>359</sup> In her last desperate days, she sent her son by Caesar, Kaisarion, "through Ethiopia to India." He was killed shortly after her death on order of Octavia by Roman sympathizers at the Red Sea.<sup>360</sup> India had remained important to the Ptolemaic Egyptian Empire until an asp finished off the last Greek pharaoh (30 BCE). The dynasty ended.<sup>361</sup> The trade to India did not. The Romans enriched their empire and extended its economic reach on the palimpsest of the Persian-Hellenistic trade between Asia and Europe. In the first century BCE, the Roman conquerors of Egypt took the Greek-Indian trade matrix and extended it to west to Rome and Iberia and east to S.E. Asia and Han China. According to Chinese sources, when Roman traders finally arrived at the Han court, they found that Seleucid and Roman slaves had arrived there several centuries ahead of them.

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<sup>358</sup> Plutarch, *Antonius*. 69, 4, cf. Cass Dio 51, 6, 3., *Plutarch's Lives* in Walter Schmitthenner, "Rome and India: Aspects of Universal History during the Principate," *The Journal of Roman Studies*. 69 (1979): 104 f. 128.

<sup>359</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 296-97.

<sup>360</sup> Plutarch, *Antonius*. 81, 4, cf. Cass. Dio 51, 15, 5 in Schmitthenner, *Rome and India*, 104 f. 128.

<sup>361</sup> Plutarch, *Antonius*. 81, 4, cf. Cass. Dio 51, 15, 5 in Schmitthenner, *Rome and India*, 104 f. 128.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EURASIAN SLAVE TRADE STRETCHES FROM ROME TO CHINA

For the king (of Barygaza in modern Gujarat) there was imported in those times precious silverware, slave musicians, beautiful girls for concubinage, fine wines, etc. (*Periplus Maris Erythraei* 49)<sup>362</sup>

The king of the Shan state, Yung-yu-t'iao again sent an envoy who, being received in his Majesty's presence (the Han emperor), offered musicians and conjurors who could make transformations, spit fire, release their limbs without assistance, interchange the heads of oxen and horses, and who were also skilled at juggling even up to a thousand balls at once. They said of themselves: "We are men from Hai-hsi (west of the sea)". The west of the sea is in fact Ta-Ch'in (Rome). (*Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76)<sup>363</sup>

The Roman conquest of the Mediterranean Hellenistic world advanced like a slow-moving thunderstorm covering the Greek lands as it blew in from west to east, southeast, until Julius Caesar finally occupied Egypt.<sup>364</sup> The tumult of conquest and a century of war in the Mediterranean had ended. Augustus worked towards the wealth that would be possible if internal peace reigned and concord was established with Asian

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<sup>362</sup> Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei; Text with Introductions, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 81, and some map work. Hereafter, this source will be abbreviated to PME.

<sup>363</sup> D. D. Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources* (Rome: Bardi Editore/Universita di Roma, 1996), 42, 150-51.

<sup>364</sup> In 168 BCE Macedonia fell to Rome, followed by Greece in 146 and Anatolia in 133. Octavian formally annexed Egypt in 30 BCE. Ironically, the Indo-Greeks conquered North India and ruled slightly longer in Asia to the mid-first century CE according to their coins. W. W. Tarn, *Greeks in Bactria & India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 351-52.

rulers. He promulgated a long era of prosperity known as *Pax Augusta* or *Pax Romana*. Peace brought an increase in trade volume and a flourishing economy, both of which increased the Roman demand for eastern luxury goods.<sup>365</sup> During his forty-five years of rule, Augustus fostered this trade through military protection and diplomacy. By the end of his reign, trade took the form that it would keep for two centuries<sup>366</sup> and to which it would extend again only under Justinian and the Abbasids. Western Europe, as far as the British Isles (and the slaves captured from there),<sup>367</sup> became connected to Asia by trade.

In this same era, the Han dynasty in the East mirrored the Romans<sup>368</sup> in pacifying a huge region through conquest and then reaching out to Central Asia and India by land and sea. The Romans, the Parthians, the Han Chinese, South-East Asia, and four new kingdoms in southern India (Satavahanas-Andhras, Pandyas, Cheras, and the Cholas) all became players on the Eurasian game board built by the Persians, Indians, and Greeks.<sup>369</sup> Southern India stuck out in the middle of the Indian Ocean halfway between China and Europe serving as the ideal lynch pin for maritime trade between East and West. Parthia played the same role as hub of the overland Silk Routes. Eastern Asia became truly connected or “globalized” for the first time that can be verified by textual sources. The meaning of “globalized” in Antiquity requires the caveat that residents of the Western Hemisphere were unknown and would not become participants in a truly global slave

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<sup>365</sup> Klaus Karttunen, *India and the Hellenistic World* (Helsinki: Finish Oriental Society/University of Helsinki, 1997), 331.

<sup>366</sup> J. Thorley, “Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus,” *Greece & Rome* 16.2 (1969): 223.

<sup>367</sup> Scholars suggest that the reason for the conquest of Britain and some other far regions only makes sense economically for Rome because of the slaves that could then be exported and sold. W. V. Harris, “Toward a Study of the Roman Slave Trade,” *MAAR Memoirs of the American Academy at Rome* 36 (1980): 122.

<sup>368</sup> Since China was always more prosperous and populated, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the Romans mirrored the Han.

<sup>369</sup> Walter Schmitthenner, “Rome and India: Aspects of Universal History during the Principate,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): 99.

trade until the Norse settled Eastern Canada and brought back at least one woman with them as revealed in DNA tests of Icelandic descendants.<sup>370</sup>

### **Rome's Use of Slaves in an Attempt to Establish Trade through Parthia**

As peace brought prosperity and corresponding increase in demand for luxury goods from the east, Augustus attempted to increase access to the sources of silks, cottons, spices, medicines, gems, and indigo. Augustus summarized his influence in his self-penned testament, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, inscribed in bronze (now lost) hung in his mausoleum that dominates the banks of the Tiber. Eighty fragments of this text survive, most from sanctuaries probably associated with emperor worship.<sup>371</sup> In these memoirs, Augustus boasted of his success in re-establishing relations with the Parthians after a disastrous defeat that had humiliated Rome. He recovered the prisoners of war and standards of three Roman armies and said that the Parthians “seek as supplicants the friendship of the Roman people.”<sup>372</sup> Overland routes depended on this peace with the Parthian shah, Phraates IV.

The Roman emperor<sup>373</sup> sealed this treaty with the Parthian shah with the traditional gift of slaves, one of whom changed the course of Parthian-Roman

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<sup>370</sup> Traci Watson, “American Indian Sailed to Europe With Vikings?,” *National Geographic*, November 26, 2010, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/11/101123-native-american-indian-vikings-iceland-genetic-dna-science-europe/#>. Accessed November 25, 2015.

<sup>371</sup> Alison E. Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti; Text, Translations, and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3-7.

<sup>372</sup> Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 29.

<sup>373</sup> Josephus claims that it was Julius Caesar who gave Thermusa as a slave to the Parthian ruler. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.2.4. in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (London: George Routledge & Sons, n.d.).

relations.<sup>374</sup> The Persian ruler, Phraates IV, had ordered the execution of his previous harem in 26 BC when threatened by the pretender Tiridates. Beautiful concubines were, therefore, probably in shorter supply than usual for a Persian palace, leading to less competition for attention from the ruler.<sup>375</sup> The beauty of one of the gifted slaves from Augustus, an Italian girl, known as Thermusa or Thea Urania, caught the attention of the Parthian shah<sup>376</sup> (see Figure 4.1). Josephus, the Jewish historian, shared the scandalous account that was circulating in his time of how this slave girl conquered the Parthian empire. Silver Drachm coins with Musa's portrait and title proclaiming her divinity, 'Thea Urania', support his rendition of events in the palace.<sup>377</sup>

He first made her his concubine, but, he being a great admirer of her beauty, in the process of time having a son by her, whose name was Phraataces, he made her his legitimate wife, and had a great respect for her. Now, she was able to persuade him to do anything that she said, and was earnest in procuring the government of Parthia for her son; but still she saw that her endeavors would not succeed, unless she could contrive how to remove Phraates' legitimate sons [out of the kingdom;] so she persuaded him to send those his sons as pledges of his fidelity to Rome; and they were sent to Rome accordingly,<sup>378</sup> because it was not easy for him to contradict her commands... Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. 18.2.4<sup>379</sup>

Musa's rise to rule demonstrates the access to power that slave status provided to foreign women. As charming slave concubines, they could conquer a king and his kingdom due to their intimacy with and influence over the reins of power and

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<sup>374</sup> More Roman slaves show up in the section on China.

<sup>375</sup> Emma Strugnell, "Thea Musa, Roman Queen of Parthia," *Iranica Antiqua* XLIII (2008): 283.

<sup>376</sup> Ilse Seibert, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Marianne Herzfeld (New York: Abner Schram, 1974,) 50.

<sup>377</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.2.4, Strugnell, "Thea Musa," 283.

<sup>378</sup> Self-preservation may also have motivated the shah to remove his adult sons since patricide was endemic within Persian politics. Phraates IV had killed his own father, Orodes II, and massacred his thirty brothers. When he was, in his own turn, poisoned, Musa and her son, Phraates V were blamed. Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 254-255.

<sup>379</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.4.2, 425.



Figure 4.1

Bust of Queen Musa.

Excavated by a French team in Khuzestan, Iran in 1939.

The National Museum of Iran in Tehran. Public Domain

succession.<sup>380</sup> Eight years after Musa sent her step-sons, the Persian princes, to Rome as royal hostages, the elderly Shah was dead. Josephus explains that Phraates IV's son by Musa, Phraataces, had been brought up to "succeed in the government" but was too impatient to wait, so the teenage prince "by his mother's assistance" formed a "treacherous design against his father." The former slave became queen and ruled Parthia by marrying her son, Phraates V (2 BCE to 4 CE).<sup>381</sup>

Having an Italian woman rule the Parthians did not make the empire particularly friendly to Rome. The Parthians fought the Romans in Armenia until Musa and her unpopular son were exiled.<sup>382</sup> "They had had enough of the upstart degradation...by the marriage of an Italian concubine and her offspring."<sup>383</sup> Even then, Rome again attempted to influence the Parthian throne. Augustus sent his candidate, one of the surviving Parthian royal sons, Vonones, who had lived in the Augustus court for over a decade. Vonones, returned to rule but only survived for a short time.<sup>384</sup> Josephus says that the rebellion against the Romanized prince was because the Parthians found it intolerable to obey the "commands of one that had been a slave, (for so they called those that had been hostages)."

Augustus's attempted peace with the Parthians and control of Armenia and overland routes east was fraught with difficulties and failures which made the Romans

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<sup>380</sup>Thermusa was not the only European slave girl who ruled over an Asian empire. Several Byzantine Greek concubines, such as Khayzaran and Shaglub, ruled the Abbasid Empire through their pliant sons. Thermusa, however, was original in ruling as wife AND queen mother. For an analysis of how slave women could access power in the palace, see Kathryn Hain, "Epilogue: Multiple Routes to Social Mobility" in *Concubines and Courtesans; Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, forthcoming).

<sup>381</sup> Marrying kin was scandalous to Romans and the Jewish Josephus, but normative behavior for Zoroastrians and royal Ptolemies. Strugnell, "Thea Musa," 283.

<sup>382</sup> The sources indicate that Musa directed her son's foreign policy. Strugnell, "Thea Musa," 275.

<sup>383</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.4.2.

<sup>384</sup>Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 255, Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.2.4. Since Josephus himself remained one of the Roman "hostages," he may have softened the anti-Rome feelings of the Parthians in his rendition of events.



more dependent on the maritime routes to India. These routes were envisioned by the Persians, were increased by the Ptolemies, but were turned into busy thoroughfares by the Romans.<sup>385</sup>

### **Rome and India: Slaves for Pepper?**

Unlike the Greeks before them, Romans were not interested in India for elephants. The Romans were less than enthusiastic about elephant warfare. Panicked elephants could easily crush the men in their own army. The Romans had seen that good cavalry or tactics could easily defeat these tanks.<sup>386</sup> From the first century BCE, the only use of elephants in the West was in triumphal processions and fighting in the arena.<sup>387</sup> What the Romans wanted from Asia was silks, pearls, gems, spices, all the luxury goods that signified wealth, extent, prestige, and power in the portrayal of empire. They especially wanted pepper and only India produced pepper for export.

Pepper had long been popular in the Mediterranean. Underwater archaeology of what are assumed to be Phoenician ships show that pepper was imported into the Mediterranean as early as the second millennium BCE.<sup>388</sup> Hippocrates (d. 378 BCE) prescribes the ‘Indian drug,’ assumed to be pepper, for women’s gynecological treatment.<sup>389</sup> Pepper was used as medicine, in incense, perfume, as a wine flavoring and preservative, and as a spice in sweet and savory dishes. The *Apicius* “cookbook” lists

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<sup>385</sup> Matthew Adam Cobb, “Balancing the Trade: Roman Cargo Shipments to India,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 34, no. 2 (2015): 185.

<sup>386</sup> Karttunen, *India*, 197.

<sup>387</sup> Karttunen, *India*, 198.

<sup>388</sup> Grant Parker, “EX ORIENTE LUXURIA: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 1 (2002): 43.

<sup>389</sup> Hippocrates, *On Women’s Diseases*; *indikou pharmakou*, 1.81

pepper in almost every recipe including common dishes.<sup>390</sup> Domitian in 92 CE built a quarter in Rome, the *horrea piperatoria*, to market the pungent spice.<sup>391</sup> Pepper proved to be an effective diplomatic player in politics. In 408 CE, Rome was saved from a siege by Alaric of the Visigoths by a ransom that included 3,000 pounds of pepper.<sup>392</sup> Of all the spices imported into the Mediterranean, pepper was the economic driver. This chapter argues that, like the probable Hellenistic export of slaves to pay for elephants, the Romans used slaves to help pay for pepper. In this era, more abundant texts referencing exports and taxable commodities witness to the slave trade of European and Mediterranean concubines and entertainers to India and beyond.

### **Few Indians, Slave or Free, Live in the Mediterranean**

Augustus's political overtures to build peaceful relations with the Indians were more successful than his attempts to have influence with the Parthians, perhaps because Parthian strength or expansion threatened both of them. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus emphasized a visit paid to him by ambassadors from India. Augustus highlighted that the Indian diplomats came to see him personally, "*ad me ex India.*"<sup>393</sup> He states that the emissaries were "often sent" although only two diplomatic visits to him are definitively known from other sources. A third diplomatic visit could be assumed from the mention of a tiger displayed in Rome in 11 BCE.<sup>394</sup> Emphasizing visitors from Alexander the

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<sup>390</sup> Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East; Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China* (New York: Continuum/Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 34.

<sup>391</sup> Parker, "Ex Oriente," 45.

<sup>392</sup> *Zosimus Historia Nova* 5:35-42 in Parker, "Ex Oriente," 45. Later, in the Muslim Era in Chapter 7, pepper used as a bribe will save the Abbasid diplomat, Ibn Fadlan. Stewart Gordon, *When Asia was the World* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), 78.

<sup>393</sup> "to me from India," Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 31.1.

<sup>394</sup> 31.1, 32.1, 32.2 *Res Gestae*, Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 249-250. The tiger's sources are *Plin*, *HN* 8.25.65 and *Dio Cass.* 54.9.8.

Great's arena evoked comparisons between Alexander, who conquered the world through war, with Augustus who wanted to leave a legacy that he had, at least, conquered India through friendship.

The first of these documented Indian embassies was a joint mission, joined by Parthians and Scythians (perhaps from the Kushan government then ruling NW India). The ambassadors traveled across most of the Mediterranean, to visit Augustus in his headquarters in Tarraco (Tarragona) in what is now Catalonia, in north-east Spain in 25 BCE.<sup>395</sup>

Legates of the Indians and Scythians, after crossing over the whole world, finally came upon Caesar at Tarraco, a city of hither Spain, beyond which they could not have sought him, and they poured out upon him the story of the glory of Alexander the Great.... with considerations of peace, so ... eastern India and northern Scythia besought him suppliantly with tribute from their countries. (*Orosius* 6.21)<sup>396</sup>

The second delegation finally met up with Augustus at Samos in 21 BCE after a difficult overland trip. They had started from India four years previously (25 BCE) with a letter in Greek from their king. The troop had suffered much on the overland route over the Himalayas and through the deserts due to the cumbersome nature of their gifts. "Many had died of fatigue," according to Nicolaus of Damascus, who met the party near Antioch.<sup>397</sup> The long and difficult trip could possibly explain the absence of the customary gift of concubines. The Indian diplomats brought the customary diplomatic gifts, anomalies such as "tigers, a partridge as big as an eagle, a gigantic python ten cubits long, huge tortoises of four cubits, and an armless boy who could shoot arrows and

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<sup>395</sup> Schmitthenner, "Rome and India," 104.

<sup>396</sup> Orosius 6.21.19-20 in Paulus Orosius and Roy J. Deferrari, *Fathers of the Church: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Baltimore: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 50:276.

<sup>397</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 15. 1. 73.

throw darts with his feet.”<sup>398</sup> Philostratos described the same embassy but also added a description of the servants of the Indian ambassadors who were in charge of the gifts, as “eight well-anointed slaves, naked all but their girdles.”<sup>399</sup> (This description probably constitutes a toga wearer’s description of an Indian wrapped *dhoti*.) The ambassadors garnered less attention than their exotic animals and surviving slaves. Indian embassies continued into the reigns of other Roman emperors. Dio Cassius writes that after Trajan’s return to Rome, many embassies came to the emperor from various barbarians and from the Indians.<sup>400</sup>

Other than diplomats, few Indians residing in Europe or the Mediterranean, free and slave, are mentioned, but rarely in Mediterranean sources.<sup>401</sup> Perhaps the only female Indian in Europe is an ivory statuette of a nude woman fixing her hair. This little maiden and her small carved servant would have arrived in Italy before 79 CE when she was buried by volcanic ash in Pompeii.<sup>402</sup> The Indian men are portrayed either as traders or slaves. Dio Chrysostom (d. 117 CE), who wrote during the reign of Trajan, described Indians among the cosmopolitan crowds in the bazaars of Alexandria, who had come by way of trade. He did not find them to be men of “a very reputable class.”<sup>403</sup> Several of these travelers left their names in graffiti on the land route between the Red Sea and the

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<sup>398</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 15.1.4, Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 249-250.

<sup>399</sup> Philostratos, *The Indian Travels of Apollonius of Tyana and The Indian Embassies to Rome from the reign of Augustus to the Death of Justinian*, trans. Osmond De Beauvoir (London; Carpentier, 1873), 66, in Dev Raj Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India as Depicted in Pali and Sanskrit Texts* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1990), 103.

<sup>400</sup> Dio Cassius, 68.15.

<sup>401</sup> Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 49.

<sup>402</sup> This statue was originally labeled “Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity.” She matches carvings made by the Satavahanas who ruled in East Central India. Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 53-54.

<sup>403</sup> *Dio Chrysostom*, 32:373.

Nile.<sup>404</sup> From excavations at Quseir al-Qadim, ostraca written in Tamil-Brahmi script give the names Kanan and Catan. The Berenike port excavation also produced two ostraca in Tamil-Brahmi, found in the midst of pottery dated from 60-70 CE. In other sources, a Roman man accuses the object of his affections of preferring Egyptian or “dark-skinned Indian” lovers.<sup>405</sup> A man named Herodes Atticus inherited an Indian slave around 150 CE described as “pretty black” who amused his masters with his pidgin Indian-Attic language while they were drinking.<sup>406</sup> Horace mentions a dark slave who was named after a tributary of the Indus, “Dusky Hydaspes who emerges bearing Caecuban wines.”<sup>407</sup> These slaves were so exotic or unfamiliar that their Indian origins merited mention. Fashions also employed wild animals from India; green parrots for pets, bulls, tigers, leopards, panthers, and one horned rhinos for coliseum fights.<sup>408</sup> These very few mentions of Indians in the West are backed up by sources that admit that more Romans, perhaps twenty times more Romans, go to India than Indian visitors or migrants come to the West.

### **The Many Romans in India**

The Roman traffic to India was almost one-way. The European saying was that more than twenty Italians labor in Asia for every one Asian in Italy.<sup>409</sup>

Though Rome received

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<sup>404</sup> From excavations at Quseir al-Qadim, ostraca written in Tamil-Brahmi script, give the names Kanan and Catan. The Berenike port excavation also produced two ostraca in Tamil-Brahmi, found with pottery dated from 60-70 CE. Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 64.

<sup>405</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 156, f.151, Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 49.

<sup>406</sup> Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, 1.8 in Schmitthenner, “Rome and India,” 96.

<sup>407</sup> Horace, *Satires* 2.8.14-15 in Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 49, McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 154.

<sup>408</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 154.

<sup>409</sup> Aloisius Rzach, *The Sibylline Oracles*, trans. Milton S. Terry (New York: Hunt & Eaton; Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1890), 87-88 ff. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 390.

Tribute of Asia, thrice as many goods  
 Shall Asia back again receive from Rome,  
 And Savage insolence return to her.  
 Many from Asia served Italian homes,  
 But the Italians, twenty times as many,  
 Shall serve in Asia in great poverty.  
*(Sibylline Oracles, 414-5)*

The evidence in both Indian and Western literature and from artifacts shows that Romans joined the ongoing Mediterranean migration of traders, craftsmen, mercenaries, and slave women to India. The majority of these migrants were probably still from the Greek communities of the Eastern Mediterranean, but they now pass through Roman taxing points.

The causes for the increase were not just the wealth and desire for luxury goods on the part of the Roman Empire but new knowledge of the winds and enough political might to wield control over the needed ports.<sup>410</sup> Both the *Periplus* mariner and Pliny write that the sea traffic to India of their time would not have been possible without the knowledge of the monsoon winds.<sup>411</sup> Arabs and Indian mariners were already familiar with the trade winds. Four different stories in antiquity explain how the Greeks broke their monopoly over the sea by discovering the value of the monsoon. Strabo's version of its discovery by the Ptolemais stemmed from an Indian shipwreck survivor who stayed in Alexandria as a ward of the king until he learned Greek and then offered to show the Greek traders the way to India.<sup>412</sup> The Ptolemais had barely begun to capitalize on their

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<sup>410</sup> For a discussion of Augustus's military attacks of Southern Arabia, see Steven E. Sidebotham, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa* 30 B.C.-A.D. 217 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 120-35.

<sup>411</sup> *PME* 57 and Pliny (Elder) NH 6, 26/100f; 104. For a full discussion of Roman use of the monsoon see Thorley, *Development of Trade*, 212-13.

<sup>412</sup> Parker, "Ex Oriente," 81-82 The Arabs and Indians used their knowledge to monopolize the trade until the Romans conquered their ports off of Yemen. Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin, 1990), 1:107.

“discovery” of the monsoons advantage when they succumbed to Rome.<sup>413</sup>

The Arabs monopolized the ports of trade between Ptolemaic Egypt and India until Augustus Caesar “pacified” their strongholds in Arabia Felix (Yemen).<sup>414</sup> Now merchants of Alexandria traveled to India directly without opposition,<sup>415</sup> by sailing up the Nile to Upper Egypt,<sup>416</sup> hiring camel caravans overland to the Red Sea, sailing up the coast of Yemen, and then crossing to India in huge convoys timed to the monsoons.<sup>417</sup> To facilitate writing his geography book, Strabo traveled up the Nile in 26-5 CE, and described the traffic headed to the Red Sea port of Myos Hormos.

....as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise. (Strabo II.5.12.)

The survival of a mariner’s manual, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, (PME) “*Guidebook of the Erythraean Sea*”<sup>418</sup> describes the mechanics of trade, including the slave trade, with India and East Africa. An anonymous Greco-Egyptian merchant wrote this unique text in simple *koine* for other overseas traders in the Indian Ocean. He described distances, navigational hazards, native peoples, and each port’s access, exports, and imports. References to one of the Nabatean Kings named Malichus dates the text to probably between 40-70 CE.<sup>419</sup> In this shipping manual, slaves as an import or export are

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<sup>413</sup> For a discussion of the presence of slaves, “flutegirls” on these first Greek trips to India, see Chapter 5.

<sup>414</sup> *PME* 26.

<sup>415</sup> For a discussion of the complete water route to India via the much dug canal, see Thorley, “Development of Trade,” 210.

<sup>416</sup> Boats on the Nile can ride the current south and because of the prevailing wind from the coast to the desert, they can sail north against the stream by catching the winds with their sails.

<sup>417</sup> This trade was organized around the monsoons heading straight across the sea by the reign of Ptolemy. XII Auletes (80-51 BCE) in Schmitthenner, “Rome and India,” 103.

<sup>418</sup> A term that mean the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Persian Gulf, and parts of the Indian Ocean. Lionel Casson, *The Ancient Mariners; Seafarers and Sea Fighters of the Mediterranean in Ancient Times*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 203.

<sup>419</sup> Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade; From Pots to Pepper* (London: Duckworth, 2008), 21.

mentioned for five different ports. The writer does not mention the origins of the slaves as his interest as a mariner started from the Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike.<sup>420</sup>

### **Evidence of Slave Trade between India and the Roman Empire**

This ancient mariner provides a manifold picture of the slave trade across the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean regions, not just India, although Indian ports take more than half of his book. The manual also describes the risks that traders and sailors took of becoming slaves themselves on these trips. He gave instructions that while sailing through the Red Sea, to set course as far west as possible to avoid the coast of Arabia. “Put on extra speed” to avoid the dangerous slave hunters along the Arabian shoreline known as fish eaters “who are vicious: they plunder any who stray from a course down the middle and fall among them, and they enslave any who are rescued by them from shipwreck....”<sup>421</sup> Pliny adds that ships on the India run carried assigned units of archers as guards since the waters were infested with pirates.<sup>422</sup> The presence of pirates indicates that shipping was frequent and trade was lucrative enough to support parasites.

The traders’ manual lays out where to acquire and sell slaves of different qualities (see Table 4.1). The slaves were always just part of a larger cargo. The slave’s place in the trade was eclipsed by constructed garments, fabrics, grain, wine, or even tortoise shells, used by Romans for veneer on furniture. The PME listed gifts of food and clothing expected by several other minor, local chiefs or rulers on the East African coast, but the king in India was the only one who required luxury goods. His required bill of lading

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<sup>420</sup> PME, I.

<sup>421</sup> PME, 20,

<sup>422</sup> Pliny, NH, 6.101.



**Table 4.1****Chart of Slave Imports and Exports in First Century****Red Sea and Indian Ocean Trade <sup>423</sup>**

<b>Port</b>	<b>Description of the Slave Trade at this Port</b>	<b>Periplus Reference</b>
Malao (modern Berbera, Somalia)	"on rare occasions slaves" (pick up for export)	8
Opone (modern Hafun, Somalia)	"better quality slaves (for export) the greater number of which go to Egypt"	13
Dioscurides (Socotra Island now governed by Yemen)	"female slaves (to import) which found a market because of a shortage there, for big cargoes of tortoise shell"	31
Omana "port of trade of Persis" (modern Chah Bahar or Tiz, Iran)	"slaves" (within list of exports to Barygaza and Arabia)	36
Barygaza Sanskrit-Bharukaccha (modern Baruch in Gujarat, India)	"For the king, there was imported in those times precious silverware, slave musicians, beautiful girls for concubinage, fine wines, etc."	49

<sup>423</sup> Chart compiled by author from Casson, *PME*, 55,59, 69, 73,81 and some map work.

included slaves who were trained to entertain or provide sexual companionship.

By the time of the PME, the Saka ruled the mid-western Indian coast. The Saka dynasty possessed incredible wealth from their grain, rice, sesame oil, ghee, and cotton.<sup>424</sup> With wealth came the desire and ability to possess foreign goods required to exhibit status, especially slave women and musicians whose light skin, hair, and eyes revealed their long-distance origins.

The PME listed the various “gifts” given to rulers to procure permission to trade. This requirement reflects back to the initial economic theories by Mauss, Polanyi, and their detractors who debated whether ancient exchange consisted of gifts, tribute with royal distribution, markets, or some combination of the above. This mixed market scenario where gifts to the king were required to participate in the local economy seems to be present in the larger ports in this era and these places. The required gift to the rulers, however, could be compared to the 25% tax on goods (probably paid in kind) that these traders paid to the Roman government on their goods brought back on their return trip to the Mediterranean which leads to the next evidence of this slave trade—the profit to Caesar, i.e., the emperor, and to Rome.

So far, finding international slave trade in antiquity has required a bit of detective work in texts and artifacts on both sides, sender and buyer. One of the maxims of investigation recommends, “Follow the money.” If each of the 120 ships observed by Strabo returned with an average of 300 tons of cargo, more than 36,000 tons of high value luxury goods: pearls, gems, spices, silks, and cottons arrived in Alexandria every

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<sup>424</sup>PME, 41 and McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 163.

year.<sup>425</sup> Indian finds of gold and silver coin hoards and amphora sherds from Italian wines show the value of these goods to the Indian market. The PME and customs records show that European slaves also served as commodities sent to India. These mixed cargos of precious metals, wine, food, and slaves together helped to open doors to the local market and to provide the trade goods wanted in India to pay for these huge cargos.

It seems ironic that the Roman Empire exported slaves when early Rome and its colonies were known for their high consumption of slaves. Ancient prophets and modern scholars point to the city of Rome as a magnet for slave importers. New Testament verses censure the city of Rome and the traders, including slave traders, “who became rich by her.” “The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore.”<sup>426</sup> “Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea (every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea) became rich by her wealth.”<sup>427</sup> The prophet lists Rome’s numerable imports, including those from the Indian Ocean trade—precious stones and pearls, silk and scarlet, cinnamon and incense—and lastly, “the bodies and souls of men.”<sup>428</sup>

One modern scholar of slave demographics ascertains that 80% of the imports to Rome (by value) were slaves, compared to 20% grain cargos.<sup>429</sup> Another scholar of Roman slavery calculated that 100,000 new slaves were needed each year in Italy from

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<sup>425</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, XVII. 1. 45 in Gary K. Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD 305* (London: Routledge, 2001), 25. Casson gives 340 ton as the preferred size of a freighter carrying government grain. Freighters of 350-500 tons, however, were not rare. The largest known ship of the ancient world (mid-third Century CE) had three decks and carried 1900 tons of grain. Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 172-73.

<sup>426</sup> *Revelation* 18:11

<sup>427</sup> *Revelation* 18.17, 19

<sup>428</sup> *Revelation* 18:13

<sup>429</sup> R. M. Geraghty “The Impact of Globalization in the Roman Empire 200 BC – AD 100” *Journal of Economic History* 67 (2007): 1058. Since many slaves came overland from the North, if this figure reflects only maritime shipping, it is still too conservative.

about 65 BCE to about 30 BCE and five times more, i.e., 500,000 new slaves were required yearly from about 50 BCE to 150 CE for the empire as a whole.<sup>430</sup> Roman slave usage waxed and waned. Still they permitted slaves to leave the empire, rather than require them to be shipped to Italian or other Roman markets. The government must have been complicit in the slave trade, at least to the degree that they enriched themselves by taxation on the export of slaves.<sup>431</sup>

Pliny the Elder (d. 79 CE) served as a witness for the volume of Asian luxury goods hitting the Roman market. As the consummate whiner, he complained about the effects of Indian luxury goods on Roman society. He complained about the spices, “Pepper’s only desirable quality is its pungency, yet for this we bring it all the way from India.”<sup>432</sup> He complained that the silk fabrics wrapped around Roman matrons were so sheer as to be immodest.<sup>433</sup> But most of all, he complained about all the specie that left the empire. He claims that “In no year does India drain less than 50 million *sestertii* from our empire.”<sup>434</sup> In another place, he rants that India, China, and Arabia. “...take from our empire 100 million *sestertii* each year. That is the sum which our luxuries and our own women cost us.”<sup>435</sup> For comparison, the average income per head in the Roman Empire at this time has been calculated below 400 sesterces.<sup>436</sup> Pliny’s moralistic financial lament has been criticized. He could have just given a vague estimate. He could have exaggerated as part of his Stoic moralizing. He does not say if the amount is the money that went to India or was the total retail cost of the return goods. All that can be

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<sup>430</sup> In comparison, the yearly average of African slaves transported to the Americans was only 51,000. Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32.

<sup>431</sup> Young, *Eastern Trade*, 25.

<sup>432</sup> Pliny, NH 12.14 in McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 143.

<sup>433</sup> Pliny, NH VI. 101.c.

<sup>434</sup> Pliny, NH VI. 26.101.

<sup>435</sup> Pliny, NH, XII. 41.84.

<sup>436</sup> Parker, *Ex Oriente*, 75.

definitely verified is that eastern trade was substantial.

Pliny the Elder's proof text lies in Indian soil. The coins left in India by Roman traders and studied by numismatists speak to the time and volume of trade from the Roman Mediterranean to India.<sup>437</sup> Even though only the coins which escaped being melted down remain, those remains are impressive.<sup>438</sup> Random finds or archaeological digs have brought to the surface around 6,000 Roman denarii and over 1,000 aurei (with reports of 10,000 aurei lost in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the Kottayam hoard).<sup>439</sup> Roman coins are found spread throughout India and some in China, but the majority appear in South India where the pepper is produced. Within the south, the east coast (Coromandel) facing Sri Lanka and East Asia had many more Roman coins (70% of the silver and 90% of the gold coins) rather than the west coast (Malabar) physically closer to Alexandria and Rome. This Roman presence on the east coast of India perhaps speaks to the Roman effort to use India as a port to reach Sri Lanka, S.E. Asia, and China either with their own ships or through trade with ships from those regions coming to trade in India. Most of the Roman coins are Julio-Claudian era coins, mostly from the mints functioning during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. Also notable is a surge of hoard finds from the later period of the Byzantine emperor, Justinian (d. 565). After that era of contact, then only occasional coins are found dating into the early seventh century.<sup>440</sup>

One explanation for the shortage of Roman coin finds after Justinian is another event that may have been aided by the Indian trade coming down the Nile to Alexandria.

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<sup>437</sup> Most books on Roman-Indian trade discuss these coins. A recent study with distribution maps can be found in Cobb, "Balancing the Trade," 187-90.

<sup>438</sup> India remains glutted with the world's gold from both ancient and medieval trade. This gold is transferred from family to family as bridal jewelry and worn by Indian women as display wealth.

<sup>439</sup> Cobb, "Balancing the Trade," 187.

<sup>440</sup> Tomber, *Pots to Pepper*, 33.

It appears that Justinian's attempt to re-establish the glory and reach of the ancient Roman Empire included trade with Greater India as shown by his coins found there. That trade provided transmission routes for disease including the devastation of the pandemic known as "Justinian's Plague." This epidemic of the bubonic plague spread from Pelusium at the mouth of the Nile to Constantinople by the Spring of 542 CE, killing ten thousand victims a day according to eye witnesses, Procopius.<sup>441</sup> Some modern scholars have identified the sixth century Red Sea port of Clysma as the entry point of the plague.<sup>442</sup> The ports of call listed in the PME show how this entire region was interconnected with Indian and East African trade.<sup>443</sup> The pandemic then cycled every eight to twelve years around the Mediterranean and Parthian worlds well into the Muslim era diminishing the population by 50-60%.<sup>444</sup>

Of those killed, traders and residents of the port cities providing trade infrastructure were hardest hit.<sup>445</sup> Byzantine customers not only were reduced in numbers but the survivors also had to finance seasonal wars against the Muslims. Regional and long-distance trade entered a tailspin from which it did not recover until well into the Abbasid era, a shortage of commerce which is reflected by the disappearance of Roman coins in India.

Specie was probably most important, but it was not the only trade item taken to India. Red coral, wine, olive oil, grain, clothing, and slaves were also used for exchange. The residual remains of these trade products have disappeared except for the pottery

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<sup>441</sup> Procopius, *Persian War* II.22–23. For more details, see William Rosen, *Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe* (New York: Viking Adult, 2007). Rosen claims that the plague killed 25 million and ended the Roman Empire.

<sup>442</sup> Costas Tsiamis, Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou and Eleni Petridou, "The Red Sea and the Port of Clysma; A Possible Gate of Justinian's Plague," *Gesnerus* 66 no. 2 (2009): 209-217.

<sup>443</sup> See PME chart above.

<sup>444</sup> Josiah C. Russell, "That Earlier Plague," *Demography* 5, no. 1 (1968): 179.

<sup>445</sup> Dols, *Plague*, 381.

shards of the amphora used for shipping liquids and a few art objects.<sup>446</sup> Their presence in the sources, however, reveal that overall trade was more than coins, plentiful as they are. If you divide Pliny's estimate of 50 million *sestertii* between Strabo's 120 ships, then each ship would only carry an average of one cubic meter of coins. Ships would require huge amounts of the other trade goods for ballast to ensure stable buoyancy in strong winds.<sup>447</sup> The PME shows that traders mixed cargos of coins, metals, slaves, foods, and manufactured goods to balance their cargos and spread risk by diversifying. An ancient south Indian poetry of the Tamils backs up the numismatic evidence that Romans used coinage in trade. One poem describes, "The large beautiful ships built by the Yavanas came with gold...returned with pepper".<sup>448</sup> Some of the earliest Tamil poems, however, also show how much the abundant "cool fragrant wine" was prized by the Indian consumers.<sup>449</sup> The procurement of these goods for export from all over the Roman Empire, as indicated by the multiple origins of the amphora clay, would have enriched local economies.<sup>450</sup>

### **Taxing Long-distance Slave Traders**

The life and death of most slaves is unknown; however, the records of the taxation of this human commodity as they passed through the custom houses between

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<sup>446</sup> One possible exception to slaves leaving no remains is two bullae discussed further in the chapter. Peppercorns, coconut husks, etc. have been found in archaeological digs at the Red Sea ports. Tomber, *Pots to Pepper*, 54-5.

<sup>447</sup> Cobb, *Balancing the Trade*, 198.

<sup>448</sup> *Tayan-Kannanar*, Agam 149, line 7-11 in Kamil Zvelebil, "The Yavanas in Old Tamil Literature," in *Charisteria Orientalia: praecipue ad Persiam pertinentia*, ed. Felix Tauer, Vera Kubickova, and Ivan Hrbek (Praha: Nakladatelstvi Ceskoslovenske Akademie Ved, 1956,) 403.

<sup>449</sup> *Puram* 50, v. 16-21 in Zvelebil, "The Yavanas," 402.

<sup>450</sup> Amphorae vessels contained wine, olive oil, and *garum* (fish sauce). The province of the amphorae found in India include Western and Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea and their making spans from the first century BC to the sixth or seventh century CE. Tomber, *Pots to Pepper*, 42.

Rome and India remains as a witness to their economic clout. The greatest tax faced by traders consisted of the *tetarte*, or one quarter of all their goods paid either in cash or kind. This tax was collected in Alexandria for the maritime trade and in various desert cities for the overland trade. For our purposes, however, this tax only shows the overall wealth that the Roman government gained in return for a small investment in protecting routes.<sup>451</sup> In addition to the imperial *tetarte*, traders paid a number of tolls mid-route. Coptos, on the Nile between the Red Sea ports and the Mediterranean, is known from a papyrus business letter of a merchant. It states, “To the public custom-house at Coptos, and I will place (them) under the authority and seal of you or of your agents or of whoever of them is present until the loading on the river.”<sup>452</sup> The document does not give the amount of the tolls or how they were used. It is assumed that these customs were used to pay for local upkeep and protection of the roads. This “toll booth” was sophisticated enough to impound goods in a warehouse until the merchants could pay the duties—again testimony of the over-all value and importance of the trade.<sup>453</sup>

The documentation of the custom houses on these routes provides a list of the goods that passed through them. From these texts, the presence and relative value of slaves to other goods or people can be determined. One list of tolls carved into a stele, in approximately 90 CE called the Coptos Tariff<sup>454</sup> enumerates the goods and persons of different status, and the tolls that they were charged.

This text reveals that the first century feminine slave trade went both ways. The

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<sup>451</sup> For a discussion of how significant the tax income was to the imperial government, see Chapter 6; ‘The Long-distance Trade and the Imperial Government’ 201-12 in Young, *Eastern Trade* and Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 75ff.

<sup>452</sup> P. Vindob G 40822 recto, col. 2, 4-6 in Young, *Eastern Trade*, 48.

<sup>453</sup> Young, *Eastern Trade*, 48.

<sup>454</sup> Alternative name is “Tariff of Koptos.”



difference in taxation for gender and commercial sexual use proves revealing. The ships' male servants, sailors, ship lookouts, or guards were charged between five and ten drachmas. The fees for women, however, ranged from twenty to 108 drachmas. The lower twenty drachma toll was for "women arriving by ship" or "women of the soldiers." For a woman, however, whose "purpose was prostitution," the custom duties were 108 drachmas or more than five times a woman (captive, concubine, or free wife?) who was claimed by a soldier and ten to twenty times more than a sailor.<sup>455</sup> Slave status of the prostitutes can only be assumed from Greco-Roman usage of slaves for brothels and the high toll.<sup>456</sup> This steep duty for prostitutes reveals the relative value of imported and exported female sex slaves and the profit that could be accrued from their trade.<sup>457</sup> An interesting fact is that all women going towards India were only charged four drachmas but still four times the one drachma toll charged for a man.<sup>458</sup>

The expectation that women traveling to the East were profitable to tax is revealed in a humorous story from the biography of the wandering teacher, Apollonius of Tyana, (d. @ 97 CE) a Greek Syrian Neopythagorean philosopher during the reign of Nero. The scene takes place as the peripatetic philosopher passes through the customs post of Zeugma before the Euphrates crossing on the Parthian overland route to India. When the customs officer asked the standard question, "What do you have to declare?" the traveler recited a list of virtues, Grace, Faith, Charity, Patience, Discipline, etc. which the officer immediately assumed were the names of slave girls which could be taxed at

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<sup>455</sup> The *R. Vindob Papyrus* (G 40822) in Young, *Eastern Trade*, 49.

<sup>456</sup> According to records of slave sales, slave prices also differed between gender. An ordinary slave brought 500 drachmas while in Egypt, female slaves sold for 1,200-1,500 drachmas. Male slave info from Horace, *Satires*, 2.7.43, female slaves from Westermann (1955) 100-1. in McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 214, f. 137.

<sup>457</sup> Tarn, *Greeks*, 375.

<sup>458</sup> *OGIS 674= IGRR I. 1183 (Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae)* in Young, *Eastern Trade*, 48-50, 250, f. 145.

the highest rates. The philosopher further confused the issue by insisting that these feminine virtues were his mistresses upon which he was required to commit his declaration to writing, capturing the assumptions of the toll collectors based on previous engagements with traders.<sup>459</sup>

Indian eunuchs imported into the Mediterranean also show up on these lists of taxable commodities. Eunuchs became increasingly fashionable, perhaps because of the growing contact with eastern courts that utilized them since the second millennium BC. In the contemporary Han court, eunuchs held inordinate power. Castration was forbidden (but done) within the Roman empire from Domitian's reign (81-96 CE),<sup>460</sup> increasing the value of imported eunuchs. The Alexandrian Tariff list attributed to Aelius Marcianus, a jurist in the early third century, and quoted again in Justinian Roman code in the sixth century, lists 54 imports subject to "Import Duty."<sup>461</sup> Indian eunuchs are listed as #47.<sup>462</sup> Eunuchs were taxed at 12.5% compared to linen at 5% and silk at 25% in Justinian's code used in the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>463</sup> These tax rates show the presence of slaves and the rate of return that their sale could be expected to produce.

Once in the Mediterranean, slave dealers could scatter slaves as far as northern Britain through networks like those of the Syrian trade diaspora. An elaborate tombstone found near Hadrian's Wall shows a wealthy merchant's wife dressed in fine fabrics with a dedication carved in both Latin and Palmyrene. She was a locally freed slave from the Catuvellauni Celtic tribe in SE Britain and the wife of a Syrian merchant named Barates

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<sup>459</sup> Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyra*, I. 20. Discussed in McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 92, 102, James Innes Miller, *Spice Trade of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 226.

<sup>460</sup> A. H. Jones, "Asian Trade in Antiquity" in *Islam and the Trade of Asia; A Colloquium*, ed. D. S. Richards (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 4.

<sup>461</sup> No slave women are listed, but Indian hair is last on the list.

<sup>462</sup> *Rescript concerning Eastern Trade in Justinian's Digest of the Roman Law; The Civil Law*, trans. and ed. S. P. Scott (Cincinnati, 1932) 9:39.4.16, in Parker, "Ex Oriente," 41-42.

<sup>463</sup> Miller, *Spice Trade*, 226.

known for supplying silk banners to the nearby garrisons.<sup>464</sup> While this slave girl was locally sourced, it was a rare trader who did not include slaves in his staff or goods.<sup>465</sup>

### **Evidence of Western Slaves in India**

In Indian literature, texts from the period mention the presence and wealth of the westerners who settled among them. The *Mahabharata*, the major Sanskrit Indian epic, mentions Rome (*Roma*), along with Antioch (*Antakhi*), and Alexandria (*Yavanapuri*).<sup>466</sup> Indian poetry, dramas, and even grammar books all mention Yavanas and Yavana women in India although pinning them to either the Greco or Roman period remains elusive. The term Yavana now adds Romans to the initial meaning of Greek, Macedonian, or Ionian. Some Yavanas could have been Indo-Greek migrants leaving North India as the Scythians invaded the Indo-Greek states of North India. They could join communities of fellow Greek speakers coming by sea.<sup>467</sup>

The mention of western women in Indian texts shows that significant numbers of Mediterranean females, especially harem slaves, were available, at least in India although dating is ambiguous.<sup>468</sup> The slave trade, however, remains difficult to trace in archaeology. Shackles or the remains of strongholds to store slaves during transport can only hint of the presence of slave traders.

Matching archaeological finds in central India, however, could point to the slave trade of women from the Mediterranean to India and date it to the Roman era. Two clay

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<sup>464</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 156, f. 152.

<sup>465</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 156, f. 153.

<sup>466</sup> *Mahabharata* 2.28.49 in Moti Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), 4.

<sup>467</sup> Romila Thapar, *Early India from the Origins to AD 1300* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 243.

<sup>468</sup> See Chapter 5 for a review and analysis of these texts.

bullae marked with Brahmi characters, dated to the second century CE contain the legend, “Yavanikanam” which translates to “of the Yavanikas-female Yavanas.” Bullae are small circular tablets produced in clay from a mold. Light in weight, they have a loop or perforation for threading. Archaeologists identify their use most likely as neck ornaments due to decorations or coin imprints found on some. In India, they are found from 300 BCE to 400 CE.<sup>469</sup> Both examples were found in the ruins of cities that had served as trade centers. One was in Mathura (in Madhya Pradesh), the former Kushan capital on the Yamuna River, which reached its height as a political and trade center during the first two centuries of the Christian Era.<sup>470</sup> The other bulla marked as Yavanika turned up in the ruins of Ujjain on the Sipra River (modern Uttar Pradesh). During the third century BCE, this city was a Mauryan seat of a viceroy. The Roman era trade guide, *Periplus of the Erythraean Seas*, notes that Ujjain (known as Ozone) was an important hub for Roman trade.<sup>471</sup>

These two “Yavanikanam” bullae were possibly more than just cheap “neck ornaments” proposed by the archaeologists. Perhaps, slave dealers took this local fashion of clay terracotta baubles and adapted the style to advertise which of their girls were imported from the West. Using metal plates hung around the necks to identify slaves was a common practice in the Roman slave market. Greeks and Roman slave dealers often added a slave’s origins to their description, showing that many were imported from Anatolia, Southern Russia, and Syria.<sup>472</sup> For example, Strabo informs us that the Athenians named their slaves after their ethnicity, like “Lydos” or “Syros,” or gave them

<sup>469</sup> A. Ghosh, “6.4 Bullae,” *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 1:177-78.

<sup>470</sup> A. Ghosh, “Mathura,” *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1990), 2:283-86.

<sup>471</sup> A. Ghosh, “Ujjain,” in *Indian Archaeology* 2:447-49.

<sup>472</sup> A search for names indicating Indian origins has found only one individual, Indus, from between the first and second century, CE. Schmitthenner, “Rome and India,” 96.

a name instantly recognizable as being from a certain locale.<sup>473</sup> The slave ID plates of the Mediterranean could have served a purpose similar to the clay markers tied onto girls in the Indian market. If this interpretation that the clay bullae were used by slave dealers to advertise or identify Yavana slave girls is correct, it would follow that it was profitable to identify girls with western origins for the market. This differentiation between Yavana and other foreign slaves, shown in that no clay bullae for other ethnicities have been found, could explain why Yavana slave girls were especially noted in Indian texts, implying that they were a luxury good, and their presence provided prestige to their owner.

In this era, ports and cities appeared in South India. Yavana westerners, now meaning Greeks or Romans, appear in texts as *Yavanar*, in Tamil, the dominant language of South India in this era. Tamil poems describe Yavanar merchants, ships, port colonies, and most of all, their desirable wine and gold that they brought to exchange for pepper.<sup>474</sup> Like all Indian literature, dating for these poems remains problematic.<sup>475</sup> “Their date is as much in dispute as their interpretation.”<sup>476</sup> Scholars posit that the oldest texts from the Golden Age of Tamil literature allude to events of the second to third centuries CE.<sup>477</sup> In over 2,000 published Tamil poems, trade is described fifty times, but Yavanas are only mentioned in ten poems, showing their presence but insignificance in the large picture of Indian trade.<sup>478</sup> In the later Tamil literature, Yavanas are no longer mentioned in

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<sup>473</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 7.3.12 C304, in Parker, “Ex Oriente,” 48-49.

<sup>474</sup> Thapar, *Early India*, 241.

<sup>475</sup> Tomber, *Pots to Pepper*, 26-27.

<sup>476</sup> Schmitthenner, “Rome and India,” 99.

<sup>477</sup> The poems may not have been collected until the seventh century or later. Miller, *Spice Trade*, 278, Schmitthenner, “Rome and India,” 99.

<sup>478</sup> E. H. Seland, “Ports, Ptolemy, Periplus, and Poetry-Romans in Tamil South India and on the Bay of Bengal” in *The Indian Ocean in the Ancient Period: Definite Places, Translocal Exchange* (Oxford: BAR

connection to trade but appear to have built a colony or trade area and became permanent residents. The poetry recognized their skills as craftsmen, engravers, carpenters, lamp makers, and guards, “The hard eyed Yavanas of terrible appearance whose body is of strong joints.”<sup>479</sup> One puzzling enigma from Tamil literature is that the Tamil term, Yavanar, does not distinguish between men and women. None of their mentions can be definitively understood as a woman. Perhaps the Yavana women were now so common, at least in this region, that they no longer served as prestige slaves worthy of recording. With so few mentions of Yavanar in Tamil literature, new discoveries, collections, and editing are needed to fill that gap in knowledge.<sup>480</sup>

Tamil traders took advantage of their geography, located at the tip of India protruding far into the Indian Ocean, to give them access to trade to the West and to the East. Indian mariners established networks throughout South-East Asia and eventually reached China. A few intrepid Roman mariners sailed around India and followed them. Multiple ports across South East Asia served as emporiums for local, Roman, and Chinese goods.<sup>481</sup>

The great number of Roman coins and artifacts in India and in South East Asia together with the eastern and western textual sources on shipping and taxation witness to the profit that Rome garnered from this East-West trade.<sup>482</sup> Slaves were just one of the cogs in this wheel that generated tremendous wealth for the Roman government and

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Intl. Ser. 1593, 2007), 71, R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization; South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 178.

<sup>479</sup> *Mullaippattu* 59-61 from the anthology, *Pattuppattu*, found in Zvelebil, “The Yavanas,” 404.

<sup>480</sup> One Jewish slave girl is mentioned in connection to St. Thomas which would place her in Tamil land in the Roman era but not in Tamil literature. See Chapter 5.

<sup>481</sup> Ying-shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China; A Study of the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 152 ff.

<sup>482</sup> Roman coin finds do not prove that Romans had actually been to that place since coins can pass from hand to hand as trade goods.

riches for the merchants whose “ships had come in.” As the Roman traders traveled further and further east, they found that Roman entertainers had reached East Asian courts a century ahead of them.<sup>483</sup>

### **Rome and China: The Quest for Silk**

Although some scholars disagree, most accept the common translation for the Han Chinese term *Ta'Chin* as Rome or at least the Eastern Mediterranean region of the Roman Empire. The word, *Ta'Chin*, is not a phonetic rendering but means “Great China,” reflecting an understanding that this great power in the west was comparable to the power of China itself.<sup>484</sup> A later term, *Fu-lin*, is understood to be Po-lin which could be the abbreviated form of “Constantinople” or the Byzantium Empire.<sup>485</sup> Chinese sources describe Ta-Ch'in as the country “west of a great sea,” or “west of the Western Sea”<sup>486</sup> but not particularly friendly with their neighbors, the *An-his* or Parthian Empire. Rome was important as a huge customer of Chinese silk, even though this fabric had to be carried by camels, mules, yaks, or ships over 6,000 kilometers.

Except for rare exceptions, these two great empires traded via Asian middle men. Chinese merchants were never seen in Rome and rarely were Roman merchants mentioned in China. These traders may be labeled “Roman” in Chinese texts, but they predominantly were the same Egyptian, Jewish, and Greek merchants from Alexandria who, before the Roman conquest, had been trading for the Ptolemies in the Indian Ocean

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<sup>483</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 42, 150-51.

<sup>484</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, XVIII.

<sup>485</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, XVIII, John Ferguson, Milton Keynes, “China and Rome,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2, no. 9.2, (n.d.):585.

<sup>486</sup> From the Chinese sources, it is not clear if the Western Sea is the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, or Indian Ocean.

when organized traffic picked up during the reign of Ptolemy XII Auletes (80-51 BCE).<sup>487</sup> The few Roman traders who made the long trip to the Han court all came to China by sea. The first arrived in 166 CE. The Chinese chronicles recorded these first Roman entrepreneurs as an official delegation from Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (*An-tun* in Chinese) but the poor quality and local sourcing of their tribute gifts caused their appropriated government credentials to be doubted.<sup>488</sup> On the land routes crisscrossing Asia, the merchants of the Kushan and Parthian empires mediated the trade. After the Pax Augusta and the resulting economic boom, the volume of the silk trade through the Parthian overland route and their competition, the Indian Ocean maritime routes, increased rapidly. Until the fall of the Byzantine empire, Constantinople was never without silk, its largest luxury imports from China in terms of quantity.<sup>489</sup>

Silk found in early Egyptian, West Asian, and European tombs does not prove trade with China before the Han dynasty (founded in the late second century BCE). Europeans and Indians<sup>490</sup> both produced wild silk, centuries earlier, using an economically viable wild silkworm species. The silk made by the Chinese was desired over wild silk, however, because of their improvements in production which allowed finer fabrics. The Chinese had learned to domesticate the *Bombyx mori* species of moth and to process raw silk by boiling the cocoon. This boiling kills the moth before it matures and eats its way through the fibers requiring them to be joined by spinning. Boiling the cocoons in a slightly alkaline solution removes the sericin which allows

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<sup>487</sup> Schmitthenner, "Rome and India," 103. Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.13 discusses the significant contribution that Indian commerce made to state revenues under Auletes.

<sup>488</sup> For these and other records of Roman merchants in the Chinese records, see Ferguson, *China and Rome*, 594-5.

<sup>489</sup> Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion, An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>490</sup> For early silk in India see I. L. Good, J. M. Kenoyer, and R. H. Meadow, "New Evidence for Early Silk in the Indus Civilization," *Archaeometry* 51, no. 3 (2009): 457-58.



strands to be removed thinner and with greater sheen, allowing for more translucent, shinier fabrics when woven.<sup>491</sup>

These technological advances in silk production gave China a home industry that could produce an export product in huge volume. Silk was key to the Han economy and political expansion. Emperors used bolts of silk as currency to pay soldiers, to buy horses and to secure peace from nomads, which allowed for their westward expansion and control of the Silk Routes.

The Ptolemies and Seleucids had traded with early Han China but silk had been imported in relatively small quantities, for example fabric for Cleopatra's transparent dresses of silk rewoven in Sidon.<sup>492</sup> During the Roman era, silk became abundant enough in the West to serve as a status symbol for a large swath of the population.<sup>493</sup> Even the besieger of Rome, Alaric, demanded four thousand silk Chinese tunics to go with his Indian pepper, paying for his retreat back to central Europe with Asian products.<sup>494</sup> Until a couple of monks smuggled domesticated silk moths to Justinian's court allowing local production, silk was worth its weight in gold or pearls.<sup>495</sup>

Ironically, "silk" went both ways. The heavy brocade Chinese silk traveled west across the Silk Routes or maritime routes to the weaving factories of the Levant. There, the heavy fabric was completely unraveled, and rewoven into a light transparent silk gauze or into a silk-linen or silk-wool blends and then dyed, some with the Tyrian purple

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<sup>491</sup> For early silk in Europe see Irene Good, "On the Question of Silk in Pre-Han Eurasia," *Antiquity* 69 (1995): 960.

<sup>492</sup> Florus 2.34.62 in Ferguson, *China and Rome*, 591.

<sup>493</sup> Florence E. Day, "Silks of the Near East," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series 9, no. 4 (December, 1950): 109.

<sup>494</sup> Ferguson, "China and Rome," 588.

<sup>495</sup> *Procopius* 8.17. 1-8 claims the monks are from India. Theophanes 4,270.3 says a Persian brought the eggs in a bamboo stalk. Ferguson, *China and Rome*, 597. "Weight in gold" from Yu, *Han China*, 159. See also, John Feltwell, *The Story of Silk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 9.

dye from the Murex sea-snail, for which the Lebanese coast was famous.<sup>496</sup>

Traders reshipped some of this reconstituted silk back east through Parthia where Parthian merchants had Chinese convinced that the “fine silk cloth” was produced by Roman silk worms.<sup>497</sup> The Chinese sources also mention importing other “silks” and fabrics from Rome.<sup>498</sup> These “silks” could have been made from the cocoons of wild silk worms which were produced on the Aegean island of Cos.<sup>499</sup> Another luxury fabric was woven from the down of “water sheep.”<sup>500</sup> *Pinna nobilis*, a type of Mediterranean clam which produce silk-like hairs to attach themselves to rocks, most likely can be identified as the water creatures which produced *byssus*, a fabric produced until the nineteenth century. These luxury fabrics produced in Europe, along with woven asbestos and fabric interwoven with gold strands, were highly prized in the ancient world and desired by Chinese royals.<sup>501</sup>

Silks dominated the westward trade to Rome although small luxury items, worked gem stones, and medicinal rhubarb for constipation also made up the contents of traders’ goods headed for the West. Roman goods also reached China through middle men. Chinese sources list numerous articles that they assumed came from Ta’Chin, predominantly worked gem stones and glass.<sup>502</sup> Chinese sources do not list Roman slaves

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<sup>496</sup> Thorley, *Development of Trade*, 217.

<sup>497</sup> John Thorley, “The Silk Trade between China and the Roman Empire at Its Height, ‘Circa’ A. D. 90-130,” *Greece & Rome*, Second Series 18, no. 1 (April 1971), 77, 79-80, Ferguson, “China and Rome”, 590-1.

<sup>498</sup> *Hou Hanshu*, Section 12, Zhong Shuju edition, 1965, trans. and annotated by John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes During the Later Han Dynasty 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> Centuries CE* (n.p.:Booksurge.com, 2009), 25. Also listed in *Wei-Lueh* (in *San-Kuo-Chih* 30) in Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 65, 74, 227.

<sup>499</sup> Kos, alternative spelling. Feltwell, *Silk*, 10, For wild silk, see Good, “Silk in Eurasia,” 959-68.

<sup>500</sup> For water sheep see Ferguson, “China and Rome”, 583, *Hou-Han-Shu* 88 (*Lieh-Chuan* 78) in Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 239, 50, 61, 71, 110, 203, 237-8, 362.

<sup>501</sup> Thorley, “Silk Trade,” 77.

<sup>502</sup> For lists of Roman products in Chinese sources see *Wei-Lueh* (in *San-Kuo-Chih* 30) in Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 71-74 ff, *Hou Hanshu*, Section 12 in Hill, *Jade Gate*, 25-29, 259-309.

as an import and, unlike India, did not have western slaves listed in their harem. Roman products and Roman slaves did arrive in China but usually through the mediation of Persian and S.E. Asian courts or traders. This transfer of trade goods to China shows in the coin finds. Unlike the thousands of Roman coins found in India, not a single Roman coin was found in China except for a few dating from Byzantium in the 530's.<sup>503</sup> Silver Sassanid coins, however, are abundant, speaking to the monopoly that the Persians maintained over the trade of Late Antiquity.<sup>504</sup> In conclusion, Romans bought a great deal of silk, but any slaves who were traded east as part of the transaction probably ended up in the Near East or South East Asia. The few western slaves in Han China were diplomatic gifts from these regions.

### **Elite Slavery in China**

To comprehend slave trade to China, it is essential to understand the royal Chinese version of the institution of slavery. The acquisition and gifting of slaves between royals shows a high degree of cultural uniformity in this aspect of court culture across time and distance as the practice appears similar to what was seen in the Amarna Diplomatic letters from two millennia earlier.<sup>505</sup> The use of slaves in the court of Han China was even more ubiquitous than in Rome.<sup>506</sup> Whether China initiated war to acquire large numbers of slaves is unclear. The accounts of some battles record thousands

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<sup>503</sup> Valarie Hansen, *The Silk Road, A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20.

<sup>504</sup> Hansen, *Silk Road*, 20.

<sup>505</sup> See Chapter 2 for Amarna evidence of exchange of slaves. See Chapter 7 for a discussion on shared court culture across Asia.

<sup>506</sup> Walter Scheidel "From the 'Great Convergence' to the 'First Great Divergence,'" in *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* ed. Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

of captives but the sources do not speak to what became of them.<sup>507</sup> Treaties regarding the Great Wall show that one of its main purposes was preventing slaves from escaping to areas outside of control which would indicate that a number of slaves came from raids on the nomads or perhaps, that nomads did the raiding and were selling their captives to the more agricultural or urban Chinese markets.<sup>508</sup> Other routes to slavery within China included judicial enslavement of the families of executed criminals, kidnapping, and selling family members during periods of famine or personal crisis.<sup>509</sup>

Families also sold their daughters to dealers who could train them in hopes of the girls becoming elite concubines or entertainers, sometimes providing social mobility to the whole family. Some also castrated their sons for palace work as eunuchs. We know about this route for girls into slavery from Wang Weng-hsu whose story was preserved. She was sold at age eight or nine to begin her training under Liu Chung-ch'ing, a state official. When a merchant from Han-tan came looking for singers and dancers, she was resold despite her mother's claim that the dealer had not yet paid the parents for her. At some point during her training, she was chosen by an agent of Emperor Wu's Heir-apparent. Once in the palace, she caught the eye of the royal prince and bore him a child. During a massacre of the Prince and his entire household on charges of black magic, the baby was hidden and raised as a commoner. When the Emperor Chao died without heir in 74 BC, this grandson was enthroned and eventually his mother of humble origins, now dead, was posthumously called "Empress," the queen mother of the empire.<sup>510</sup> This story

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<sup>507</sup> K. C. Chang, "Ancient Trade as Economics or as Ecology" in *Ancient Civilization and Trade*, ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff and C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 218; C. Martin Wilber, *Slavery in China during the Former Han Dynasty* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1943), 34:72-117.

<sup>508</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 95.

<sup>509</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 72-96.

<sup>510</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 44, 123, 162, 181.

and other sources show that the terms for female slave and concubine appear together as though there were no distinction between them.<sup>511</sup> This linguistic lack of distinction between freedom and slavery exists also for entertainers, leaving scholars to believe that they were predominantly slaves.<sup>512</sup>

Court chronicles show that gifts/tribute offered by neighbors and allies provided a major source for royal slaves, especially concubines and entertainers. Even if the givers, foreigner diplomats or traders, were not vassals, the Han court officials recorded all gifts as tribute. For example, in 49 CE, the leader of the Wu-huan in Manchuria/Inner Mongolia came with 900 followers to present “tribute” which included male and female slaves, livestock, weapons, and furs but returned with even richer gifts.<sup>513</sup> Wu Ti (140-87 BCE) explained that the emperor distributed treasures and silks as rewards and gifts in richer measure than all that they had brought him.<sup>514</sup> These gifts or tribute also represented potential or actual trade. Hostage princes, ambassadors, and foreign merchants also offered male and female slaves to government officials as gifts or bribes.<sup>515</sup>

### **Mediterranean Slaves as Tribute to China**

Western sources are silent on their people in China. Chinese chronicles, however, describe Mediterranean slaves playing the role of entertainers in two foreign tribute packages from their allies on their frontiers. These slaves, who survived both the long trip to China and made it into the sources, make for a short story.

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<sup>511</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 162.

<sup>512</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 181.

<sup>513</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 95-96.

<sup>514</sup> Frederick J. Teggart, *Rome and China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939), 214-15, f. 59.

<sup>515</sup> Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 96.

The early Han dynasty conquered the Turkish tribes which controlled Central Asia bringing Chinese borders of control up to the borders of the new empire of Parthia. The shah of Parthia, Mithridates II (124-87 BCE), with a formidable armed force of 20,000 cavalry soldiers, welcomed the emissary of the Han emperor, a general named Chang Ch'ien, at his eastern frontier, now their common border. With the Central Asian nomadic tribes between them pacified, the rulers of China and Parthia signed a treaty of alliance in 115 BCE. For his diplomatic efforts, the Chinese general-diplomat was given a local Turkish woman, along with horses, grape vines, and alfalfa to introduce to China.<sup>516</sup> This Turkish woman is not part of the story of western slaves since the Turks had not yet moved into the Mediterranean, but she demonstrates how ubiquitous it was to seal every agreement, even with a proxy, by giving a concubine.

Following the peace treaty, Parthian ambassadors carried tribute for the Emperor Wu Ti to the capital. The Chinese sources record that the Parthian king sent tribute which included slaves.<sup>517</sup> "They offered to the Chinese court large birds' eggs, and jugglers from Li-kan, at which His Majesty was highly pleased."<sup>518</sup> These trained slaves serving as a diplomatic gift have been given Seleucid origins. A nineteenth century Orientalist scholar, Friedrich Hirth, identified the jugglers' origin as Li-kan, a place which he explains is represented by different Chinese characters in the various records mentioning the tribute. He argues from Chinese etymology and Seleucid overland trade destinations that these entertainers originated from Petra or Rekem located within the Nabatean

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<sup>516</sup> Ferguson, "*China and Rome*", 591.

<sup>517</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 222. A discussion of the Chinese understanding of the term used for these slaves and its cultural meaning can be found in Chapter 5 in the section on Chinese acrobats.

<sup>518</sup> *Shih-chi*, Chapter 123. Ta-wan was written about B.C. 91 and more expanded in *Ch'ien-han-shu*, chapter 96A A, His-yu-chuan: An-shi-kuo written about A.D. 90 encompassed facts from 206 BCE-25 CE. Friedrich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Leipzig: G. Hirth, 1885), 35-36.

trading realm making them Syrians in the Han court.<sup>519</sup> Ostriches were also indigenous in the ancient Levant. This interpretation has gained traction in most discussions on the topic, including Yu Ying-shih, who places these jugglers' origins in the Roman Orient.<sup>520</sup> Chinese government sponsored scholarship by Shen Fuwei, however, identifies these entertainers from Luxuan which, "according to the *History of the Han Dynasty*, was located to the north of Anxi (Parthia) or Traxiane by the Oxus River (Amu-Darya)."<sup>521</sup> The dissonance between these two interpretations of Li-kan - Luxuan remains unresolved.

The sources do not state how the Parthian court came to possess these Greek or Central Asian entertainers. Perhaps they were captives from wars between the Persians and the Greeks. Perhaps they were bought by agents of the Parthian crown from slave dealers who specialized in training and selling slaves for entertainment. They could have been gifts to the Parthian court from the Seleucid, Ptolemaic, or Indo-Greek rulers. Perhaps their "agent" or owner brought them to the court in the hope of patronage or a rich present.

That these skillful conjurors were slaves, not free, is a conjecture based on Greek and Chinese traditions of using foreign trained slaves to add an element of exoticism to elite entertainment.<sup>522</sup> Slave dealers had the resources necessary to buy, feed, clothe, and train the more talented children of the captives or slave markets. They could provide the substantial investment needed for years of training to bring an entertainer's ability up to

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<sup>519</sup> Hirth, *Roman Orient*, 169-71.

<sup>520</sup> Yu, *Han China*, 97. Syria only became "Roman" in 63 BCE although, most residents probably still considered themselves culturally and linguistically Greek.

<sup>521</sup> Fuwei Shen, *Cultural Flow between China and Outside World throughout History* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>522</sup> See Chapter 5 for Chinese sources on entertainers as slaves.

“show time.” A free entertainer could refuse to travel or refuse to provide sexual services to the recipient, both of which could mar a planned diplomatic gift. Slave status would solve these problems.

The Han general Chang Ch'ien also convinced the Wu Ti to send embassies to the minor rulers in Central Asia, including a number of Indo-Greek states, especially in Bactria.<sup>523</sup> Matching the names of Indo-Greek rulers in the Chinese chronicles to the legends of ruler's names on Indo-Greek coins proves problematic.<sup>524</sup> The speculation that Greek slaves could have come to China through these diplomatic ties can be based only on the simple algebra formula, If  $A = B$ , and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ . A. - The customary tribute gifts of vassals expected by the Han emperors included people: royal daughters for the harem or sons for hostages, concubines, dwarves, musicians, dancers, and other entertainers.<sup>525</sup> B.- Although Indo-Greeks have left no texts other than coin legends, the Chinese chronicles record diplomatic visits to and from them.<sup>526</sup> Therefore, C.- the Indo-Greeks most likely provided yet another source of western slaves as tribute gifts to China in this period.<sup>527</sup> Even more speculative is the suggestion that these slaves were Greek. Since the other Mediterranean slaves that appear in the Han court were given to the emperor by non-Greek rulers, the ethnicity of tribute slaves given was not related to the ethnicity of the giver. If any slaves passed from Indo-Greek rulers to the Han, it is just as likely that they were Turkish, Indian, or any other nationality. Since these slaves remain invisible in the few records remaining, their ethnicity, travels, and even existence

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<sup>523</sup> A. K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 139.

<sup>524</sup> Narain, *Indo-Greeks*, 129.

<sup>525</sup> Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand; A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), Chapter 2, 40-57.

<sup>526</sup> Narain, *Indo-Greeks*, 130, 154 ff.

<sup>527</sup> Ferguson, “China and Rome”, 592. The only internal documentation of Indo-Greek rule is coins.



in China remain only a possibility.<sup>528</sup>

Slaves formed an essential part of tribute payments to the Han.<sup>529</sup> East Asians used slaves to embellish even the most minor political overtures, very similar to sources recording royal gifts in West Asia.<sup>530</sup> Slaves were essential elements of diplomacy and used to staff the royal households. Elite Han tombs in Canton-Guangdong located on the South China Sea give up grave figurines that represent non-Chinese servants. These figures of both males and females have typical “barbarian” faces and were buried with the dead to make their afterlife as comfortable as their homes.<sup>531</sup> These clay household servants most likely represent the foreign slaves given as tribute that are so abundant in the sources.

The openness of the Han era meant that slaves also could have arrived as commodities. The Han emperor, Wu Ti, was open to trade with the West. Indian missions had already arrived at the Han court by 159 BCE.<sup>532</sup> By the 140s, maritime routes brought Greeks, Syrians or Arabs, all called Ta-Ts’in, to China, most likely bringing slaves as gifts or trade items.<sup>533</sup> Chinese merchants were finally able to travel the Silk Roads directly to the border of Parthia. Some, although very few, ventured by sea to South East Asia. Through various trade routes, other Mediterranean slaves who were not preserved in the sources may have entered China.

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<sup>528</sup> See Chapter 7 for a Central Asian mural of ambassadors accompanied by women.

<sup>529</sup> C. Martin Wilbur, “Industrial Slavery in China During the former Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 25),” *The Journal of Economic History* 3, no. 1 (May 1943): 58.

<sup>530</sup> For example, Paekche in Korea sent a royal gift to Japan in 542 CE consisting of local Funan goods and two slaves. Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C.-A.D. 907* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 101. For similarities, see section on Greek use of slave in diplomacy in Chapter 3 and the Amarna texts in Chapter 2.

<sup>531</sup> Yu, *Han China*, 180.

<sup>532</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 138, K. A. A. Nilakanta Sastri, “The Beginnings of Intercourse between India and China,” *The Indian Historical Quarterly* 14 (1938): 380-87.

<sup>533</sup> Their first cargo consisted of coral. See, Ferguson, “China and Rome”, 592.

The second, larger group of western entertainers is listed in the Chinese annals over two centuries later, this time with little doubt as to their origins. Roman entertainers were part of a tribute gift to the Later Han court of Emperor An in 121 CE.<sup>534</sup> Again, the trained slaves are taken to China through a third party, this time the court of Shan (in modern Burma). This chronicler gives details about the western slaves and where they come from.

The king of the Shan state, Yung-yu-t'iao again sent an envoy who, being received in his Majesty's presence, offered musicians and conjurors who could make transformations, spit fire, release their limbs without assistance, interchange the heads of oxen and horses, and who were also skilled at juggling even up to a thousand balls at once. They said of themselves: "We are men from Hai-hsi (west of the sea)". The west of the sea is in fact Ta-Ch'in (the Roman Empire). To the southwest, the state of Shan communicates with Ta'Ch'in. (*Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76)<sup>535</sup>

Later Chinese histories and encyclopedias embellished this material, perhaps borrowing from the stories of their era. They give more physical descriptions, "deformed eyebrows, steep noses, ruffled hair and strong side-curls, and four feet and five inches in length (height)" and number them at fifteen.<sup>536</sup> The details of the skills of the performers also increase in this account, adding the ability to pour water out of their hands and to drop pearls from their feet.<sup>537</sup>

The text adds that the region that sent them, known as Yung-Ch'ang (included in modern Burma), produces exotica because "There is a water route (from Ta'ch'in) communicating" with the Shan king.<sup>538</sup> By this time, Roman ships had found their way

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<sup>534</sup> Although the slaves are Roman, neither the Roman emperor, Hadrian, nor the Parthian emperors are involved. This gift came from the Burmese ruler. Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 42, 150-51.

<sup>535</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 42, 150-51. For a discussion on Ta'Chin see p. 29.

<sup>536</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 222.

<sup>537</sup> Ferguson, "China and Rome", 598.

<sup>538</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 151.

past India and were docking at ports across Southeast Asia. Presumably, they had presented or sold these trained slaves to the Burmese royals or perhaps the Burmese or Indians had purchased western children and trained them before forwarding them to China as exotica. By the end of the third century CE, the Chinese were no longer passive recipients of maritime trade but sent Chinese ships as far as the Persian Gulf for plunder and trade making it possible for them to access European and African slaves residing in India and the Gulf.

Mediterranean slaves, albeit in small numbers, reached China before Roman merchants did. The fact that their origins were recorded show their value to the Han recipients. Their exotic origins and talents made them a proper gift from a Parthian shah to his neighboring emperor, from a Burmese king to his powerful Chinese overlords. These slaves' talents made them a luxury good worth transporting the long-distance across Asia and the Indian Ocean.

## **Conclusion**

These three chapters illustrating the long tradition of trade between the Mediterranean and India and China undergird Ibn Khudadhbih's description of medieval slave trade. These ancient sources illustrate that the trade of women: princesses, slave women, and trained entertainers of both sexes contributed to diplomatic, military, and economic goals as far back as the dawn of writing and perhaps earlier. Shells, jade, and beads prove that exchange between the Mediterranean and India and China has existed for at least seven millennia. With the coming of written language, the presence of slaves, especially women, in these exchange interactions becomes definitive. Cuneiform tablets

first record the movement of female slaves from the Zagros Mountains into Mesopotamia and the long-distance transport of royal daughters and slaves to the Pharaoh from Mesopotamia.

The evidence of the movement of slave or captive women from Europe to India is recorded in the Jain literature of the early Iron Age. This long-distance trade grew in prominence with the closer contacts between the Persian and Hellenistic worlds and India. With the arrival of the Roman and Han empires on either end of this trade region, the use of slaves for diplomatic gifts and/or trade extended across the known world. Only one, maybe two groups of Mediterranean slaves, all entertainers, are known from the Chinese chronicles, but they show that it was possible for slaves to cross the continent of Asia or the Indian Ocean even if it took years. The transport of European or Mediterranean slaves to East and South Asia existed through Antiquity even though in small scale. They were used as tribute for rulers and/or to fill a cultural desire for the exotic, for foreigners to serve as entertainers, guards, and concubines. The very few mentions of Indian slaves in Europe and no known Chinese, slave or free, coming the other direction are evidence that the human trade tended to be west to east, perhaps to pay for the elephants, pepper, and silk desired by the Greek and Roman rulers and markets of classical antiquity.

The royal demand for western slaves in India and China leaves questions that remain unanswered. “Why did Indian royalty desire to possess enormous harems? How were Yavana women stereotyped in the Indian sources? What roles did Yavana slave women fill in Indian society? The rare mention of western entertainers given as tribute to the Han Chinese court also leaves the question; why did the Han desire exotic

entertainers from foreign lands? The answers to these questions are not based on economical exchange, but stem from religious and cultural differences. The Indian and Chinese sources describing Greek and Roman slaves in this earlier era illuminate the cultural values that pulled slaves from incredible distances. These same influences appear to have continued to draw foreign slaves from the Mediterranean to medieval India and ninth century Tang China when the trade networks described by Ibn Khurdadhbih entered the slave trade. The following chapters examine the sources of Classical and Medieval India, Han and Tang China, and Abbasid Baghdad to find the cultural values which caused the demand for abundant beautiful women.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CULTURAL VALUES OF INDIA WHICH CAUSED DEMAND FOR MEDITERRANEAN SLAVE WOMEN

But I should not accost her. For who will listen to the Yavana courtesan's words which are like the chattering of a monkey, full of shrill sounds and of indistinguishable consonants...? (Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka, 111-112)<sup>539</sup>

The above excerpt from a Sanskrit drama describes a Roman woman working as a courtesan in an Indian establishment with other women noted for their foreign racial and linguistic characteristics. Other Indian sources note western Yavana women present in palaces and pleasure houses playing three major roles. First, Indian diplomacy required foreign women to play political roles as “gifted virgins,” tribute, or booty to be displayed in a royal entourage proving a ruler's power, wealth, extravagant consumption, sophistication, and prestige. As early as Jain rule in Bihar, Central India, predating Alexander the Great, a Greek woman appears in Prakrit sources, playing this political prestige role, listed as one of many multi-ethnic foreign women serving in the royal harem.<sup>540</sup> Second, with the increasing presence and

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<sup>539</sup> Manomohan Ghosh, *Glimpses of Sexual Life in Nanda-Maurya India: Translation of the Caturbhāṇī, Together with a Critical Edition of Text* (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1975), 157.

<sup>540</sup> *The Antagada-Dasao and Anuttarovavaiya-Dasao* trans. from the Prakrit by L.D. Barnett (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1907), 28-29. For a discussion how this Greek woman could have been carried to India, see Chapter 3.

influence of Hellenistic Greeks in Central Asia, western slave women apparently became ubiquitous enough in India to give Greek women a “brand” or stereotypic niche as armed body guards in Indian dramas. Third, and probably most prominently, in the Roman era, western women, Yavanas, appear as musicians and courtesans in Syriac and Sanskrit sources.<sup>541</sup> These three overlapping roles for foreign female slaves: retinue, guards, and entertainers/sex workers, in late Antiquity continued with some change into the early medieval period. The cultural forces influencing the market for western slaves remained or perhaps, even increased, in what is known as the early medieval period in the West or as the early Muslim period in India.

Ancient Greek or Latin sources on western slaves in the Near and Far East remain scarce. The exception, Thea Musa, an Italian slave girl, became known by name in the West only because Josephus shared how she ended up ruling the Parthian empire married to a young shah, her son.<sup>542</sup> Other mentions of slave women, in tax records or descriptions of cargos, reveal only that nameless musicians and concubines were on ships or overland routes headed for India and that female sex workers were taxed heavily on the trade routes.<sup>543</sup> Their stories in western sources ended with their passage to Asia.

In contrast to the near silence on slave women in Western sources, ancient sources in India identify the work done by Greek and Roman female slaves. Two types of sources illuminate their lives. The first type of source illuminates the Indian

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<sup>541</sup> Syriac is still the liturgical language used by Christians in South India and Syria, or at least, Syria before the war.

<sup>542</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.2.4, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (London: George Routledge & Sons, n.d.), 425, Emma Strugnell, “Thea Musa, Roman Queen of Parthia,” *Iranica Antiqua* 43 (2008): 283. See Chapter 4 for this concubine queen’s influence.

<sup>543</sup> See Chapter 4 for an analysis of these references.

cultural background creating these roles for foreign women. The second group of sources specifically identify Yavana or Mediterranean women. Whether working as diplomatic pawns, bow-wielding bodyguards, or tempting courtesans, a women's western "Yavana" origins appear to be valued enough in the Indian culture to merit mention in their texts.

### **Retinues Required Female Slaves**

The Asian kings of Antiquity were legendary for the size of their royal retinues at home and on the road.<sup>544</sup> The accounts of Indian royals could easily compete in this competition across Asia for prestige (and probably for exaggeration). The further back in time, the more sensationalist the numbers grow. Buddhist literature remembers the ancient Indian king, Maha-Sudassana, for his just rule and for his 84,000 women at the time of his death.<sup>545</sup> When the young prince, Siddhartha Gautama, forsook his wealthy household and became Buddha, the "Enlightened One," the wife he left behind was hardly lonely as she shared the royal precinct with 40,000 co-wives.<sup>546</sup> In this small city of women, 1,090 were daughters of the elite families, *kattiyas*, and the rest are presumed to be slave concubines, *nataka-ittis*, or domestic servants.<sup>547</sup>

Although the harem census does shrink rapidly in later eras, still the harem size of historically documented emperors appears more legendary than factual. Thai ruler, Phya Lithai, wrote a sermon teaching the message of Theravada Buddhism.

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<sup>544</sup> Chapter 7 discusses the size of households and shared court culture in other Asian courts.

<sup>545</sup> *Jakata* D. XVII.II.5 in Dev Raj Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India as Depicted in Pali and Sanskrit Texts* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1990), 158, f. 42.

<sup>546</sup> *Jakata* IV.282 in Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, f. 42 and 46, 158.

<sup>547</sup> Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 46, 158.



Within this fourteenth century Buddhist cosmology, Ashoka, the Mauryan emperor who adopted Buddhism, is portrayed with one favorite wife and 16,000 concubines.<sup>548</sup>

Women, slave and free, joined these huge households for a number of reasons. Indians practiced the usual custom that a ruler inherited the women of the harem of his father and he claimed any harem surviving the defeated kings that he conquered.<sup>549</sup> To these women were added others by political transactions, more or less, peacefully. Royal houses established political alliances through an accumulation of marital ties. The Brahmanic jurisprudence texts, the *Dharmasastras*, sanctioned this royal polygamy. Sending a bride served as an auspicious and solemn “seal” on critical political agreements.<sup>550</sup>

Families whether rivals, vassals, or those desiring royal friendship, fealty, or favors could practice *kanyadana*, the “gift of a virgin.” Sometimes this so-called “gift” could be coerced when the women of conquered households were “acquired” with little say of their families. The Allahabad pillar of Asoka boasts that the princesses of the local kings were sent to the Mauryan house for marriage.<sup>551</sup>

These new brides and the free-born daughters in these households would have their own household “retinue” of attendants responsible to establish their mistress’s household, keep her company, carry messages, and spy on the other women for her. Many of these ladies-in-waiting were drawn from distant relatives or family members

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<sup>548</sup> Frank E. Reynolds & Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley: University of California-Asian Humanities Press, 1982), 5, 172-89.

<sup>549</sup> A number of Indian rulers either had their harems executed in times of possible defeat or their wives and female slaves committed suicide to avoid enemy capture and humiliation. This would reduce the number of women from previous harems.

<sup>550</sup> Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>551</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 51.

of ministers or vassals, others were slaves.<sup>552</sup> These adjunct servants, however, were just as subject to the sexual whims of their mistress's husband as his own slave concubines and servants.<sup>553</sup>

Minor princes or even those aspiring to political position or trading ties could also ingratiate themselves with the gift of beautiful concubines. Even Roman era traders from the Mediterranean knew that they had to give musicians and concubines to the king if they wanted to do business in the richest port on the West Indian coast.<sup>554</sup> With women used as currency to buy political influence, especially slaves made desirable by different racial markings, talents, or long-distance origins, the market demand for beautiful foreign slave women would have been acute and enduring.

These massive households of wives, servants, and concubines waited on the lord, not just in his bedroom, but as a traveling "retinue" or *parivaranam*. The *Vasishtha-Dharma Sutra*, a Vedic era list of rules for kings, states that the retinue of a prince should consist exclusively of women.<sup>555</sup> Elite Indian women did not commonly observe veiling and even resisted *purdah*, literally "curtain" or veiling, in India until the middle Muslim period. A few royal families in Northern India mention veiling after the first century CE, but art, literature, and travelers make it clear that seclusion of women was not common down to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>556</sup> In contrast to the last

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<sup>552</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 52.

<sup>553</sup> Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, f. 84, 159.

<sup>554</sup> See Chapter 4. Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei; Text with Introductions, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 81.

<sup>555</sup> *Vasishtha-Dharma-Sastra*, Sutra D II-9, ed. A. A. Fuhrer (in Sanskrit), English trans. G. Buhler (Oxford, 1882) in Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, f. 57, 159.

<sup>556</sup> A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization; From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), 166-76. (footnotes of primary sources in Hindi) Mahesh Singh, *Bhoja Paramara and His Times* (Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1984) 207-09.

millennium of Muslim inspired veiling in India, in Antiquity and the early medieval period, Indian harem women provided elite men with a public entourage which used size, beauty, and ostentatious dress to demonstrate prestige.

The western visitors of Antiquity who wrote about their observations of India were suitably impressed and described these parades of richly clad women in their accounts. The Latin historian of Alexander, Quintus Curtius (assumed date 63 BCE-224 CE.), described an Indian king in all his luxury, reclining in a golden litter, adorned with pearls hanging on every side. Pans of incense perfumed the road ahead of him and armed guards and his body guard followed him.<sup>557</sup> The retinue of women appears in a description of this royal's favorite pastime, the "chase."

...shooting with arrows animals shut up in a preserve, amid the prayers and songs of his concubines.... when he undertakes a longer expedition, he rides in a chariot drawn by elephants and the entire bodies of such huge brutes are covered with gold. Also, that nothing may be lacking in his abandoned habits, a long line of concubines follows in golden litters; this train is separated from that of the queen, but equals it in luxury. (VII.ix.28-29, Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*)<sup>558</sup>

These mobile harems were not unique to Indian culture. When Quintus Curtius described the defeat of Darius by Alexander, he described not just the Persian army: troops, retainers, and horses, but he included that the army was followed closely (and encumbered) by Darius's female household which included his mother, his wife, his daughters, the throng of women who waited on them, fifteen wagons of children and governesses, a "herd of eunuchs," and "365 concubines of the king,

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<sup>557</sup> VII.ix.23-29 Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Quintus Curtius Historiae Alexandri Magni Macedonis [History of Alexander] with an English translation by John C. Rolfe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), 2:309.

<sup>558</sup> VII.ix.28-29, Quintus Curtius, *History* 2:311.

these also regally dressed and adorned.”<sup>559</sup>

This Persian version of a female entourage was far from the palace, headed to the rigors and risks of the battlefield. The description above of the Indian retinue on the “chase” was a pleasure trip, but Indian women like their Parthian counterparts, along with the fighting men’s wives, prostitutes, and even professional singers, followed Indian armies in wagons.<sup>560</sup> Both descriptions demonstrate that Indians, like their neighbors to the north, the Persian rulers, valued and went to great expense and risk to be accompanied at all times by a huge female retinue. These ancient sources show the essential role of women, including numerous slaves, for public display on the road, during war or the hunt, and at home. The critical issue for this chapter, however, remains the roles Yavana women played in these huge harems and female retinues of Indian royals.

### **“Yavani” Greek Slave Women as Political Currency**

Both Alexander the Great and his successor in Asia, Seleucus I Nicator, founder of the Seleucid Dynasty, failed in their attempt to conquer India. Seleucus fought Chandragupta, founder of the Mauryan Empire, for two years before suing for peace ca. 305 BCE. Although the wording of the peace treaty is vague, it appears that Seleucus agreed to the traditional Indian vassal arrangement, the “gift of a virgin.” He agreed to his daughter, Cornelia, entering the harem of Chandragupta to seal the agreement, to act as hostage to guarantee the good behavior of her family, and to act on behalf of the Greeks with the influence that might accrue from intimacy with the

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<sup>559</sup>Quintus, *History*, III.iii., 2:22-24.

<sup>560</sup>Johann Jakob Meyer, *Sexual Life in Ancient India; A Study in the Comparative History of Indian Culture* (New York: Barnes & Nobel, 1953), 267 ff.

ruler.<sup>561</sup> Whether Seleucus, however, followed through on his end of the treaty is never mentioned in the sources, even by his ambassador, Megasthenes, who wrote more about elephants. If his daughter was sent in the traditional style, she most likely arrived with dozens, if not hundreds of Greek (and/or Bactrian) attendants with her.<sup>562</sup> The bride herself may well have been half Bactrian as her mother might have been a Bactrian noblewoman married to Seleucus.<sup>563</sup> Macedonian kings were traditionally polygamous, but this daughter could have been offspring of the “daughter of Spitamenes, the Bactrian” who was given to Seleucus in the mass Asian marriage ceremony held by Alexander when he himself married Darius’s eldest daughter. In the editorial notes to the new translation of Arrian’s text, James Romm notes that the name of this bride (perhaps Cornelia’s mother) was Apame, according to Plutarch. This union is the only one known that survived. The other generals repudiated their Persian brides after Alexander’s death.

Some scholars, such as Romila Thapar, surmise that Asoka, Chandragupta’s grandson and heir, could have been 25% Greek through this marriage.<sup>564</sup> Problems, however, exist with this view, that India’s greatest emperor might have had Greek blood. Asoka, in his later edicts, mentions relations with a number of Greek rulers who would, in the case of marriage and progeny, have been his second cousins. Since he never mentions family ties, most scholars assume that he was not a grandson of this Seleucid princess. Still, it is likely that he knew this Hellenistic contingent when

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<sup>561</sup> Appian, *History of Rome; The Syrian Wars*, 55.

<sup>562</sup> See the tradition of sending slave attendants in Chapter 3.

<sup>563</sup> Arrian, 7.4.4-7 in James Romm, ed. *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander, Anabasis Alexandrou*, trans. Pamela Mensch (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 279, f. 7.4.6c.

<sup>564</sup> Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 20.

he was a child growing up within the confines of a large palace complex.<sup>565</sup> The ethnicities in Jain harems show that Cornelia was not the first Greek woman to live in an Indian harem. Her arrival, if it happened, however, probably served as a harbinger of a more numerous presence of Hellenistic women, slave and free, in India.

Other, unnamed Yavana girls probably also served as political pawns between courts. After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, Indo-Greek rulers moved south from Hellenistic strongholds in Bactria to fill the vacuum in north-western India. According to their coins, these Greek speakers ruled for two centuries. The Indo-Greek era lacks texts so the movement of women between courts can only be surmised from the prevailing court culture. Both Asian and Greek court protocol and exchange of ambassadors required numerous gifts, in which slave women were requisite. The need for allies and trade between these Indo-Greek city states and Indian ruled cities most likely had rulers exchanging daughters and gifts of slave girls in the kaleidoscope mosaic of shifting political alliances.

Nonroyal Greek women, most likely slaves, also filled a political role when they were sent as tribute. If Albrecht Weber is correct, Indian inscriptions mention Yavana girls as tribute.<sup>566</sup> If Indian girls were sent the other way into Greek courts, their presence is missing in the sources. The exception may be the slave women as previously mentioned who were dressed as Indians and exhibited in Ptolemy

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<sup>565</sup> Thapar, *Asoka*, 139.

<sup>566</sup> Albrecht Weber, *The History of Indian Literature* translated from the second German Edition by John Mann and Theodor Zachariae (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1852, 1961), 251-52, f. 276. Tribute gifts of powerful aphrodisiacs are also recorded, a gift always appreciated by rulers over large numbers of concubines. Romila Thapar, *Early India from the Origins to AD 1300* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 177. A tour guide of the palace in Jaipur, Rajasthan, also mentioned the frequency of this gift. Conversation, 1977.

Philadelphius' parade.<sup>567</sup> These Greek slave girls and royal daughters played roles mandated by political culture when the men who purchased them or fathered them, used them as “gifts” to gain influence in an Indian court.

### **Yavana Women as Armed Guards**

Greek women, however, served as more than just political “gifts” in Indian harems. Yavanis show up in Indian Sanskrit dramas from approximately the fifth century CE as the stereotypic ethnicity of female body guards armed with bows and arrows surrounding princes and kings. Beautiful women armed with weapons was not a new concept in Greece or India in this period of intense East-West cultural mixing. Indian epics from the earliest periods record fighting women.

Indian celestial maidens on the walls of temples and shrines sometimes carry weapons. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain artisans in stone, wood, and paint repeatedly portray nubile divine courtesans with their elaborate jewels, coifed hair, wasp waists, belly fat mounds, and full hips. These semidivine maidens decorate multiple monuments across different regions and religions from Antiquity through the medieval period. The weapon-bearing women first appear on temple walls in Kusana art, the culture that took over the NW area of India after the Indo-Greek rulers were defeated or assimilated.<sup>568</sup>

Known as *yaksis*, *apsaras*, *surasundaris*, or *devanganas*, these female companions of the gods have a number of repeated poses. Several of these portrayals, such as the *vira*, *menaka*, and *maricika*, consist of a bare-breasted female courtier

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<sup>567</sup> See discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>568</sup> Gauri Parimoo Krishnan, *The Power of the Female; Devangana Sculptures on Indian Temple Architecture* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2014), 4-5, 320-23.

holding a weapon, usually a sword, knife, noose, or bow and arrows.<sup>569</sup> A medieval Sanskrit treatise on architecture includes an entire chapter instructing artisans on how to portray female deities: color of skin, type of clothes, number of arms, type of crowns, posture, etc. A number of these hold weapons in at least one of their hands. For example, Chamundi's upper right hand holds a pike while her upper left hand holds a skull.<sup>570</sup> Chamundi and Bhairavi both hold up arrows while Kaumari holds "missiles" in her two left hands.<sup>571</sup>

Not only demi-goddesses on temple walls carried weapons. The majority of Hindus worship goddesses. Most represent protection, wealth, fertility, and motherhood, but others, who also share the pantheon, are awe-inspiring, bloodthirsty, violent, and destructive. The lack of recorded evidence makes it impossible to understand the development of the cult of goddesses until the fourth and fifth centuries CE when the religious texts emerged known as the *agamas and puranas*,<sup>572</sup> which glorified the Great Goddess.<sup>573</sup> By 600 CE, goddesses begin to rival male deities.<sup>574</sup> As local, individual regional goddesses and their mythology evolved, merged, and divided, several portrayals emerged which show these feminine immortals with weapons for protection and destruction. For example, Parvati, goddess of motherhood and fertility, is also portrayed as Durga, fighting demons from the back of her tiger, with her multiple arms holding swords, shield, bow and arrows,

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<sup>569</sup> Krishnan, *Devagana*, 97-99, 320-26.

<sup>570</sup> Prasanna Kumar Acharya, *Architecture of Manasara*, trans. Prasanna Kumar Acharya, Manasara Series 4 (Oxford University Press, 1934, repr. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1980), 56:136-38, 555.

<sup>571</sup> Acharya, *Manasara*, 56:139, 154-55, 555-56.

<sup>572</sup> The Puranas are a Hindu encyclopedia based on traditions written down in the ninth Century ACE.

<sup>573</sup> Mandakranta Bose, *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92.

<sup>574</sup> Bose, *Faces*, 111.



and trident. Together, these dual goddesses are the source of creation, preservation, and annihilation in Hindu spirituality.

Classic Sanskrit literature supports the artistic and spiritual renditions of armed women. The epics show armed women as an earthly phenomenon, not just paradisiacal. Militant women described from India's oldest epic, the *Rig Veda*, perhaps reflect traditions from as early as 1700-850 BCE (dates for most Indian texts remain fluid) to the ninth century CE *Agni Purana*. Ruling families gave their daughters military and administrative training as back up if the male family members were killed.<sup>575</sup> The warrior caste, Kshatriya, trained both its sons and daughters for combat and used fencing and archery to develop the mind and body of both sexes.<sup>576</sup> Rajput royalty, also Kshatriyas, were famous for their martial women. They fielded armies that included at least one all-woman unit who tied their saris into legged wraps so they could ride horseback into battle.<sup>577</sup> Numerous Indian queens over the centuries are remembered for their martial skills and sometimes for their bloody death while leading their army to save their king and kingdom.<sup>578</sup> Medieval queens, housewives, and prostitutes continued to accompany their men to battlefields in carts as mobile households.<sup>579</sup> Barriers to armed women did not exist in the Indian mind.

Ancient Greeks also conceptualized armed women, divine and earthly. The Mediterranean peoples shared with the Indians the concept of a goddess of war or protection. The Greek goddess Diana is portrayed holding her bow and quiver of

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<sup>575</sup> For numerous examples for this paragraph, see Altekar, *Position of Women*, 21-22.

<sup>576</sup> Adrienne Mayor, *Amazons; Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 408. Later Hindu attempts to place Greeks within the caste system moved them from outsiders/ Shudra (slaves) to fallen Kshatriyas, warriors.

<sup>577</sup> David E. Jones, *Women Warriors; A History* (Washington: Brassey's, 1997), 42.

<sup>578</sup> Meyer, *Life*, 267.

<sup>579</sup> Indu Banga, "Gender Relations in Medieval India," in J. S. Grewal, ed. *The State and Society in Medieval India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 450.

arrows. Egyptian goddess, Neth, and Greco-Roman Athena/Minerva were also described as goddesses of war and sometimes portrayed with weapons.

Amazon horsewomen were more earthly-bound. Their valiant fighting ability filled Greek sagas, epic poems, and the art on vase paintings, of which more than 1000 have been found.<sup>580</sup> Homer's *Iliad* serves as the earliest reference in Greek literature to Amazons<sup>581</sup> where he described them as *antianeirai* which could be translated as "equals of men." The vocabulary designates them as an ethnic group, named with the loan word, *Amazones*. Herodotus passed on that Amazons of Scythia did not marry until they had fought a man in battle and a few never married.<sup>582</sup> These descriptions of the group's distinctive gender relations reveal the amazement of the patriarchal Greeks, whose goddesses may have fought, but whose ideal free-born women stayed home from war to work on wool.<sup>583</sup>

The stories of formidable armed women whose fighting skills matched those of men have proven to be more than just legends. Recent translations of Caucasian and Central Asian oral legends and epic poems, added to archaeological excavations of Scythian tombs, show that the Amazons were an ethnic group. Opulent graves containing women dressed in gold and buried with horses and weapons, some with skeletal marks indicating wounds received from active combat, have been excavated in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan.<sup>584</sup> These horse nomads hailed from the tribes on the steppes stretching from the Black Sea, east 4,000 miles

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<sup>580</sup> Mayor, *Amazons*, 18, 38.

<sup>581</sup> *Amazones antianeirai* appears twice in Homer's *Iliad* 3.189, 6.186

<sup>582</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 4.110.

<sup>583</sup> Mayor, *Amazons*, 22-3.

<sup>584</sup> Mayor, *Amazons*, 76-81.

to the Great Wall of China, prospering from about 700 to 500 BCE.<sup>585</sup> Mastery of horse and bow did not depend on sheer physical strength and, therefore, could be equally achieved by male or female. The steppe oral traditions, battle-scarred skeletons of women buried with weapons and horses, Greek epics and vase art that portrayed armed women, all verify that Central Asian women went to war alongside men and sometimes with other women.<sup>586</sup>

The warrior goddess myth in both the Mediterranean and India probably predates Amazon contact in the seventh century. If the Aryans migrated to both the Indian sub-continent and to Europe around 1200 BCE, then it is plausible that they would have brought with them a proto-Amazon, Central Asian steppe culture of warrior women. Shared proto-Indo-European origins could be the source of the similarity, not just in their languages, but between the warrior goddesses in Greek and Indian mythology.<sup>587</sup>

Perhaps the fighting women who appear in Indian culture from the Rig Vedas and forward are a continuation of the tradition of fighting horse women.<sup>588</sup> The Indian practice of using armed women as harem guards was still in use 2,000 years after the Mauryan Dynasty. The Indo-Muslim Mughal empire of Delhi had ‘sober and active’ women who served as armed retainers around the apartment of Akbar (d. 1605) located within his *zenana* of 5,000 women. Similar reports by diplomats spoke of women sepoys late into British rule.<sup>589</sup> If so, Proto-Amazon warrior women of the

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<sup>585</sup> These peoples domesticated the camel and invented the first wheeled vehicles. See Chapter 2.

<sup>586</sup> Mayor, *Amazons*, 20.

<sup>587</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 45.

<sup>588</sup> Thapar, *Asoka*, 88.

<sup>589</sup> Gavin R. G. Hambly, “Armed Women Retainers in the Zenanas of Indo-Muslim Rulers: The case of Bibi Fatima,” in Gavin R. G. Hambly, ed. *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and*

steppe possibly influenced traditions south to the Indian Ocean and influenced the tradition of fighting women.

In a phenomenon that seems unique to India<sup>590</sup> not only were royal women and Kshatriya caste women competent with weapons, but armed slave women protected kings. Early Buddhist texts state that slave women served as armed guards.<sup>591</sup> Strabo is the first Western writer who mentions that some of the female retainers of Indian princes served not just as retinue attendants but as well-armed guards. He quotes the diplomat, Megasthenes, who describes Chandragupta and his retinue leaving his palace for a hunt.

He departs in Bacchanalian fashion. Crowds of women surround him, and outside of this circle spearmen are ranged. The road is marked off with ropes, and it is death, for man and woman alike, to pass within the ropes. Men with drums and gongs lead the procession. The king hunts in the enclosures and shoots arrows from a platform. At his side stand two or three armed women. If he hunts in the open grounds he shoots from the back of an elephant. Of the women, some are in chariots, some on horses, and some even on elephants,<sup>592</sup> and they are equipped with weapons of every kind, as if they were going on a campaign. (Fragment XXVII, Strabo XV.i.53-56)<sup>593</sup>

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*Piety*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 457-58. Such a heritage perhaps even explains the election of and bloody assassinations of both Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto.

<sup>590</sup> Arrian 7.13.2-6 does record an incident where a Median satrap, Atropates, presents Alexander with a hundred women equipped with axes instead of spears and smaller, light shields and claimed that they were the fabled Amazons. Alexander feared turmoil and rape in the army so sent them home. Since elite militias often tended to be outsiders, these women could have come to Media from India or local steppe tribes. Diodorus also writes about an Amazon queen who arrives at Alexander's camp with her militia of armed women to request Alexander to impregnate her. *Diodorus*. Book XVII, Chapter 7 in Siculus Diodorus, *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian, In Fifteen Books*. (London: Printed by W. McDowall for J. Davis, 1814.), 220-21.

<sup>591</sup> For women as guards, see *Jataka*, ed. V. Fausboll (London: Luzac, 1964), 1:290.

<sup>592</sup> The elephant mounts may have indicated more than wealth. Several sources indicate that a woman who received the gift of an elephant for her sexual favors was not guilty of indiscretion. Arrianus, *Indica*, 17, Strabo, *Geography*, 15.1.43 and f 22, Thapar, *Asoka*, 87 ff., Karttunen, *India*, 192.

<sup>593</sup> Strabo wrote "Of the Manners of the Indians" from Megasthenes. John Watson McCrindle and E.A.Schwanbeck, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian; being a translation of the fragments of the Indika of Megasthenes collected by Dr. Schwanbeck, and of the first part of the Indika of Arrian by J. W. McCrindle*. (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1977), 72-73.

Indian sources of the Mauryan dynasty provide the precepts that prescribed protocol inside the palace. Kautilya, the kingmaker responsible (at least in his own viewpoint) of overthrowing the Nanda dynasty and putting Chandragupta on the throne, wrote a treatise on proper governance called *Arthasastra* (c 321-296 BCE). In the section on personal safety in the harem, he recommends that women serve as guards for the king in his bed chambers. “When he rises from bed he should be escorted by teams of female guards armed with bows.” Several lines down in the same section, he orders that “Neither foreigners, nor those who have earned neither rewards nor honour.... shall form the bodyguard of the king.”<sup>594</sup>

The nonforeigner recommendation for harem guards seems to have been amended over time. Ancient Sanskrit dramas portray Greek Yavana women serving as armed attendants so frequently that their ethnicity was stereotyped as the king’s bodyguards. Kalidasa, deemed the Sanskrit Shakespeare, dated from several centuries BCE to seventh century CE,<sup>595</sup> describes Indian royalty waited on by their armed *Yavanis*, girls.<sup>596</sup> For example, in *Shakuntala*, the king hears a voice in distress and calls for his weapons.

King: A bow! A bow! (Enter a Greek woman with a bow.)  
 Greek woman: A bow and arrows, your Majesty. And here are the  
 finger-guards. (Kalidasa, *Shakuntla*, Act. VI)<sup>597</sup>

Perhaps Greek slave women shared native Indian or Hellenistic Bactrian

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<sup>594</sup> Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans. *The Arthasastra; Selections from the Classic Indian Work on Statecraft* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012), 1.21-1.23, p. 13.

<sup>595</sup> Mary B. Harris, *Kalidasa: Poet of Nature*, (Self-published University of Chicago doctoral thesis, 1936). Arthur W. Ryder, *Kalidas; Translations of Shakuntala and Other Works* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912). On page vii, this scholar gives “the fifth century of the Christian era” as his dating for the work.

<sup>596</sup> Weber, *Indian Literature*, 252, f.

<sup>597</sup> Ryder, *Kalidasa*, 78. Other translators just translate Yavani as “Slave”. See Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Sakuntala or The Lord Ring: An Indian Drama, translated into English Prose and Verse from the Sanskrit of Kalidasa* (1885, London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., n.d.), 170.

traditions reaching back to the fighting women of the Central Asian steppes. Perhaps they were chosen only because there were plenty of them in the slave market available for training.

Later Tamil literature from South India indicates that Yavana (known as *Yavanar* in Tamil) were valued as royal guards. Tamil epic literature first mentions Yavanas as merchants, but in later eras, Yavanas were described in other careers, one of which was bodyguards, “the hard-eyed Yananas of terrible appearance, whose body is of strong joints,” and armed with horsewhips (using the Greek word for whip).<sup>598</sup> A later poem describes Yavana mercenaries as “The Yavanas of murderous sword, best in guarding the gates of the fortified wall.”<sup>599</sup> The other foreign group that worked as guards with them were both foreign (*mlecchas*) and mute.<sup>600</sup> The inability to communicate or bond with the locals through either vocal deformity or foreign origins and language made a foreign unit less vulnerable to persuasion from local dissidents. Whatever the reason, Yavana men and women earned a name for themselves and carved a niche for their ethnicity as armed harem and palace guards in north and South India in Late Antiquity.

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<sup>598</sup> *Mullaippattu*, v. 59-61 discussed in Kamil Zvelebil, “The Yavanas in Old Tamil Literature,” in Felix Tauer, Vera Kubickova, and Ivan Hrbek, ed. *Charisteria Orientalia praecipue ad Persiam pertinentia*, (Praha: Nakladatelstvi Ceskoslovenske Akademie Ved, 1956), 404. The term *yavanar* is gender-neutral. “The ending -ar is gender neutral and it is also used for plural in Tamil. For example the word *avar* means ‘he, she, they’ (but not it.) It can denote a male, a female, or (be used) as a plural noun. It indicates men or women in the same way that Indian means both men and women.” (Quora Conversation with Dr. C. R. Selvakumar, speaker of modern Tamil. <https://www.quora.com/Is-the-ancient-Tamil-word-Yavanar-gender-specific-Or-can-it-mean-men-and-women/answer/C-Selva-R-Selvakumar/comment/19813817> on May 25, 2016.

<sup>599</sup> *Cilappatikaram* xiv 66-7 in Zvelebil, *Old Tamil Literature*, 405-06.

<sup>600</sup> *Mullaippattu*, v. 59-61 in Zvelebil, *Old Tamil Literature*, 404.

### ***Hetaira to Ganika; Greek Women as Exotic Indian Courtesans***

While the Greek language distinguishes between the common brothel worker and the highly trained escort service of Antiquity, the Sanskrit vocabulary has 330 synonyms for prostitutes.<sup>601</sup> These words cover hierarchies of the profession: divine woman, temple girl, royal concubine, society courtesan, brothel prostitute, and prostitutes so cheap that they were disparaged as *khumbhadasi*, “spittoon slaves.”<sup>602</sup> Some titles indicated the woman’s origin: the daughter or ward of an elderly courtesan, the secret prostitute who was moon-lighting from her respectable life, the wife who supported her husband, dancers and actresses who also sold sex, the *shudra* or artisan’s wife from the lowest caste made vulnerable to sexual exploitation when working in other’s homes, the runaway wife who lives as a mistress, as well as the famous *ganika* who possessed a beautiful body as well as literary and musical skills for the wealthy.<sup>603</sup> Other epithets referenced the qualities that they could offer, “melon-breasted, mountain bosomed, hip-shaker, rolling-buttocked, lotus-scented, and fish-fragranced.” If the breadth of vocabulary is evidence, a large space existed in ancient and medieval Indian society for “joy girls,” local and imported, and their services. The “horizontal trade” flourished.<sup>604</sup>

These overlapping sex and entertainment careers provided a market for merchants who could provide trained Mediterranean entertainers. Two western

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<sup>601</sup> Ludwik Sternbach, *Vesya: Synonyms & Aphorism* 9, no. 1, 2 (January and June, 1945): 1050, 49-65. Quoted in Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, vol. 2, M-Z (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 2: 246, 249.

<sup>602</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: a Social History* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987), 86.

<sup>603</sup> Bullough, *Prostitution*, 89-90.

<sup>604</sup> This term was coined by Meyer but medieval Hindu temple art (for example, the Konarak or Khajuyaho Temples) would indicate that participants preferred vertical positions executed with astounding balance and coordination. Meyer, *Life*, 264.

sources demonstrate that Greek and Roman traders considered musical performers as crucial commodities for those who wished to trade in India.

A story dating to the Ptolemaic era, from Posidonius of Apamea (d. ca. 1 BCE), and related by Strabo (d. ca. 24 CE), tells the story of an Anatolian shipper, Eudoxus of Cyzicus.<sup>605</sup> Eudoxus worked at shipping on the Nile until he was chosen by the Ptolemaic king, Ptolemy Physcon-Euergetes II (r. 146-117 BCE) to make a trip to India. The expedition was to be guided by a shipwrecked Indian sailor who had been found starving on a deserted island in the Red Sea. When this stranded Indian learned to speak Greek, he offered to show them how to use the monsoon winds to sail all the way to India instead of being limited to middle men on the Arabian Peninsula for access to Eastern trade. In this way, Eudoxus traveled to India twice, returning with treasures of gems and perfumes, which were promptly confiscated by the Ptolemaic court.

Eudoxus of Cyzicus changed his tactic for a third trip, perhaps in an effort to avoid having his valuable cargos confiscated by the rulers in Alexandria. He (like Vasco da Gama 1500 years later) decided to reach India by sailing from Libya around Africa from the west.<sup>606</sup> He built a “great ship” at Gades (Cadiz, Spain). From the experience gained from his two former trips, he took in his cargo “flute girls,” physicians, and other artisans. This ship ran aground on the sand somewhere on the west coast of Morocco. The flute girls most likely were confiscated or “gifted” to

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<sup>605</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 2.3.4-5.

<sup>606</sup> Strabo discusses all the ancient accounts of other mariners who attempted this route from the time of Pharaoh Neco, including the shipwreck of a supposedly Libyan ship in East Africa that convinced him this route was possible. Strabo, *Geography*, 2.3.4.



King Bogus of Maurusia where Eudoxus went for succor.<sup>607</sup>

Eudoxus learned that King Bogus's advisors suspected him of being a spy and that they planned to rid themselves of him by abandonment on a deserted island. He fled and return to Iberia. Undaunted, Eudoxus prepared to sail for India a fourth time. This time he took agricultural implements, seeds, and carpenters so he could winter over on an island and grow enough food to finish the journey. He never returned. Strabo trusted Posidonius who told him this story but he gives a number of reasons why the events could not be true. Despite its questioned veracity, the account does make it clear that if an experienced entrepreneur planned to trade with India, he included slave girl musicians as trading goods or gifts.

The second Western source, the previously mentioned *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a Roman era mariner's guide, recommended bringing concubines and entertainers as gifts needed to get permission to use the port and markets of Barygaza in modern Gujarat, midway up the western coast of the Indian sub-continent. "For the king, there was imported in those times precious silverware, slave musicians, beautiful girls for concubinage, fine wines, etc."<sup>608</sup> These two texts from the West in addition to the taxation records speak to a slave trade to provide for sex and musical entertainment in India.<sup>609</sup> Indian sources explain why.

Indian sources note foreign slaves in these roles. Kautilya, the recorder of Mauryan culture and laws formative to Indian culture, gives four origins for

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<sup>607</sup> Strabo mentions the nearby Lixus River which is probably the modern Loukkos River located on the north western Atlantic coast of Morocco. This means that Eudoxus's first journey to circumnavigate Africa was quite short in comparison to the length of the West African coast.

<sup>608</sup> PME 49, Casson, *Periplus*, 81.

<sup>609</sup> Roman taxation records show that slave girls or unattached women were highly taxed. See Chapter 4.

prostitutes in India.<sup>610</sup>

- 1) Children born to prostitute mothers
- 2) Women punished for adultery
- 3) Slaves purchased from the slave market
- 4) War captives

Of these four sources of sex workers, the last two could have been the conduits bringing Hellenistic, Indo-Greek, or Roman slaves to India. The Greek and Roman sources prove that merchants were shipping girls east, but their story ends at that point in the western texts. The Indian sources mentioning Yavani sex workers, courtesans, or flute girls provide a much deeper insight into how these women fit into or carved a role for themselves in Indian culture.

One source, the hagiography of the Apostle Thomas, provides a shared Eastern/Western text that utilizes a Mediterranean flute girl in India as a voice for the missionary apostle.<sup>611</sup> In this sacred biography, Thomas was unwilling to go to India but sold himself or had been sold by the Lord to a merchant working for the Indian king, Gudnaphar, who was looking for carpenters to build a palace.<sup>612</sup> In the traditions, Thomas travels by ship with a merchant to India in 52 CE. When they disembark, they hear the sound of pipes and organs and much singing for the wedding of the king's daughter. The king had invited everyone, rich and poor, strangers and citizens, to the feast with threats of the royal displeasure if his invitations were ignored. Thomas (known as Judas) unwillingly attends the feast where the others

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<sup>610</sup> *Arthashastra*, II.27, X.1-3 in Sukumari Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India," *Women in Early Indian Societies* (1999): 199.

<sup>611</sup> This Syriac document dates to the beginning of the third century describing events 150 years earlier. Hagiography has its own historiographical issues. A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas; Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 15.

<sup>612</sup> Coins testify to a king by this name in North India. Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 20-21. Tamil poems describe Romans who worked as builders and craftsmen. *Manimekalai xix, v. 108*, in Zvelebil, "Old Tamil Literature," 406.

stare at him.

Then the flute-girl who was in the middle of the party, was going round to them all; and when she came to Judas, she was standing and playing over him. And the flute-girl was a Hebrew woman. (*Acts of Thomas* 5)<sup>613</sup>

Both Thomas and the flute girl would have been Jews, strangers in a strange land, who spoke the same mother tongue. They recognized each other, perhaps by accent, beard, or by side locks, if Thomas kept his hair cut in the manner of Jewish law. The girl saw the newcomer as a fellow Jew, a fellow Syrian, and a fellow Hebrew speaker. Thomas Judas does not eat and did not lift up his face to the girl, but stared at the floor. The girl's attention to him, however, did not go unnoticed.

“And one of the cupbearers came, raised his hand, and smote him on the cheek.”<sup>614</sup> In response, Thomas Judas, the newly arrived Hebrew slave carpenter, prophesizes in his own language that he would see the hand which smote him dragged in by a dog.<sup>615</sup> Thomas Judas goes on to sing a very long song comparing the church with the bride in whose honor the party was held, but being a Hebrew speaker, no one could understand what he was saying except the flute girl.

But the flute-player heard everything, because she was a Hebrew and she was looking at him. And when she left him and played to the others, she still kept looking at him and loved him as a countryman of hers; and in his looks, he was more beautiful than all those who were there. And when the flute-player had finished, she sat down opposite to him and did not turn away her eyes from him, but he did not lift up his eyes, and did not look at any one... waiting till he might arise and depart from the banquet-room. (*Acts of Thomas* 8)<sup>616</sup>

The flute girl becomes a vital part of the story when the party is disturbed. Into the

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<sup>613</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 26-27.

<sup>614</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 28.

<sup>615</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 28.

<sup>616</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 39-40.

midst of the banquet-room a black dog drags in a bloody right hand.<sup>617</sup> It seems that when the cupbearer had gone to the fountain to draw water, a lion attacked and tore him limb to limb.<sup>618</sup> The severed hand raises a stir. Only the flute girl can tell what the hand means.

Then the flute-player broke her flutes, and came to the feet of the Apostle, sat down, and was saying, “This man is either God or the Apostle of God; for I heard him in Hebrew what he said to that cupbearer, and immediately it befell him. For he said to him: ‘I shall see a dog dragging the hand that smote me’ and lo, you have seen how the dog dragged it about.” And some of them believed the flute-player and some of them did not believe (her). (*Acts of Thomas*, 9)<sup>619</sup>

This glimpse of a Hebrew flute girl embedded into the miracle stories of the Apostle Thomas can reveal some information about the slave trade from the Mediterranean. The girl is not a newcomer. She has been in India long enough to learn the local language well enough to translate but not for so long that she forgot her mother tongue. That means that she most likely was not kidnapped and sold as a young child when language is quickly forgotten. The ability to speak or at least understand her native language perhaps speaks to her age when she entered India as younger children quickly forget their native languages without practice. Perhaps her ability to speak Hebrew shows difficult conditions of slave transport, that only teens or adults, but not young children, could survive the long journey. It is also possible that the girl was a second-generation slave or freed slave, the daughter of a Judeo-Palestinian slave woman who could understand her mother’s language.

The reference to Thomas and the flute girl speaking Hebrew is problematic.

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<sup>617</sup>Elijah also prophesied that the Phoenician/Israeli Queen Jezebel would be consumed by dogs for her evil deed. Like the cupbearer, only her hand remained perhaps serving as the origin of this motif. 1 Kings 16:31; 18:4-19; 19:1, 2; 21:5-25; 2 Kings 9.

<sup>618</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 40.

<sup>619</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 41.

Scholars of the languages of first century Palestine debate the question of when Hebrew existed as a living language. Until the publication of the ancient Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls, most scholars argued that Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Levant in this period. Qumran Hebrew documents and other epigraphic remains from the Judean Desert, including legal documents, personal letters, and bilingual tombs and ossuaries, reveal at least three different language variants of Hebrew and “unequivocal signs of a Hebrew vernacular.”<sup>620</sup> After examining biblical and extra-biblical texts for evidence of colloquial elements, a number of scholars now argue that “In the time of Jesus, Hebrew was actively spoken and written, alongside Aramaic, by many Palestinian Jews.”<sup>621</sup> There is no doubt that Aramaic overwhelmed Hebrew after the second century C.E., but strong evidence exists that the early Christian and Jewish population of Palestine, especially the working classes from which Thomas and the slave girl most likely originated, used Hebrew as part of their bilingual or multilingual worlds.<sup>622</sup>

The flute girl appears to be bicultural as well as bilingual. Her religious understanding is syncretic, consisting of Indian religious plurality as well as her native Jewish monotheism as revealed in her statement, “This man is either God or the Apostle of God.”<sup>623</sup> A Jew would not say Thomas was a god. A Hindu would not say that he was an Apostle of God. Because the girl broke her flute, probably as a statement that she was forsaking her life of providing sex and entertainment

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<sup>620</sup>Steven E. Fassberg, “Which Semitic Language did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012), 272.

<sup>621</sup>Fassberg, *Semitic Language*, 273. My appreciation to Dr. Randal Buth and Dr. Raymond Pritz, scholars from the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research and Jerusalem Perspective, who sent me this and many other sources on the subject.

<sup>622</sup>Fassberg, *Semitic Language*, 277. Thomas was traditionally known as a carpenter.

<sup>623</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 41.

behind,<sup>624</sup> she must have understood the more sexually austere Jewish tradition. In comparison, visible at least within a few centuries, Hindu temples promoted sex and music in worship of their gods. If the girl truly had the ability to leave her entertainment career, she would have been a freed slave.

Another bit of evidence about the slave trade of Mediterranean women is that being “Yavani” in this context did not automatically put the slave entertainer into the top ranks of elite courtesans. She is playing in the room where the unknown strangers and, presumably, the lower class were served. If Yavani ethnicity automatically made a slave girl more desired, this girl would have been playing her flute for the king and his guests, rather than in a room where a newly arrived foreign slave could recline. Perhaps the girl is still in training or perhaps she has aged out of the elite positions, but a Yavani origin has not protected her from working with the lower echelon of customers.

Like a number of “soiled” women in the Biblical text, such as Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, the Samaritan woman at the well, and Mary Magdalene, this Hebrew flute girl finds herself as the one who is responsible for revealing the divine message. She is also the first Christian convert in India. The king hears about the flute girl’s words and comes to forcibly take Thomas to pray for his betrothed daughter. The apostle’s ministry of teaching and miracles begins. The strong Eastern Syriac church in Kerala and across South India traces its origins to this incident.

The term “flute girl” in Greek texts carries the dual meaning of musician and sexually available slave. Modern society has somewhat erased the links between entertainers, musicians, dancers, poets, and actresses from those who make a living as

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<sup>624</sup> Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 42.

purveyors of sex. In other cultures, however, from the ancient Greek *hetaira* to the medieval Italian *cortigiana*, to the modern Japanese *geisha*, this connection between entertainment, leisure, and romantic sexual fantasy and fulfillment remained intact in the institution of the courtesan.

Courtesanship is defined as the social phenomenon whereby highly educated, creative, and skilled women engage in relatively exclusive exchanges of artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favors with male patrons.<sup>625</sup> These women found an opening in elite societies where marriages were arranged as family or business ties, where respectable women were expected to live reclusively and modestly at home, serving her husband's parents and bearing male children. Men, therefore, expected to find stimulating repartee, entertainment, cultural performance, educated companionship, and romance from public women. Courtesans, who were picked at a very young, trainable age because of their combination of beauty and talent, most often came from the lower echelons of society or enslavement. They blurred class lines by co-opting upper-class education, styles, and privileges to serve men at the highest levels of society, who could afford their company....at least until their pockets were emptied.<sup>626</sup>

Within the multiplicity of sex workers in India, the courtesans were at the top of the hierarchy. Ancient cities elected and crowned their chief courtesan and her court with pomp and ceremony.<sup>627</sup> For example, Buddhist *Jataka* texts preserve the name of two competitive courtesans, Ambapalli of Vaisali in northern Bihar and

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<sup>625</sup>Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts; Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>626</sup>Feldman, *Courtesan*, 6.

<sup>627</sup>Bullough, *Prostitution*, 86.

Salavati of Rajgriha in south Bihar.<sup>628</sup> An elected courtesan known as “the chief ornament of the city” in prosperous towns could maintain huge establishments of their own singers, instrumentalists, and dancing girls to let out for hire. Sama, courtesan of the city of Kasi (modern Varanasi), was reputed to have 500 *ganikadasis* (female slaves of a ganika).<sup>629</sup>

These women were often trained and certified at state expense in the seventy-two arts and sciences that an educated public woman was expected to know.<sup>630</sup> The state expected to reap espionage workers and taxes from its investment. The *Manual for the Superintendent of Prostitutes* specifies that all of these public entertainers along with their relatives, especially those who knew various languages, were expected to be useful in “detecting the wicked and murdering or deluding foreign spies.”<sup>631</sup> They also paid taxes to the state. This Mauryan period text lists tax rates of two days’ income per month or 6.6%.<sup>632</sup> Owners of foreign entertainers listed as “actor, dancer, singer, player on musical instruments, a buffoon, a mimic player, rope dancer, a juggler, a wandering bard or herald, pimps, and unchaste women” all had to pay extra, “five *panas* as license fee,” to work in India<sup>633</sup>

The highest-class sex workers received salaries from cities or from kings. For the top courtesans, one of their major duties as “prestige makers” was to bring their troops of entertainers, beautifully adorned, to welcome, escort, and entertain

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<sup>628</sup> Altekar, *Position of Women*, 181.

<sup>629</sup> *Jataka*, III.59-63 in Bhattacharji, *Prostitution*, 202, 227.

<sup>630</sup> *Brhatkalpabha* in f. 33 Bhattacharji, *Prostitution*, 202.

<sup>631</sup> Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, trans. Mahamahopadhyaya; Arthasastravisarada; Vidyalkara; Panditaraja (Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 1961), XXVII, 125.

<sup>632</sup> Bullough, *Prostitution*, 92.

<sup>633</sup> Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, XXVII, 125.



dignitaries or victorious generals during their visits.<sup>634</sup> According to tradition, Buddha was one of these visitors. He enjoyed lunch with the famous Ambapalli and accepted the gift of a mango grove from her.<sup>635</sup> A Buddhist votive inscription from a woman who identified herself as a prostitute speaks to a social milieu where sex work was accepted as a career even in a religious setting.

These social conditions for a career in prostitution, however, could be onerous, especially for the foreigner. In the Gupta Era (455-510 CE),<sup>636</sup> a Sanskrit monologue play gives a disparaging description of a Yavani courtesan which reveals the difficult vicissitudes in the life of an imported sex worker.<sup>637</sup>

I understand that a Yavana courtesan, a female monkey and a female dancer, a man of Malava and one addicted to amorous passion, a donkey and a singer, all have a common nature.... But she also is indeed my friend. (Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka, 111-112)<sup>638</sup>

This description of a Greek sex worker in Late Antiquity is mediated through the words of a man who considered himself a friend. The text hints rather, that he is the pimp of the “courtesan’s quarter.” Further on in the monologue, he reveals that his so-called “friendship” does not extend far enough to protect the Greek girl when she is taken by a rough paramour, her customer paying for sexual satisfaction, because, in the pimp’s words, “We are precluded (from taking an interest) in the affair” because of being the “father-in-law” of the clients.<sup>639</sup> He assumes this pseudo-familial status to add the respectability of marriage relations to a courtesan-client

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<sup>634</sup> Meyer, *Life*, 269-71.

<sup>635</sup> Meyer, *Life*, 94., Altekar, *Position of Women*, 181, Bullough, *Prostitution*, 86-91.

<sup>636</sup> *The Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka: a text-critical edition*, dissertation by Godard H Schokker (The Hague, Paris : Mouton & Co., 1966, 1976), vii, in Ghosh, *Sexual Life*.

<sup>637</sup> The writers in antiquity seem to assume that the audience knows the slave or free status of individual courtesans. Some are referred to as freed slaves so I am assuming slave status for the foreign girls when the text does not say “freed.”

<sup>638</sup> Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 157.

<sup>639</sup> Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 157.

relationship.

His continued soliloquizing gives a hint of the difficulty of the foreign courtesans' lives.

But I should not accost her. For who will listen to the Yavana courtesan's words which are like the chattering of a monkey, full of shrill sounds and of indistinguishable consonants, and which are interspersed with the display of the forefingers? (Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka, 111-112)<sup>640</sup>

The girl appears to be a recent import, struggling to learn the Indian dialect and interspersing her own language for the words she does not know. Her "display of the forefingers" could have several interpretations. Not knowing the language, she might be attempting to use gestures to sign her meaning to no effect. She also could have been using hand signals used by courtesans and dancers to express emotion or to convey messages to the initiated. A professional manager of courtesans, however, would know this language of the hands.<sup>641</sup>

It is possible that the use of hand signs was introduced to India by a trained Yavani dancer. The use of signaling to speak to the audience was already a full-fledged practice in ancient Rome where dancers and pantomimes, most often slaves or freedmen, gestured with their hands to tell the story of their dance.<sup>642</sup> During the time of Nero (r. 54-68 CE), Demetrius, the Cynic philosopher, attacked dance, but when he saw a dancer interpret the love of Aphrodite and Ares, he was delighted. He

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<sup>640</sup> Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 157.

<sup>641</sup> For a chart of some of these signals see P. Thomas, *Kama Kalpa or the Hindu Ritual of Love; A Survey of the Customs, Festivals, Rituals and Beliefs Concerning Marriage, Morals, Women, the Art and Science of Love and Sex Symbolism...* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., 1960), lxxxii, chart 188 opposite page 115. Medieval Abbasid era courtesans were also famous for making hand signs.

<sup>642</sup> E.J. Jory, "The Drama of Dance: Prolegomena to an Iconography of Imperial Pantomime," in W.J. Slater, ed. *Roman Theater and Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 3-4, 24. and David S. Potter, "Entertainers in the Roman Empire," in D. S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly, ed. *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 274.

shouted out, “I hear the story you are acting, my man, I do not just see it; you seem to me to be talking with your very hands!”<sup>643</sup> Whatever the meaning or origin of the signs, the girl’s struggles to communicate are ridiculed, compared to a monkey, a noisy, ubiquitous menace in Indian forests and parks.<sup>644</sup> The monkey could also reference the tamed monkeys kept by Indian courtesans as pets.<sup>645</sup>

The girl also has to compete with other “exotic” foreign slaves. The text describes the “water carrying maid,” Barbarika, as “this Barbari, the veritable goddess of darkness with whiteness in the teeth and eyes only, appears like night, with a very thin strip of the crescent moon.”<sup>646</sup> While Ghosh identifies this girl as a Berber, it is much more likely that she is a slave from East Africa. The Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum served as the African trading nexus between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean during late Antiquity, supplying numerous African slaves for Asian markets.<sup>647</sup> The pre-Islamic Arab traders pejoratively labeled sub-Saharan slaves as “Barbara,” the Greek term for “barbarian” although later in the Islamic period, black slaves came to be known as *Zanj*.<sup>648</sup> This geographic spread of the meaning of the word *barbara* from North Africa to all of Africa and the physical descriptions of a dark courtesan confirm that this courtesan house owned and perhaps specialized in foreign sex workers.

Another hint that varied racial characteristics or long-distance slaves were part

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<sup>643</sup> Lucian, *Salt*. 63ff. trans. A. M. Harmon (London and Cambridge, MA: Loeb, 1972), 5: 265-67 in Jory, *Drama*, 3-4.

<sup>644</sup> Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 157.

<sup>645</sup> Kamala Chauhan, *Cultural History of Northern India, Prior to Medieval Invasion* (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 1988), 154.

<sup>646</sup> *Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka*, 107, in Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 155.

<sup>647</sup> André Wink, *Al-Hind; The Making of the Indo-Islamic World: Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1:25-33.

<sup>648</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, 14, 30.

of the specialty of the house is the description of a third courtesan, “that young girl of Lata” who had “bought off” the “poor fool,” the brother-in-law of the king, with her naiveté. The local prince was described as dark-skinned and very thin, a contrasting “shadow” against the breasts of “the fair-looking and corpulent girl.”<sup>649</sup>

Customers who desired slaves with distant origins or racial characteristics were certainly not limited to India or even to Asia. Foreign entertainers were also a common commodity in the Roman Empire. When L. Verus left Asia for Italy, he brought back oriental musicians that changed the musical tastes of the capital.<sup>650</sup> Athenaeus described Rome as the world in miniature from the many slaves “from all nations.”<sup>651</sup> It appears that the measure of sophistication across Eurasia was owning a collection of foreign beauties or in the case of courtesans, being wealthy enough to afford the short-term rental of the company of exotic foreign girls.

The description of the clothing of the girls reveals their dating to Late Antiquity or perhaps their profession. The commentator describes a courtesan’s clothing as “a bodice [that] reaches up to her waist and covering her breasts up to the roots of the arms”<sup>652</sup> In contrast to the artistic renditions of beautiful women or goddesses, the girls are not portrayed bare breasted. In classical India, both men and women wore traditional wrapped garments covering the lower body and optional upper garments but, for the most part, leaving the chest bare, as portrayed in early monumental carvings, sculptures, or paintings. Due to the influence from the Parthians, Sakas, and Dusanas, Indians adopted Persian shoes and trousers. The

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<sup>649</sup>*Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka*, 109-110., in Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 156

<sup>650</sup> Script. hist. aug. *Verus*, 8 in R. H. Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (1928, repr. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), 20.

<sup>651</sup> Barrow, *Slavery*, 20.

<sup>652</sup>*Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka*, 109, in Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 156.

Guptan court kept the draped lower garments, but added Sasanian headbands, coats, tunics, girdles, and pants.<sup>653</sup>

Covering the breasts with a bodice could have been an example of courtesans setting fashions, the new “Persian style” for elite women. It could also have other interpretations. Abbé J. A. Dubois, a French Catholic priest, escaped losing his head in the French revolution when he departed to India as a missionary. He forsook the European settlement and went “native” for thirty years (1792-1823) to better understand his flock. One of the fruits of his labor is an early anthropological study of South Indian society.<sup>654</sup> He observed that most women went bare breasted, but not the prostitutes.

Of all the women in India it is the courtesans, and especially those attached to the temples, who are the most decently clothed. Indeed, they are particularly careful not to expose any part of the body. ...Experience has no doubt taught them that for a woman to display her charms damps sensual ardor instead of exciting it.... (Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 586)

So perhaps the bodice carefully noted in the source is to differentiate the “joy girls” from normal wives who were still bare breasted.<sup>655</sup> Other sources reveal that courtesans traditionally identified themselves by wearing red clothes and red flower

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<sup>653</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 168.

<sup>654</sup> Abbe J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, trans. and ed. Henry K. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1827, 1924), 586.

<sup>655</sup> Dubois in his description of “A Hindu Woman’s Costume” noted some women wore a sort of little bodice under their saris but he was told that it was a modern innovation and borrowed from the “Mohamedans”. He said that the custom of leaving the upper body uncovered as far as the waist was formerly common to all South India but still prevailed on the Malabar Coast and in the neighboring provinces. His editors footnoted that the custom is gradually dying out amongst the educated classes. Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 341. However, two centuries later, in 1977, when I visited Balasore, Orissa, on the east coast of India, the local women, including the upper-class Muslim family I visited, did not wear blouses or undergarments under their saris. The only women who wore anything other than a sari were either school girls in uniforms or the educated women in the city. Indian students inform me that the custom yet prevails.

leis or neck garlands.<sup>656</sup> Red in India stands for life, passion, and love.

The description of gold earrings and jewels, pearls, and gold ornaments attached to the courtesan's braids appears to show standard working attire.<sup>657</sup> Legal sources on economics state that even in bankruptcy, a prostitute is allowed to keep her ornaments. The jurists considered them the tools of her trade.<sup>658</sup>

Violence lurks in the last lines of the text describing the Yavani girl.

Who is this another man, who is carrying off swiftly on the back of a she-elephant his beloved woman... This is the son of a wealthy man... the leader of the gang wearing loincloths, and is an expert in rough sexual intercourse. (Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka, 113)<sup>659</sup>

A text from 1230 CE from Gujarat shows that not just customers, but also owners could use violence to coerce their slave girls. It was legal to “punish her by kicking and catching her by the hair and tying up and beating her.”<sup>660</sup> If a prostitute refused a customer after a service agreement was made, she could be fined eight times her fee unless the king was involved, then the punishment increased to 1000 lashes.<sup>661</sup>

When this Yavani girl aged out of the courtesan business, if she did not become a manager for younger courtesans, her prospects were bleak as a common slave. Another medieval source states that slaves were beaten like mules, made to carry heavy loads, and suffered starvation and thirst. They must work around the clock without rest or complaint. If they disobeyed, they could be kicked or beaten

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<sup>656</sup> Meyer, *Life*, 264. My first night in Delhi, I wanted to buy a white jasmine “necklace”. My Indian companion forbid me because he said it indicated that I wanted to sell sexual favors.

<sup>657</sup> Pādatāḍitaka of Śyāmilaka, 109, in Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 155.

<sup>658</sup> Narada, xvii 10f in Meyer, *Life*, 274, Bullough, *Prostitution*, 93.

<sup>659</sup> Ghosh, *Sexual Life*, 157.

<sup>660</sup> Pushpa Prasad, “Female Slavery in Thirteenth-Century Gujarat: Documents in the *Lekhapaddhati*,” *Indian Historical Review* 15, nos.1-2 (1988-89): 269-75. Also in Irfan Habib, “Slavery,” in J. S. Grewal, ed. *The State and Society in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 431.

<sup>661</sup> Kautilya, *Arthasastra*, XXVII, 125.

with sticks until they died while their owners enjoyed impunity. Some had their foreheads branded as if they were cattle. They were absolute property with no rights except the most miserly maintenance.<sup>662</sup> Despite her jewels, gold, and fashionable clothing, this elite slave is no more than a rented plaything to her customers and a source of income and amusement to her owner, to be sold when her usefulness was gone.

These few plaintive lines describing the life of a Greek courtesan reveal the difficulty of the foreign courtesans' cultural adjustment and vulnerability to violence that made up their lot. Western sources list these girls only as commodities to be shipped and taxed. The Eastern texts, rare as they are, reveal the humanity, roles, and living conditions of the western sex slaves in India.

Greek girls are mentioned in Indian sources as trained courtesans or *ganika* who served the king and the wealthy elite. Another class of sex workers which grew prominent in the medieval period, however, are the institutionally sponsored slaves called *deva-dasi*, signifying "slave girl for god" but often translated as "temple dancers." Beginning in the third century CE, this custom appears to have spread from central India to the south, from *Yavani* or Roman markets areas in India. I would like to suggest that the custom may have been inspired by the Greek custom of temple prostitution.

The impoverishment of Greece after the migration to the Hellenistic New World or the conquest by Rome might have forced the owners of professional courtesans and trained entertainers as well as slave dealers to pack up and "follow the

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<sup>662</sup> Purushottam Chandra Jain, *Socio-Economic Exploration of Mediaeval India (from 800 to 1300 A.D.)* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1976), 270.

money” to the military bases, new trading cities, and even new non-Greek patrons among the elite of the Hellenized Egyptians, Persians, and Indians. However, the custom of dancing did not appear in temples, at least in Indian texts, at the time of the initial arrival of the Hellenistic Greeks. It is tempting to surmise that possibly the third century CE appearance of female temple slaves was an export from later Roman society when temples and temple prostitution were going out of style due to the infiltration of Christianity and Judaism into the Greater Mediterranean. Did western slave owners and their brothels of slave musicians, dancers, and prostitutes face increasing loss of patronage, motivating them to migrate to India to find work? Did they bring the concept of sexual union with the divine with them?<sup>663</sup> Perhaps the idea of using slave prostitutes to finance temples migrated from the Greek world to India. More research needs to be done to see if West to East cultural transmission can explain the introduction of temple prostitution to India in Late Antiquity.

Female slaves from the Mediterranean were brought to India where they filled cultural roles for elite slaves in public display, diplomacy, female armed protection, and courtesan entertainment and sexual services in Antiquity and Late Antiquity. In the Medieval or Muslim period of India, a number of cultural, political, and economic changes affected and perhaps increased the foreign slave trade and female enslavement. Yet their traditional roles lingered.

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<sup>663</sup>For discussions of slavery, religion, and prostitution in the ancient Mediterranean, see Jennifer Larson, “Sexuality in Greek and Roman Religion” in Thomas K. Hubbard, ed. *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World: Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* (Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), chap. 13.



## Trade to Medieval India

The two religious movements of Antiquity, Buddhism and Jainism, that had previously fostered far-flung trading networks and cultural dispersion diminished after Antiquity according to André Wink. The Vedic Brahmins had never disappeared, but with royal support, they rose from their subaltern status. Their guru cults took the place of Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism disappeared or was absorbed into Hinduism in most parts of India. The ascendant Hindu god, Vishnu, gained Buddha as an avatar. Jainism becomes confined to the western and southern coasts of India, prime places to do international business.<sup>664</sup>

The Brahman order that became the religion we now know as Hinduism might have transformed who participated in international trade because of its inward-looking dogma. Jewish, Parsi, Muslim, and Christian middle men appear as traders in the sources, perhaps reflecting a vacuum created by the growing Brahman distaste for trade, especially long-distance marine trade.<sup>665</sup> The lack of Hindu traders could also reflect a lack of enthusiasm or need for western goods in comparison to the West's desire for Indian tropical trade products. Foreign trade diasporas from the Middle East monopolized medieval Indian Ocean trade, especially on the west coast. This seismic change began in the Byzantine-Sassanid-post Gupta age, giving Babylonian-Persian Jewry a head start because of their geographic centrality and organization of trade, finances, and banking institutions.<sup>666</sup>

The trade monopoly by foreigners did not hamper India's role in the world economy for a number of reasons. Increasing population densities affecting regional

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<sup>664</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 228.

<sup>665</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 230.

<sup>666</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 89.

economies increased India's role in trade. The overland Silk Roads through the Tarim basin collapsed after 750 CE. The insecurity of these overland routes from China probably sent even more east-west trade through Indian ports. The Indian Ocean maritime routes used India as the hinge pin between East and West. By the mid-ninth century, India had become the foundation of the international economy.<sup>667</sup>

The Abbasid traders faced the same problem that the Romans did: how to offset the balance of trade enabling them to buy Indian products. Even with Muslim conquerors absconding with wagonloads of treasure taken from Indian temples, India remained a glut for precious metals. Indians used gold in ornamentation, as bullion, for trade with Tibet and China, and for religious images.<sup>668</sup> Kings, when awash in booty, endowed temples richly. King Ananata (d. 1081) and his consort gave away their weight in gold.<sup>669</sup> Indian kings in hard times, who needed to replenish their finances, could become more iconoclastic than their Muslim or Byzantine Orthodox peers, as a means to transfer precious metals used for the divine images into the royal treasury.<sup>670</sup>

In the early medieval period, the seventh to eleventh centuries, the sub-continent drew vast amounts of gold and silver exceeding trade in previous periods and trade with their Asian competition. The Abbasid era traders went great distances to obtain gold and silver for Indian trade. Arab and Berber traders with camel caravans crossed the Sahara to sub-Saharan Africa to bring gold (and slaves) back for Indian trade. With the strong local Indian economy and tropical exports, relatively

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<sup>667</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 89.

<sup>668</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 247.

<sup>669</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 248.

<sup>670</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 249.

few other imports, other than precious metals, were needed.<sup>671</sup>

### Slave Trade in Medieval India

The slave trade into India did provide a second import, besides gold, desired by rich kings, i.e., beautiful women. The Kashmiri Chronicles tell of King Kalasa's desire to have foreign girls. The slave dealer Bulliya brought the Kashmiri king a number of beautiful slave girls from the "Turks"<sup>672</sup> who had gathered them from many countries. The king found them all so beautiful that he bought the entire bunch and sent them off to his harem.<sup>673</sup>

The Indian slave trade was certainly not one-way. The medieval unrest after the fall of the Guptan empire (550 CE) saw transcontinental slave trade in and out of India. Pirates, bandits, raiding tribes, and their own or neighboring kings kidnapped and sold the locals to overseas merchants. Enemy women were ravished, humiliated, and then sold.<sup>674</sup> Indians call the unrest of this era *matsyanyaya* or "rule of the fish," meaning the big fish eat the little fish which included enslaving neighbors that they conquered. Famine, high taxation, and gambling also moved Indians into the slave market. King Vajraditya of Kashmir sold many slaves to *mlecchas*, foreigners.<sup>675</sup>

The battles caused by Muslim advances into India also caused many local inhabitants to be defeated, enslaved, and exported. One possible motivation for the raids, warfare, and enslavement of captives was the ready market provided by the

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<sup>671</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 63.

<sup>672</sup> Indian sources use the term "Turks" to reference all Muslims. From the ninth century, the core of the Abbasid armies were Turkish mamluks. In the early eleventh century, the Ghaznavid Turks extended their hegemony to the Ganges. Wink, *al-Hind*, 21.

<sup>673</sup> *Rajatarangini* VIII, 520-21, in Jain, *Socio-Economic Exploration*, 279, 295.

<sup>674</sup> Jain, *Socio-Economic Exploration*, 261.

<sup>675</sup> *Rajatarangini* IV, 397, in Jain, *Socio-Economic Exploration*, 279, 295.

newly wealthy Umayyad and Abbasid Empires and Tang China where Indian slaves were desired. The initial Umayyad conquest of Sind removed captives from India by the tens of thousands.<sup>676</sup> The Abbasids did not conquer more territory but they still had a massive appetite for slaves. The Muslims continued to raid Sind as far as the Punjab for slaves.

These Indian slaves appear in Abbasid sources in several places. The Abbasids experimented in social and zoological migration by their forced movement of 8,000 Jutt (Zutt) tribesmen and their water buffalos to Syria. The caliph moved the tribe over 2500 miles or 4000 kilometers west to the Byzantine frontiers to create an agricultural zone for farmers and their water buffalos, which could kill the lions which threatened the Muslim troops and the *barid* pony express.<sup>677</sup> The Abbasids forcibly resettled other Jutts in Basra and Kaskar, Iraq. After these Sind slaves joined the Zanj slave revolt and were defeated by the canals being diverted, their survivors were resettled once again in “Khanikin, Ain Zarbah, and the frontier.”<sup>678</sup>

Mas’udi recounts one Sindi slave who was so clever that he managed to seduce his master’s wife and convince his owner to castrate himself. The story ends badly when the Caliph Hadi hears the slave owner’s tragic story and, in retaliation, orders the governor of Sind to have all Sindis driven out of their land. “Which explains why slaves from that country became cheap and glutted the markets at that

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<sup>676</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 205. Wink expresses reservations about the sources which he calls, “Vague and weak here.”

<sup>677</sup> Al-Baladhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State, Being a Translation from the Arabic Accompanied with Annotations, Geographic and Historic Notes of the Kitab futuh al-buldan of al-Imam abu l’Abbas Ahmad ibn-Jabir al-Baladhuri*, trans. Philip Khuri Hitti (New York: Columbia University, 1916), 1.168, 2.629 pp. 259, 111. Water buffalo can kill lions because if one is attacked, the other buffalo will attack and stomp the lion to death.

<sup>678</sup> Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, 376, 110.

period and were sold for such low prices.”<sup>679</sup> One indication of Indian slaves in the Baghdadi slave market, even a century later, is the famous Ibn Butlan slave catalogue which categorizes the usefulness of different ethnicities of slave women. This eleventh century catalogue advises slave buyers that Indian women are most useful for bearing children.<sup>680</sup> Arabic sources show the ubiquity of Indian slaves in their markets but Indian sources show that slave women were still imported. Their roles as retinue, armed guards, and sex workers adjusted or even increased because of changes in Indian medieval culture.

### Medieval Retinue

According to medieval Indian sources, the numbers of slave women needed to project royal status increased to unbelievable proportions. A compilation of architecture, *Architecture of Manasara (Essence of Measurement)*, includes a chapter describing royal entourages which ranked kings by the number of queens and courtesans in the palace.<sup>681</sup> Kings are divided into nine categories. The most humble ruler at the lowest rank, an *Astra-graha* king, possesses an army of five hundred horses, five (hundred) elephants, 50,000 foot soldiers, 500 beautiful court ladies, and

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<sup>679</sup> Mas’udi, *Meadows of Gold; The Abbasids* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989) ed. and trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, VI: 264-265, p. 54.

<sup>680</sup> His manual, *Risala fi shira al-raqiq wa taqlib al-abid (Epistle on the Purchase and Commerce in Slaves)*, is the first extant slave catalogue of which many followed in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. His material was later incorporated into manuals for market inspectors (*Hisbat al-suq*) who were charged with preventing fraud. Ibn Butlan, “Shira al-Raqiq,” in Bernard Lewis, ed. *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople: Religion and Society*, trans. Bernard Lewis (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), 2: 243-52.

<sup>681</sup> Acharya, *Manasara*, 432-35. Discussed in Ali, *Culture*, 114, Ram Sharan Sharma, *Social Changes in Early Medieval India (circa A. D. 500-1200)*, (Delhi: Inter-University Board of India and Ceylon on behalf of Devraj Chanana Memorial Committee, 1969), 7.

one queen.<sup>682</sup> A middling king would need an army of 200,000 foot soldiers and 2,000 beautiful court ladies with five principal queens.<sup>683</sup> Above him, in the eighth highest ranking, the ideal king would require ten million “women ready to die with the king” and one thousand queens.<sup>684</sup> The highest in the ranking, a *Chakravartin* or universal monarch, a lord like unto Indra, king of the gods, has women numbered with nineteen zeros.<sup>685</sup> Since this is more women than the current population of India, or even of the planet, it appears that these numbers start with the ideal households of earthly kings and seamlessly connect them with the retinues of the gods. In all of these descriptions of rank, no matter how exaggerated, it remains obvious that the number of women needed to achieve status is as important as the numbers of horses, elephants, and soldiers.

The Hindu rulers, however, used their female courtiers not just as vehicles to project prestige but also to engender spiritual blessings through a replication of the gods’ households. The women of the Indian royal retinues, slave and free, played the major supporting role in a court tableau portraying the divine. The palace women gathered daily for a meeting and presentation to outsiders in the pillared assembly hall. Protocol mandated that the king sat, ensconced on his throne flanked by *rajavecyas*, his all-important wielders of the fly whisk, betel nut maker, and parasol holder. Courtesans held these positions, paid with royal stipends.<sup>686</sup> The king instructed his chamberlain when to issue the invitation to enter court. First, the

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<sup>682</sup> *Manasara* 41: 10-12.

<sup>683</sup> *Manasara* 41: 22-24.

<sup>684</sup> *Manasara* 41: 33-36.

<sup>685</sup> *Manasara* 41: 37-48. A later chapter, XLII, which describes royal insignia delineates the proper accretions for each of these ranks of royalty and commands that “Petty kings serve those kings who are higher in rank.” XLII:56.

<sup>686</sup> Bullough, *Prostitution*, 90-91.

doorkeepers would allow in the palace women: queens and concubines. Some came in palanquins, some on horses, mules, or on foot. These women took their seats, by rank, on either side of the throne and behind it. They were to sit in rapt attendance with their gaze on the king, literally *paryyupasate*, meaning “to sit in worship.”<sup>687</sup>

From the Gupta period (320-550 CE) encompassing the Golden Age of India and the beginning of the revival of Brahmanism creating Hindu culture, the sources emphasize this ubiquitous female presence around the king. Later descriptions of the king present him as an embodiment of a deity, typically Vishnu. The court women played the part of the goddesses, who are Vishnu’s consorts and bring wealth (Laksmi), land (Bhu), fame (Kirti), learning (Sarasvati), and protection or weaponry (Durga).<sup>688</sup>

In front of the seated king and his women, the princes, then the rest of the religious and political establishment gathered: priests, counselors, ministers, provincial lords, and administrators. Behind the dignitaries came an assortment of entertainers whose role included providing the sound track by chanting “Victory and long life” to the king.<sup>689</sup> Again slave women would have been present among the musicians and dancers. Not all the trained entertainers were in the back row. Sources show that the palace employed musically trained courtesans in the harem. Female entertainers were probably present with the queens and concubines and standing with the minor retainers, depending on their current position and patronage. For the ascendant Hindus, these women, slave and free, were required to bring the kings celestial boons by providing him with a female retinue which mimicked the courts of

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<sup>687</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 113.

<sup>688</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 114.

<sup>689</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 114

the gods who were surrounded by bare breasted, full bosomed, jeweled consorts illustrated in text and stone.<sup>690</sup> Hindus, as well as the newly arrived Muslims, nobles as well as kings, measured their prestige by the number of concubines, dancing girls, and wives in their entourage.<sup>691</sup>

### **Religious Changes Increase the Demand for Slave Prostitutes**

Indian texts from Antiquity reveal a robust prostitution business lightly taxed and legitimized by the government. Medieval changes moved prostitution into the temples. This cultural change in medieval India stemmed from the rulers, starting with the Guptas, who re-empowered the Brahmans according to André Wink. With the royal support of Hindu practices, monumental temples started to be built across India, dedicated to Vishnu and Shiva. Ancient Hinduism had always had its sexual elements as shown in the stories of the god's trysts and the literature of Kama Sutra (compiled probably in 200 CE). With the coming of the temples, however, the sexual element became more prominent. The *lingam* (phallus form of Shiva) and *yoni* (vulva) became the focus of worship across India in large and small temples.<sup>692</sup> Tantric streams of the faith emerged in 900-1600<sup>693</sup> blatantly extolling sexual expression as the path to experience the divine. Medieval temple sculptures became more sexually explicit than any portrayals from the ancient period illustrating the increasing sexualization of Hindu worship.

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<sup>690</sup> Ali, *Culture*, 168.

<sup>691</sup> Dharendra Nath Ojha, *Aristocracy in Medieval India* (Delhi: Orient Publications, 1993), 141-45.

<sup>692</sup> Wink, *al-Hind*, 229.

<sup>693</sup> Bose, *Faces*, 111. Tantras are rituals to experience the divine, among which, mystical sexual practices are included. Some schools of thought teach that this experience should be between spouses, others teach that any sex worker can provide the necessary avenue to divinity. Bullough, *Prostitution*, 96.



The sexuality incorporated into worship in the new temples proved to be more than just metaphysical.<sup>694</sup> Temple girls start to appear in the medieval sources. Their jobs were to clean the temple, dance and sing before the god twice a day, dance in public processions, serve as concubines for the priests, subsidize the temple finances by prostitution, and serve the community as an auspicious guest at weddings and family events by bringing good luck as the “wife of a god.” When their sexual charms faded, the women were branded to mark their service to the god and sent away to wander and beg from the public.<sup>695</sup>

Labeling these girls as slaves-*dasi* could refer more to their dedication to the gods than to actual slavery. Defining the entire institution as slavery is problematic since some girls entered this service of the gods as a donation from their parents.<sup>696</sup> Mothers hoped that a first-born daughter given to the god would ensure that her second child would be a boy. The medieval *Puranas*, however, are not reticent about the role of slavery as they recommend buying a girl to dedicate to the solar god, even a bevy of prostitutes for good measure, to guarantee eternal bliss in *suryaloka*, the realm of the sun god.<sup>697</sup>

A number of scholars note that temple dancing girls or temple prostitution were unknown in classical India.<sup>698</sup> The Jataka Buddhist tales do not mention them. Greek observers of Mauryan India never note them. Arthasastra, who described in

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<sup>694</sup> Contemporary middle class Indian society adopted the Victorian sexual prudishness of their British colonizers. They often find themselves chagrined that their medieval architecture and culture is unreservedly sexually explicit.

<sup>695</sup> Walker, *Hindu World*, 247.

<sup>696</sup> Bhattacharji, *Prostitution in Ancient India*, 217, f. 99.

<sup>697</sup> *Padmapurana*, Srishtikhanda, 52, 97 in Altekar, *The Position of Women*, 182-83.

<sup>698</sup> Altekar and Bhattacharji both argue for the beginning of temple prostitution at third century CE or later. Chanana, however, gives a more vague case, that temple prostitution has been an institution in India from Antiquity to the modern era. Chanana, *Slavery*, 169, f. 69.

detail the laws governing sex workers, never discusses them. The first description of these temple sex workers is Kalidasa who in late Antiquity refers to girls dancing at evening worship in Mahakala temple of Ujjayini.<sup>699</sup> Note that this is the same location as Ujjan on the Sipra River (modern Uttar Pradesh). The Roman era trade guide, *Periplus of the Erythraean Seas*, notes that Ujjan (known as Ozone) was an important hub for Roman trade. In this “City of Temples,” the clay bullae marked “Yavani” was found. In Chapter 4, I argue that this marker could have identified western girls in the slave market. The first Indian text noting temple dancers locates them in the exact place where Roman markets, and probably Roman slave markets, existed. It does not prove a Western or Greek influence on the Indian temples but it could be one clue of how the western girls were utilized.

Many references show how this practice of temple dancers spread over India. The seventh century Chinese visitor to India, Yuan Chwang, saw numerous singing girls in the temple of the Sun in Multan (modern Punjab). The temple made the city rich. When Muhammad al-Qasim conquered the city, he claimed that he killed the men and made captives of 6,000 of the custodians of the *budd*.<sup>700</sup> The Muslim general confiscated the temple’s wealth and women but kept the actual idol as a captive to ensure the good behavior of the neighboring Hindu kings.<sup>701</sup> During the same century, a Sanskrit historical chronicle on the kings of Kashmir witnesses to singing girls in a temple in Kashmir. The Somanatha temple on the coast of Gujarat had 500 dancing

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<sup>699</sup> *Maghaduta* I, 35 in Altekar, *The Position of Women*, 182.

<sup>700</sup> Al-Baladuri defines *budd* as the temple and explains “everything which they (the Indians) honored in a religious way was called by them *Budd*, the idol also being *Budd*.” Al-Baladuri, *Futah al-Buldan*, 2.736, p. 218.

<sup>701</sup> Al-Baladuri, *Futah al-Buldan*, 2.427 in Wink, *al-Hind*, 187-88.

girls to provide music night and day for the deity.<sup>702</sup> These high numbers of dancing girls indicate an increased need for female slaves.

A Muslim traveler, al-Biruni, writing in the early eleventh century wrote one of the most “penetrating accounts” extant on medieval Indian society.<sup>703</sup> In his account, he gives a clue to the motivation for the institution of temple dancers.

Hindus are not very severe in punishing whoredom. The fault, however, in this lies with the kings, not with the nation. But for this, no Brahman or priest would suffer in their idol-temples the women who sing, dance, and play. The kings make them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons. By the revenues which they derive from the business both as fines and taxes, they want to recover the expenses which their treasure has to spend on the army. (Alberuni, *Tarikh Al-Hind*)<sup>704</sup>

Al-Beruni traveled extensively in North India and learned Sanskrit. Although he understood Indian culture better than other Muslims of his time, it is possible that he projected his own Islamic morality onto the Hindu priests. Perhaps the priests’ real complaint about the financial impositions of the crown came from their own desire to profit from the temple girls. By the medieval period, a twelfth-century text records that rulers taxed 25-30% of a prostitute’s income, over four times the tax imposed in Antiquity.<sup>705</sup> Whether king or priests profited more from temple prostitution, the ultimate profit accrued to slave dealers who could import slave women for donors to buy to fill the growing numbers of temples.

The custom of temple dancers moved from north to south. South Indian

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<sup>702</sup> *Rajatarangini* IV.31 in Altekar, *The Position of Women*, 183.

<sup>703</sup> This Muslim scholar is considered the founder of “Indology.” Ainslie T. Embree, “Introduction” in al-Beruni, *Alberuni’s India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), v.

<sup>704</sup> Also known as *Indica*, in al-Beruni, *Alberuni’s India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau, ed. Ainslie T. Embree, Abridged Edition (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), II.157.

<sup>705</sup> *Nammayasundarikatha*, in Bhattacharji, *Prostitution*, 203.

inscriptions show dancing girls performing in temples from the ninth century.<sup>706</sup> They had a long run. A thousand years later in South India, the (previously mentioned) French missionary, Dubois observed that every temple of any importance had in its service “eight, twelve, or more” girls, who were bound by their profession to grant their favors to anybody demanding them in return for ready money.<sup>707</sup> *Devadasis* were only made illegal when India became a state in 1947.<sup>708</sup> A number of documentaries on *devadasis* posted to YouTube show that little has changed in the custom of giving girls to the gods for sex slavery. The medieval period saw the professions of courtesans, dancers, and prostitutes enlarge to include large numbers of *devadasis*, possibly increasing demand for slave girls.

### **Medieval Armed Slave Women**

Some other uses of slave girls from Antiquity continued in medieval India. Kings still used women as armed guards although now the term *Yavani* is no longer used as the stereotypic ethnicity of the armed girls surrounding a prince. When Dabir, the King of Sind in 712 CE, rode out on his white elephant to fight the Umayyad Arab invaders, he had two women in his *howdah* (seat for riding an elephant with a railing and canopy). One was to there to prepare his betel leaf, a mild narcotic leaf for chewing. The other handed him arrows one by one. The Muslim invaders sent a flaming arrow into the howdah, the elephant stampeded into a river, and the king was beheaded. Al-Baladhuri relates that one-fifth of the booty, including those who were daughters of princes, was sent to al-Hajjaj, the governor

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<sup>706</sup> Altekar, *The Position of Women*, 183.

<sup>707</sup> Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 585.

<sup>708</sup> Bhattacharji, *Prostitution in Ancient India*, 217.

back in Kufa, Iraq.<sup>709</sup> The queen of Sind was not included because when the Arabs attacked the city where she resided, “In fear, lest she be captured, [she] burned herself and her attendants and all her possessions.”<sup>710</sup> The fate of the girls who went into battle with Dabir, however, remains unknown.

Women guarding the harem as armed guards again show up in a medieval Indian drama, this time a Prakrit play. Prakrit was already a dead language but the author, Rajasekhara, imitated Kalidasa’s work from approximately five hundred years earlier.<sup>711</sup> In his play, *Karpuramanjari*, the queen uses twenty-five girls to guard a prisoner in her “subterranean room”. Five of her attendants carry shining swords, five carry bows and sharp arrows, five whose usual job is holding the betel-box hold raised lances, and five bathing attendants’ wield sharp and shining *chakras*, the circular sharp throwing weapon seen in pictures of Vishnu.<sup>712</sup> Five more women who are usually reciting poems hold golden batons and supervise the others.<sup>713</sup> The author does not remark on their ethnicity, but the institution of armed women, this time in the queen’s household, obviously remains. In this feminine world, the attendants served double duty in providing personal service (the betel box and bathing attendants) and protection.

A third example of armed slave girls in the medieval period is a text mentioning them with King Bhoja (d. 1055). This famous Rajput king in north-east Rajasthan would personally interview candidates that might qualify as his bodyguard.

<sup>709</sup> Daudpota, *Chachnama*, 195-238 and al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, 426-27, in Wink, *al-Hind*, 205.

<sup>710</sup> al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, 221.

<sup>711</sup> Rajasekhara’s work is dated by the kings who patronized him, Mahendrapala, King of Kanauj (903-07 CE) and his son, King Mahipala (@ 917), Manomohan Ghosh, *Rajasekhara’s Karpuramanjari (A Prakrit Play)*, *Critically edited with an Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Calcutta: The World Press Private 1972), 65.

<sup>712</sup> Thank you Kartheek Maremalla for the definition of *chakras*. Ghosh, *Rajasekhara’s*, 232.

<sup>713</sup> *Rajasekhara, Karpuramanjari*, Act IV.7-8 in Ghosh, *Rajasekhara’s*, 231 ff.

Fighting both Ghaznavid Muslims and local Indian rajas, perhaps he felt that his life depended on the girls he chose to protect him. The records of King Bhoja also reveal that women were still given as gifts to curry political favor. He gave a lovely girl to his commander-in-chief, Kulachandra.<sup>714</sup> The market to procure beautiful slave women obviously still remained.

## Conclusion

Ancient Indian sources portrayed Greek or Roman girls as diplomatic gifts, armed harem guards, and courtesans. The medieval sources reveal that slave girls, including foreign slave girls, continued to fill these roles in Indian society. However, it is no longer possible to identify girls of Mediterranean origin in the texts. The meaning of Yavana, originally an ethnic term evolved from Ionic to Greek to Roman, now encompassed all Muslims. The scarcity of texts could also contribute to the lack of mention of ethnicity of medieval era slave women.

The clue, but not proof, that European girls were part of the medieval Mediterranean slave trade to India is Ibn Khurdadhbih's description of west-east trade. He twice describes Europeans as west to east trade goods. In Book Five of his *Book of the Routes and Kingdoms*, he describes "Slavic, Roman, Frankish, and Lombard slaves; Roman and Spanish concubines" who are exported "through the Western Sea." In Book Six of his work, he describes Jewish merchants who are called al-Radhaniyya who "bring from the West eunuchs, concubines, boys" foremost among their luxury goods for the Eastern markets. He describes three Radhanite trade routes that passed through the Sind and Hind ports. The group of European slaves

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<sup>714</sup>*Prabhandha-Chintamani*, 47, in Singh, *Bhoja*, 99.

described in Book Six travel through Egypt to the Red Sea, straight to Sind and Hind, skipping Baghdad.

The medieval Indian market demand for slave women probably increased between the Roman and the Abbasid Empires. The medieval conquerors and travelers to India reported that the Indian rulers still used slave women as they had in Antiquity. Courtesans and musicians still filled palaces.<sup>715</sup> Civil strife and conquest internally and from the Muslim north created many local slaves but still Indian rulers enjoyed buying foreign girls for their beauty.

Medieval India in contrast to ancient India had no emperor. A multitude of regional rulers created a multitude of courts, each king attempting to gain prestige by amassing a huge retinue. With kings increasing in number, each needed more slaves. The rise of massive temples and temple dancers funding the crown also increased demand on the slave market. Traders importing foreign slave girls to India would have found a ready market for their wares. Medieval Indian culture continued to fuel a market demand for foreign slave women that the slave traders dealing in European slaves were well positioned to fill.

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<sup>715</sup> al-Beruni, *Alberuni*, 157.

## CHAPTER 6

### CHINA: MAGNET FOR THE WORLD

The king of the Shan state.... offered musicians and conjurors... They said of themselves: “We are men from Hai-hsi (west of the sea)”. The west of the sea is in fact Ta-Ch’in (Rome). (*Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76)<sup>716</sup>

The vast distance involved for European slaves to reach China, by the four routes described by Ibn Khurdadhbih, creates skepticism about whether his text is accurate.<sup>717</sup> Yet, Chinese sources describe entertainers with Seleucid and Roman origins, given as tribute or gifts by Central and Southeastern Asian vassals to the Han emperors.<sup>718</sup> The mention of the origins of these performers probably indicates the rarity of Mediterranean slaves sent to the Han court, but their presence does prove that it was possible to transport slaves, from court to court, from the Mediterranean Sea to China in Antiquity. Their skills explain why they were valued.

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<sup>716</sup> *Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76 in Donald Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, “Studi Orientali” vol. X4 (Rome: Universita di Roma, Bardi Ed.e, 1996), 42, 150-51. The Shan rulers, located in the mountains in northern Burma, on one route between China and India, sent tributes to the Later Han court via Yunnan in 94, 97, and 120/121 ACE. The Roman entertainers were part of the Burmese mission arriving at court in January 121 CE., the first year of Emperor An. *Hou Han Shu* 4:4a, 5b, 5:7b in Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 150., *Hou-Han-Shu* 116:9b in Ying-shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China; A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 115.

<sup>717</sup> The distance from the Mediterranean port of Antioch to Chang’an China by land is around 6400 kilometer/4,000 miles.

<sup>718</sup> Chapter 4 discusses how Mediterranean entertainers were exported and the role of slaves in tribute or diplomatic gifts.



The Chinese appreciation of trickster performances by foreign slaves combined with their love of novel tricks made western slaves worth the investment and the risk of the journey. The Han emperors celebrated the wide influence of their empire with entertainers from as many regions as possible. These performers entertained the court, the local population, and visiting diplomats. The medieval Sui and Tang emperors followed Han policy and supported tens of thousands of performers. The western slaves among those performers influenced, if not dominated, music and dance in China's Golden Age.<sup>719</sup> The Mediterranean and European slaves, who survived the long trip, found cultural niches in Chinese society ready made for their skills.

### **The Mediterranean “Jugglers” in the Han Sources**

India's cultural milieu attracted beautiful concubines and “flute girls.” The Chinese also enjoyed musicians, singers, and dancers who provided sexual benefits as well as concubines, but Chinese court culture also desired a different type of foreign slave. Greek and Roman slaves first show up in Han chronicles as trained tricksters or “jugglers.”<sup>720</sup> Other Chinese sources, textual and artistic, illuminate the Han entertainment complex that created a demand for foreign, trained performers from Eurasia, a demand that reached as far as the Mediterranean basin.

The Chinese terms for entertainers applied to these western slaves, *hsuan-jen* or *huan-jen*, are not gender specific<sup>721</sup> and usually translate into English as “jugglers”.

Jugglers, especially those who juggled with swords, were a long tradition for Chinese

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<sup>719</sup>Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 49-58. This topic is discussed in the medieval section below.

<sup>720</sup> Chapter 4 discusses these texts in the context of the political and economic relations between Rome and China.

<sup>721</sup> Thank you to L. J. Jiang for the Chinese grammar check on gender.

audiences. Juggling harked back to an earlier, perhaps legendary era, when jugglers performed before battles.<sup>722</sup> Once, in a battle between the states of Chu (770-223 BC) and Song (1046-286 BC), the juggler, Yiliao, appeared between the battle lines and calmly, juggled nine balls at once. His Chu troops won a complete victory when the Song troops were stupefied and fled without fighting. During another battle in the Warring States Period, the juggler "Yi Liao of Shinan, juggled balls, and the conflict between two houses was eliminated."<sup>723</sup>

Despite the legends of martial juggling exploits, “juggling” is an inadequate translation of a very rich entertainment tradition. The term is much broader, comprising a wide array of performance skills including not just jugglers, but also conjurors, magicians, acrobats, illusionists, and tricksters.<sup>724</sup> Perhaps a better translation would be “circus performers,” a term that encompasses a number of acts: animal trainers, strongmen/strongwomen, clowns, tightrope performers, acrobats, and even includes circus “freaks” whose physical abnormalities provided awe and entertainment. This tradition and the huge numbers of foreign and local entertainers mentioned in the ancient and medieval Chinese sources, demonstrates why allies and vassals across Asia chose to include trained entertainers in their tribute/gifts to the Chinese court.<sup>725</sup>

The Chinese chronicles describe the first western slaves as Parthian tribute (along with an ostrich egg).<sup>726</sup> The Parthians, more likely, saw the slaves as gifts given between

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<sup>722</sup> Juggling was not unique to China. A wall painting depicts a juggler in the Egyptian tomb of Baqet III from the Eleventh Dynasty in the twenty-first century BCE.

<sup>723</sup> "Xu Wugui," chapter 24 in *Zhuang Zi*, translated and quoted by Fu Qifeng, *Chinese Acrobatics through the Ages* (Beijing, Foreign Language Press, 1985), 42. (no bibliography).

<sup>724</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 222.

<sup>725</sup> Chinese emperors interpret all gifts as tribute and proof of the recognition by other rulers that the Chinese rule the earth.

<sup>726</sup> Chapter 4 discusses the political context for this tribute. Chapter 7 discusses Persian-Chinese Tang relations. The Chinese sources do not give the date of this meeting.

equals. The Parthian shah, Mithridates II (121-91 BCE), sent two Seleucid entertainers to the Emperor Wudi (r. 140-87 BCE) as part of the first Parthian peace envoy to China around 120 BCE. In Chinese eyes, these foreigners from the West had “deformed eyebrows,<sup>727</sup> steep noses, ruffled hair and strong side-curls, and [were] four feet and five inches in length [height].”<sup>728</sup> His majesty was highly pleased with his gift.

Two and a half centuries later in 121 CE, a second group of slaves in China identified themselves as Romans. They also arrived at the Han court as tribute, this time sent by the ruler of Shan, from what is now Burma, on the southern border of Han China. The description focuses on the tricks that they could do.

The king of the Shan state...offered musicians and conjurors who could make transformations, spit fire, release their limbs without assistance, interchange the heads of oxen and horses, and who were also skilled at juggling even up to a thousand balls at once. They said of themselves: “We are men from Hai-hsi (west of the sea)”. The west of the sea is in fact Ta-Ch’in (Rome). (*Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76)<sup>729</sup>

Later Chinese histories and encyclopedias embellished the description of these Roman performers. The skills of the performers, now numbered at fifteen, increased with each telling. These later sources describe their ability to pour water out of their hands and drop pearls from their feet.<sup>730</sup> Informants perhaps gained their knowledge from other sources now lost or from knowledge of the current exploits of the western entertainers in their era.

A third text mentioning Roman jugglers is contained in a description of the Roman Empire, its government, cities, palaces, chariots, animals, and products. The

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<sup>727</sup> Chinese women shaved their eyebrows and redrew them to popular shapes, which changed over the centuries.

<sup>728</sup> Ma Tuanlin, *Wen-hsien-T'ung-Kao*, chapter 330, Translation Q in Friedrich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (1885, repr. New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966), 80.

<sup>729</sup> *Hou-Han-Shu* 86 / *LIEH-CHUAN* 76 in Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 42, 150-51.

<sup>730</sup> John Ferguson, “China and Rome” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2 (1978): 598.

jugglers in this admittedly distant view of the empire have a prominent place in the description. They “are jugglers who can let fires burn on their foreheads; make rivers and lakes in their hands; raise their feet and let pearls and precious stones drop from them; and, in opening their mouths, produce banners and tufts of feathers in abundance.”<sup>731</sup>

These texts provide a colorful description of the talents that these Roman slaves, male and female, possessed. They provide no indication if their training came from the Mediterranean or if they gained it in the passage through Parthia or South East Asia. The Mediterranean culture did have a heritage of acrobatic entertainments that could have provided trained slaves for export. Greek historian, Xenophon, student of Socrates writing in the late fifth and early fourth century BCE, describes the stir that a trained female acrobatic slave created at a symposium. “But now there was brought in a hoop set all around with upright swords; over these the dancer turned somersaults into the hoop and out again to the dismay of the onlookers.”<sup>732</sup> Roman entertainment continued the Greek gymnastic tradition but as in all things, did it bigger and better.<sup>733</sup> While the Greek symposiums had a modest three entertainers, in Augustus’s palace, performers numbered in the hundreds, many of them owned by the palace.<sup>734</sup>

Roman audiences favored pantomime dances and public entertainment in the coliseums. In addition to the main attraction, a bevy of performers, including many women, performed as *embolaria* or “interlude actresses.” Roman sources mention a variety of acts: “singing ropedancers,” acrobats who leapt off springing platforms,

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<sup>731</sup> Ma Tuanlin, *Wen-hsien-T'ung-Kao*, ch. 330, Translation Q in Hirth, *China*, 80.

<sup>732</sup> Xenophon, “Symposium,” in Xenophone, *Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, Apology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 549.

<sup>733</sup> Potter, “Entertainers in the Roman Empire,” in D. S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly, ed. *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 280.

<sup>734</sup> Christopher P. Jones, “Dinner Theater” in Walter J. Slater, ed. *Dining in the Classical Context*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 193.

*grallatores* who walked on stilts, jugglers, clowns, miracle workers, and animal trainers of all sorts.<sup>735</sup> Usually, these performers were not in the limelight and barely described in the texts with the exception of the *Secret History* of Procopius, who wanted to disparage the queen, Theodora. This powerful sixth century empress of Constantinople began as the lowly daughter of a bear keeper for a chariot faction. Her profession as an actress who supposedly performed erotic acts with geese became fodder used by Procopius to sully her name. Meager as these texts are on these sideshow entertainers, they still contain enough descriptions of performances to know that entertainers coming from the Mediterranean could be well equipped to contribute to the Han court's entertainment extravaganza.

### **Slavery and Entertainers in China**

One essential question for this study is whether slave status was usual for entertainers in classical China and the Mediterranean. Roman entertainers were slaves, freed slaves, and free, but considered to be on the lowest rungs of society.<sup>736</sup> Edward H. Schafer relates that many free musicians achieved fame in China,<sup>737</sup> but it appears that, especially in the performance business, women and foreigners were slaves. Many of the Chinese entertainers or concubines in China entered their training and profession as children sold by impoverished or indifferent parents to brokers.

Several Chinese sources reveal the slave status of many of the local Chinese entertainers. Liu Chih (r. 164-154 BCE), the King of Chi-pei, bragged about buying four clever girls. "They are good at doing tricks, and have many skills. They do things

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<sup>735</sup> Potter, *Entertainers*, 276.

<sup>736</sup> Potter, *Entertainers*, 269.

<sup>737</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 54.

according to new methods.”<sup>738</sup> Besides the presence of women in the career of tricksters, this text reveals their slave status. The king boasted that he bought the girls for 4,700,000 cash (strings of copper coins) at the “common people’s place” in contrast to the “place for nobles.”<sup>739</sup> Slave dealers were in a position to pick the more talented children, offspring of captives, convicted criminals or starving families, who were passing through the slave markets. They also had the resources needed for the years of training. Singers and entertainers targeted for elite customers still passed through the degradation of a slave market that treated them like livestock even when silk clad. Chia Yi (177-174 BCE) described luxury slaves for sale. “Nowadays people who sell youths dress them up in embroidered clothes and silken shoes with the edges all embellished, and put them into pens.” He went on to rant that the clothes used by the slave sellers used to be what “ancient empresses” wore. This writer harangued that “singers and entertainers, mean people” wearing “the ornaments of an empress” signaled the deterioration of society.<sup>740</sup> Wang Mang (CE 9) described the slave markets perpetuated by the House of Han where humans, some of whom were free wives and children who had been kidnapped, were put “into the same pens with cattle and horses” to be sold.<sup>741</sup>

The slave status of entertainers solved a number of problems for two groups of clients—courts needing to send human tribute and the owners of performers. If a court wanted to send an entertainer with free status as tribute, they could encounter problems if the performer refused to travel or provide sexual services.<sup>742</sup> Chinese poetry reveals that

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<sup>738</sup> SC, *Shih chi*, 105.7a, in C. Martin Wilber, *Slavery in China during the Former Han Dynasty*, vol. 34, Anthropological Series (Chicago, IL: Field Museum of Natural History, 1943), 288-90.

<sup>739</sup> SC, *Shih chi* 105.7a, in Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 124, 288-90,

<sup>740</sup> CHS, *Ch’ien Han shu* 48.6b, 17b, in Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 124, 279.

<sup>741</sup> CHS, *Ch’ien Han shu* 99B.4b, 8a, in Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 452-53.

<sup>742</sup> For a discussion of slaves in entertainment and sexual rights over slaves in China, see Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 80-183.

managers expected entertainers to provide sex to patrons or select members of the audience. Han scholar, Pien Jang, (d. ca. 200 CE) wrote of the delight of visiting dancing girls in their private rooms after the music stopped.<sup>743</sup>

Another factor in determining the slave status of foreign-trained entertainers, including conjurors sent as tribute, stems from the Eurasian traditions of sending slaves as gifts to rulers. The Han and Tang emperors ruled over even more regions than the Greeks, Romans, or Indians. The resulting tribute/gifts of war prisoners, freaks, dwarves, beautiful concubines, musicians, and trained performers from conquered peoples inside the empire and from vassals or allies on the frontiers and beyond flowed like a river to the capital.

Two beautiful Korean women stand out in sources because their situation was an exception. As a thank-offering for saving the citizens of the besieged city of Liao-Tung, the ambassadors brought two beautiful women to the emperor. T'ai Tsung returned them saying "To detain their persons while forgetting their families—to love their fairness while wounding their hearts—this I cannot do."<sup>744</sup> This exceptional return of a human tribute gift was most likely a political gesture as the court used these slaves to demonstrate the reach and majesty of their empire. The expectations of submission required each vassal to include their local culture in the form of entertainers: singers, instrumentalists, dancers, and "jugglers" in their tribute.<sup>745</sup> The Chinese rulers then incorporated these outlying cultural performances of the conquered and allied regions into their performances for the court and diplomats.

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<sup>743</sup> *Chang-hua-fu* in chapter 110 of the *Dynastic History of the Later Han period*, quoted in R. H. Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China; A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A. D.* with a new introduction and bibliography by Paul. R. Goldin (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 77.

<sup>744</sup> Yu-wen, *Chuang t'ai Chi* 199a, 3615d in Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 44-45, 290.

<sup>745</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 50-57.

## Development of the Royal Patronage of Entertainers in China

The modern three-ring circus in the West is only a pale reflection of the huge state-sponsored entertainment complex of trained entertainers supported by Chinese emperors from the Han Dynasty. Chinese legends and traditions, dating long before the Han period, explain why “jugglers” or acrobatic slaves were favorites among the tribute gifts to the emperor. Sources as early as Yung-Chia era (307-312 BCE) show the Chinese court employment of performers, including singers, musicians, actors, and acrobats, from as far as T’ien-chu (India) are mentioned.<sup>746</sup> The short-lived Qin Dynasty, (221-207 BCE), the first centralized rule of China, supported trained entertainers and long variety shows, laying the foundations for the Han Dynasty and their promotion of foreign entertainments on a grandiose scale.”<sup>747</sup>

The Western Han emperors (Early or Western Han 206 BCE–24 CE) used entertainers on a grand scale to project their political agenda and hegemony. The chronicles and ancient artistic renditions of performers portray programs featuring huge numbers of entertainers with their individual acts, singing, dancing, playing instruments, and performing amazing acrobatic tricks all performed simultaneously.<sup>748</sup> Reexamining the texts used earlier that describe the entertainers that the Parthian emperor sent as part of his gift to Emperor Wudi (r. 140–87 BCE)<sup>749</sup> shows from the Chinese viewpoint the value that this emperor put on promotion of acrobatic entertainment. He also promulgated poetry and literature. After his conquests, doubling the size of China to nearly its modern borders, he used the arts, especially entertainment, as tools of diplomacy to maintain his

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<sup>746</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 223.

<sup>747</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 12.

<sup>748</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 14-32.

<sup>749</sup> Also known as Emperor Wu, Wu Di, Wuti or Liu Che.



empire and display its glory.

Ambassadors arrived to Wudi's court from all directions. The emperor made stupendous arrangements to host, entertain, and impress these diplomats, who, if suitably impressed, would carry a description of his wealth, fame, and grandeur back to their countries. In 108 BCE, Emperor Wudi invited the ambassadors to his capital, Chang'an, to attend a great feast in their honor, with "pools of wine and forests of meats" to show off his empire's prosperity and power. A viewing stand allowed the distinguished guests to feast while viewing the performances: wrestling, weight lifting, spinning plates, swords, juggling balls, fighting animals, dramas accompanied by song and dance of ancient myths, complete with special effects of clouds, mists, and snow. A display of rare birds and animals from the royal menagerie followed the human acts. Modern Chinese scholars consider Wudi's diplomacy as the first Chinese promotion of economic and cultural exchange between East and West.<sup>750</sup>

This feast with the splendid after dinner performances for the ambassadors birthed the "Hundred Entertainments" that set the bar for ostentatious displays of spectacle for every emperor, rival, ally, and even minor officials who attempted to imitate the Han court. Entertainers were the key element in this use of pageantry to project power, prestige, and good will.

From the second century BCE, this festival of a "Hundred Entertainments" became a tradition that, except for interludes of rebellion or famine, continued for the next 200 years of the Han era, even when the capital was re-established in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE). Each passing year produced greater variety, grandeur, and

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<sup>750</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 16-18.

ever more daring in acts and performers.<sup>751</sup> The imperial Han court supported professional training and then used the “Hundred Entertainments” performers for festivals and celebrations year-round. Even the common people were treated to royal largess when the court sponsored circus performances in the large squares of Ch’ang-an.<sup>752</sup> Fashionable nobles imitated the royals by owning or hiring musicians, dancers, actors, and courtesans to entertain their guests. These musical and acrobatic programs contributed so richly to Han cultural identity that artisans used scenes of these entertainers to decorate pottery tableaus, brick reliefs, stone and pottery sculptures, and tomb murals found across China, and even outside of the area encompassed by the Great Wall<sup>753</sup> (see Figure 6.1).

Word of the extravagant Han performances spread across Asia. Foreign rulers and vassals sent performers to the Chinese capital as tribute that would perhaps please or placate this most powerful neighbor and emperor. The Shan/Burmese balanced on poles and the Indians did tricks with snakes. The Roman entertainers sent by the Shan/Burmese ruler were renowned for swallowing knives, cultivating gourds, spitting fire, slaughtering people, killing horses, and tying and untying oneself in rope tricks.<sup>754</sup> Slave entertainers became instruments of diplomacy and traveled in and out of the empire as gifts or tribute projecting Han hegemony. Entertainers, freaks, and dwarves proved to be popular gifts among rulers. Re-gifting entertainers as tribute to an overlord or as a gift to a peer also solved a basic economic

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<sup>751</sup> Zang Heng, man of letter during the Eastern Han Dynasty, described these performances and imperial sponsorship in his *Rhyme-Prose on the Western Capital* in Fu, *Acrobatics*, 18.

<sup>752</sup> Yu, *Han China*, 197.

<sup>753</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 14.

<sup>754</sup> From *Records of the Historian* quoted in Fu, *Acrobatics*, 16, Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, 222. The reference to the gourds is in f. 8. Growing a plant or killing horses and people sound like illusionist tricks.

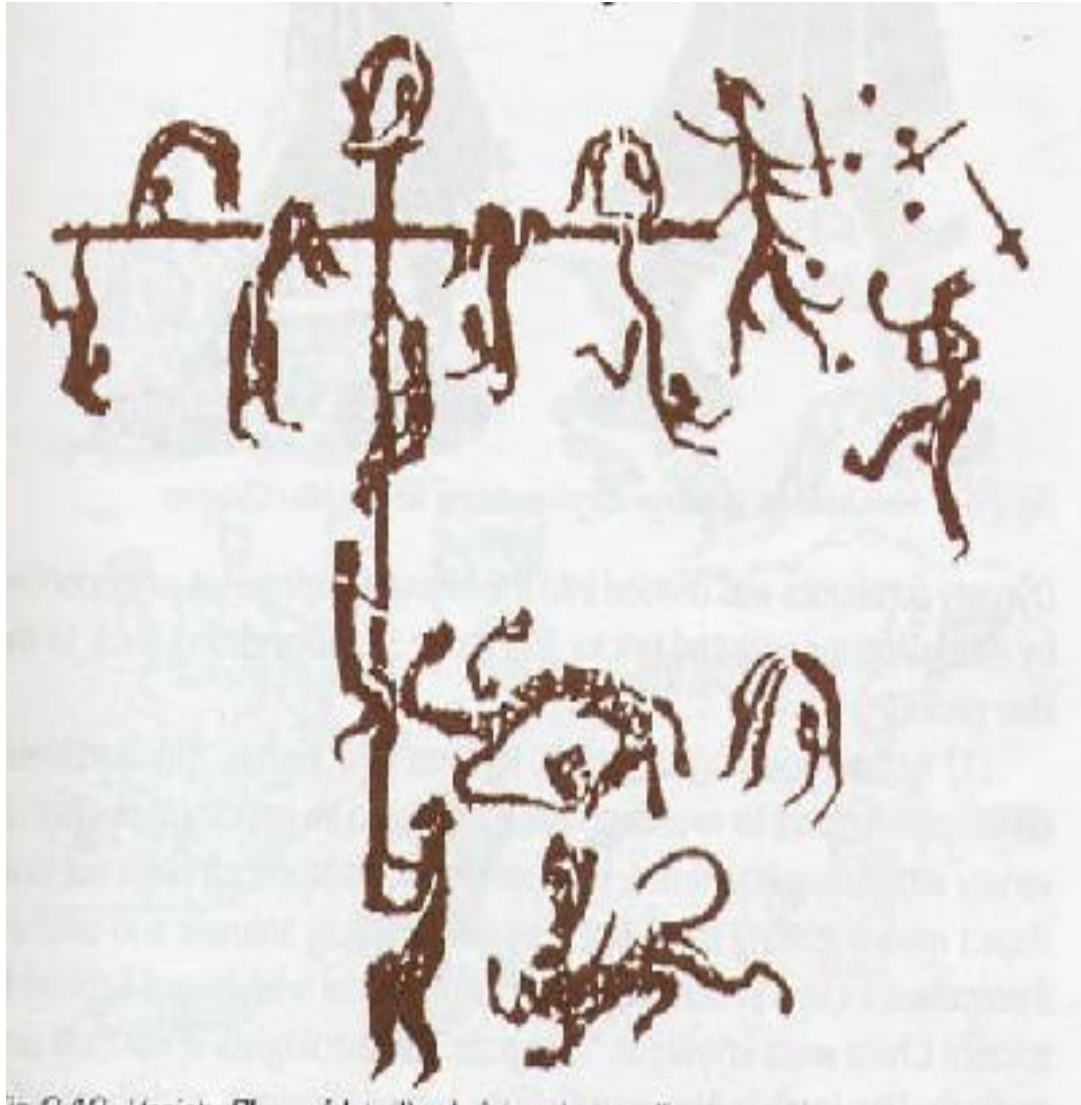


Figure 6.1

Pole Balancing in a Han Tomb.

A painting unearthed in Anqiu County, Shandong Province shows ten acrobats performing various stunts on a long pole held by a single man.”

[http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en\\_artqa/2003-09/24/content\\_37714.htm](http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2003-09/24/content_37714.htm)

In ChinaCulture.org accessed on 6-10-2016.

problem of feeding and clothing these slaves after a ruler knew all their tricks and grew bored with their repertoire. In comparison, the palace could use and then recycle the gift of concubines. When their charms faded and their songs ran out, the palace administration could relegate surplus girls to work on textile production or, in times of financial frugality, would allow them to leave voluntarily.<sup>755</sup>

The conjurors' skills, however, were more valuable when they solved the problem of a gift needed to impress a fellow royal. An anecdote from Nanking shows evidence that rulers tired of entertainers or freak slaves and then tried to pass them on to others. When a Roman merchant named Ch'in Lun<sup>756</sup> visited the court of (Sun) Ch'uan in 226 CE, the ruler, Emperor Wu, persuaded him to take with him twenty "blackish" pygmies or dwarves, ten males and ten females, whom the army had captured in a campaign.<sup>757</sup> The text is not clear whether the pygmies were being sent back home or were sent as a gift to another ruler. The trip ended when Lun's ship sank.

The Chinese appreciation of talented musicians, dancers, acrobats, tricksters, and freaks did not end with the demise of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. The following four centuries of civil strife caused a kaleidoscope of small, evolving rump states in what had been Han China in a period known as the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties. Multiple small courts arose, each sponsoring a number of performers to prove the sophistication needed for their political aspirations to expand. Performers also survived outside the capital, often performing at Buddhist temple fairs.<sup>758</sup> The glory, extravaganza, and level of patronage of entertainers introduced by the Han court, however, did not

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<sup>755</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 185, 192.

<sup>756</sup> Since only Chinese chronicles record this merchant's visit, his western name remains unknown.

<sup>757</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources, 100-01*, Ferguson, "China and Rome", 594, Wilber, *Slavery in China*, 92-93.

<sup>758</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 29-38.

return until Emperor Yang Di of the Sui Dynasty gained power in 604 CE and summoned performers to his eastern capital, Luoyan.

Once again, foreign guests, the local elite, and commoners could expect the extravagant entertainment of the “Hundred Entertainments” By 610 CE, registered professional performers numbered in the tens of thousands. The New Year’s celebration that year comprised 30,000 entertainers, of which 18,000 were musicians. The sound of the drums and gongs resonated five kilometers away. After musicians, acrobats were the largest proportion of the performers. Their acts included juggled balls and swords, balanced poles on their heads, tricks on horseback and on tightropes.<sup>759</sup> By regathering and sponsoring entertainers, the short-lived Sui Dynasty laid the foundation for the Tang Dynasty’s (618-907) Golden Age of Chinese culture and performance.

The Tang emperors (like the dynasties before them) used performers to enhance their prestige and as evidence of conquest of a vast number of culturally unique regions. These entertainers, including many slaves, were major players in creating the Golden, Age, a cultural flowering, still considered the epoch of Chinese sophistication and influence in all the arts. The Tang followed the pattern laid by the Han and Sui Dynasties in using the “Hundred Entertainments” to impress and entertain diplomats, guaranteeing that lavish reports of Chinese power and wealth would spread to the provinces and frontier rivals. Acrobats and musicians were standard fare in state celebrations that would last for days. The emperor also sponsored parades of entertainers doing their tricks outside the palace walls to which thousands of commoners came. Local officials, within 150 kilometers, sent their own troupes of several hundred performers to

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<sup>759</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 39.

show off their own local talent.<sup>760</sup>

Tang Emperor Xuan Zong (r.712-756) established court officials and a ministry in charge of teaching, rehearsing, and performing music, dance, and the Hundred Entertainments.<sup>761</sup> The office, located in the capital, Chang'an, sponsored 10,000 performers.<sup>762</sup> Foreigner entertainers, especially women, were popular with the Chinese audience and writers showing the presence and integration of imported slaves into this Tang entertainment complex.

In the ninth century, when the Tang central power dissolved into civil war and central influence waned, military governors and frontier commanders established their own independent rival courts, each needing professional performers for their own Hundred Entertainments to project prestige. The need for palace administrators to find performers to provide a Hundred Entertainments at multiple locations across China influenced the market for local and foreign-trained performers. Slave dealers must have traveled long-distances to find or bring promising performers.

### **Popular Acrobatic Acts by Women**

Tang Chinese poetry describing female performers reveals that women in novel acrobatic acts proved extremely popular. These writers describe women standing on the backs of galloping horses, dancing on horseback waving their colorful scarves, and doing a double handstand with a partner on a galloping horse.<sup>763</sup> Female tightrope performers

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<sup>760</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 42.

<sup>761</sup> Xuan Zong appears again in Chapter 7 in the context of possessing one of the largest, recorded harems in Tang China.

<sup>762</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 41.

<sup>763</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 46-47.

found fame as ropedancers (a popular act in both Rome and China).<sup>764</sup> Their thin silk or gauze gowns, elaborate piled hairstyles, and jeweled or jade ornaments all embellished their graceful movements. These ropedancers would ascend a slanting rope, bend, dance, turn somersaults, skip rope, sit and bounce back up, juggle balls, and change positions with another actor on the rope while fencing.<sup>765</sup> The Tang era introduced women dancing on tightropes in stilted wooded sandals (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3 for details) and forming “human pagodas” of acrobats stacked on top of other performers, the performer serving as the base also balancing on the rope. A Japanese scroll from the 1200s, “Shinzei’s Ancient Musics,” shows Tang cultural innovations, which spread to popular culture in Japan.<sup>766</sup> The text and pictures illustrate how central these acts were to popular culture and Tang cultural hegemony.

Both Chinese poetry and paintings memorialize strong women in jaw-dropping performances.<sup>767</sup> Women as the “strong men” dance while balancing a number of other performers on their head or shoulders. Verses immortalize three of these extraordinary women. Shi Huohu, a Tang era performer noted for her foreign minority status, was famous for being able to balance five little girls on a pole long enough for them to perform a full-length song and a dance, which included acrobatic tricks. She also provided the base for the “Human Pagoda”. While standing on small tables piled up in five tiers, she balanced performers on her shoulders for a height of three more tiers. When she made the signal, they put out their hands looking like a towering

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<sup>764</sup> Potter, *Entertainers*, 276.

<sup>765</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 45.

<sup>766</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 45-46.

<sup>767</sup> Art pieces that portray female weightlifting performers are in the Dunhuang grottoes and on the painted bow from the Tang era. Fu, *Acrobatics*, 54-5.



Figure 6.2  
Detail of Fairy Lady Juggling Balls on a Rope  
<http://d.hatena.ne.jp/keisukekeyuki/>

Accessed 6-10-16, Calendars and Clocks

プロフィール keisukekeyuki 最新タイトル

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最近のコメント 2013-01-10 keisukekeyuki





Figure 6.3

Fairy Ladies Juggling Balls on a Rope

<http://blog.goo.ne.jp/nippondentougeinou/e/87a09f38de28e119479e58f0a9fd8d11>

Accessed 6-10-16,

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2013-06-28 | 日本の伝統芸術

pagoda.<sup>768</sup>

Another extraordinary “strong woman” immortalized in verse is “Aunti Wang.” An awed ten-year-old child prodigy described the strong woman’s performance as the best at the Royal Theater as she effortlessly danced around the arena while a performer with a whip did tricks on top of a beautifully carved wonderland on a wooden platform balanced on a pole that Aunti Wang balanced on the top of her head (see Figure 6.4). Another Tang poet, Wang Jian, describes another nameless strong woman’s performance.

A pole so heavy that a hundred men can hardly lift it up,  
Rising into blue clouds in mid-air:  
A woman with slender waist balances it with effortless grace.  
Lifts it on her head while dancing to the rhythm of a whole melody.<sup>769</sup>

The line between dance and acrobatics seems to have blurred in the Tang quest to see something innovative and different. The most popular dance in the realm during the Tang Golden Age came from the West, the *Hu Xuan*. Central Asian rulers, especially from Samarkand, sent Sogdian Persian girls to do this dance, clad in crimson robes with brocaded sleeves, green damask pantaloons, and boots of red deerskin.<sup>770</sup> They skipped and twirled on the tops of balls. The “Whirling Dance” or the Rat-ta-ta-ta Dance got its name from the sound that the wooden balls, two-thirds of a meter in diameter, made as the dancers performed the dance whirling as if cyclones balanced on the balls.

Like a precious pearl found under the Black Dragon’s chin,  
The ball advances and retreats,  
Vanishing as fast as a shooting star in the sky.  
A maiden with flushed cheeks, waving a light scarf,  
Spins around just like lightning.<sup>771</sup>

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<sup>768</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 54.

<sup>769</sup> Wang Jian quoted by Fu, *Acrobatics*, 45.

<sup>770</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 56.

<sup>771</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 57.

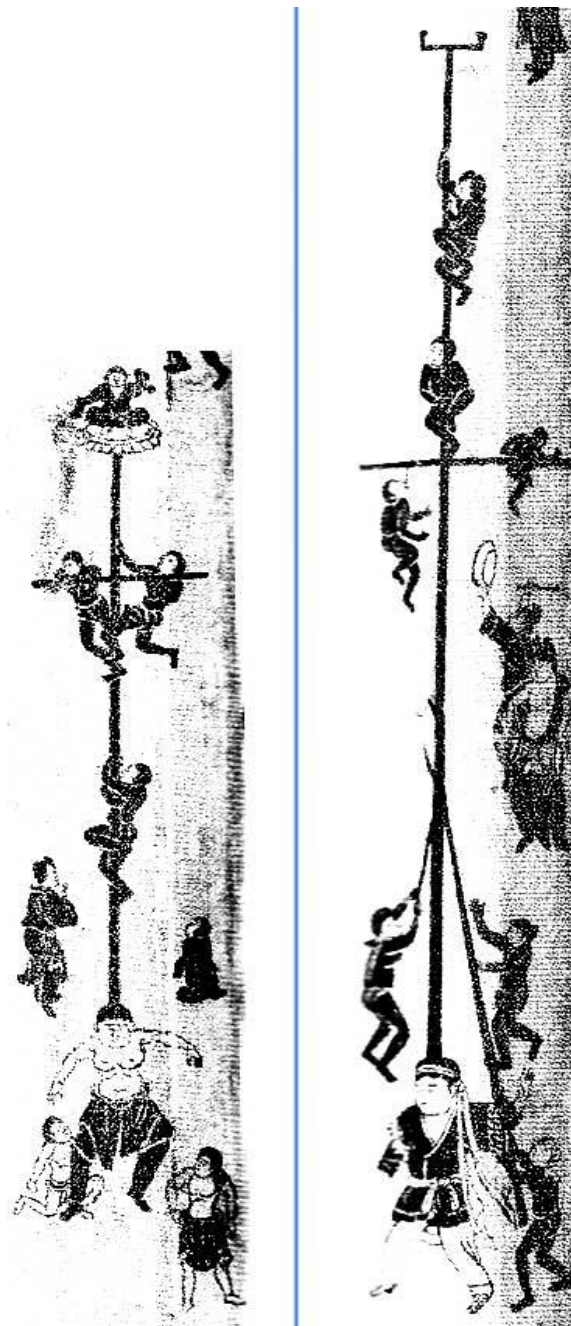


Figure 6.4

Tang Strong “Person” Entertainers. Notice the woman holding the left pole. Accessed on 6-10-2016.

[http://deracine.fool.jp/circus/studies/z\\_silkroad/silkroad04.htm](http://deracine.fool.jp/circus/studies/z_silkroad/silkroad04.htm)

【連載】サーカスのシルクロード

第4章 正倉院展の墨絵弾弓図

At the height of the popularity of this dance, several hundred women in court costumes would perform the dance in formations, twisting, whirling, waving scarves, and changing patterns. With several hundred wooden balls rolling, the act sounded like thunder. The fad caught on until even the women of the royal harem were treading on wooden balls.<sup>772</sup> Some blame this dance for the An-Shi Rebellion, which began the period of Tang weakness and decline. The infamous “fat” concubine, Yang Yuhuan, favorite of Emperor Xuan Zong, learned the Hu Xuan dance to perform it, supposedly for her consort. She attracted the attention of An Lushan, also a renowned whirling dancer. This garrison commander with western origins, rose up in rebellion against the Tang emperor.<sup>773</sup> This dance is only one of many *hu*-western cultural adoptions, which filled the Tang courts, elite homes, and drinking establishments during China’s Golden Age.

### **Problems Identifying Western Slaves in Tang China**

The Chinese saw the Roman Empire as an empire of comparative grandeur and called it Ta Ch’in or “Great China” in recognition of its similarity to their own.<sup>774</sup> Chroniclers carefully noted Greek and Roman performers arriving at the Han court. When Rome no longer ruled an empire, Constantinople existed in the Chinese Chronicles first as “Fu-lin” and sometimes as a corrupted transmitted “Hrom” or Rome.<sup>775</sup> Trade

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<sup>772</sup> Fu, *Acrobatics*, 57.

<sup>773</sup> Shen Fuwei, *Cultural Flow Between China and the Outside World Throughout History* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1996), 88.

<sup>774</sup> Leslie, *Chinese Sources*, XVIII. For a full discussion of the meanings of Da Qin or Ta Ch’in, see John E. Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes During the Later Han Dynasty 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> Centuries CE, An Annotated Translation of the Chronicle on the ‘Western Regions’ in the Hou Hanshu* (No Publisher, 2009), 254-56.

<sup>775</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 5.

goods and diplomats still traveled from Byzantium to Chang'an.<sup>776</sup> For example, the Tomb of Feng Sufu (d. 415), brother of the North Yan King, has five rare Roman light and dark green transparent glass vessels (see Figure 6.5 for example.) similar to glassware produced in the Rhine region during the Roman era and unlike anything produced locally.<sup>777</sup> Mediterranean glass vessels from Late Antique Byzantium appear in museums across East Asia. After the two centuries of the Justinian plague and the Muslim conquest, however, Byzantine influence waned in China.

In the Han era, the Chinese had respect for the Greek and great Roman empire and so mentioning the origins of the performers who came from those regions carried a certain cachet even when they were sent as gifts from closer allies. In the Tang era sources, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to identify people from Europe or the Mediterranean. Now, instead of vocabulary that differentiated Seleucids and Romans, Chinese called all foreigners who came from the west *hu*, meaning “foreigner” or “barbarian.” In ancient China, the *hu* epithet applied only to the northern neighbors, but during the Tang dynasty, it expanded to describe Indo-European speaking peoples of Central Asia, especially Sogdians, but could loosely label all foreigners from north and west.<sup>778</sup> Schafer interprets *hu* as Iranians, Indians, Arabs, and Romans.<sup>779</sup> The term had evolved in Chinese, and much like the term “Yavana” in India, it gradually expanded to mean all Westerners. Similarly, Arabs used the term “Frank” to mean all Europeans during the Crusades and Europeans called all Muslims “Saracens.” Sometimes the

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<sup>776</sup> For Byzantine and Early Muslim diplomatic visits recorded in the Chinese Chronicles, see Chapter 7.

<sup>777</sup> Fuwei, *Cultural Flow*, 53-54.

<sup>778</sup> Xiaofei Kang, “The Fox [hu] and the Barbarian [hu]: Unraveling Representation of the Other in Late Tang Tales,” *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 27.1 (1999): 49.

<sup>779</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 4.



Figure 6.5

Fifth Century Roman Glass Found in Korea  
Seoul National Museum, Korea  
Photo by Raymond Hain, January 2015

Chinese designated Westerners as “Persian” but the term still stood for any foreigners from the West. Chinese also applied the term “Black” to all people darker than themselves, including Persians.<sup>780</sup>

Trying to identify European or Mediterranean slaves in Tang literature by using physical characteristics of green or blue eyes and light hair proves to be problematic. For example, Emperor Hsuan Tsung kept a western boy he called “Chick” among his entertainers in his “Pear Garden.”

The Western boy with curly hair and green-irised eyes.  
In the high tower, when the night is quiet,  
Blows the transverse bamboo.  
(Li Ho, “Lung yeh yin”, *Li Ch'ang-chi ko shih, wai ci*, 14a)<sup>781</sup>

The problem is that these performers with seemingly Caucasian or Aryan features could have come from inhabitants much closer to China instead of from Iran or Europe.

From the Bronze Age to the Tang era, Caucasian features appear in frescos, texts, textile designs, and on mummies with red or blond hair in Western China. Over 100 Bronze Age Caucasoid mummies were studied in the Tarim Basin, in the northwestern region of Xinjiang in China. The oldest and most famous among the remains is the red haired Cherchen Man. Radio-carbon dating places this fifty-five-year-old male with European features to about 2000 BCE. Similar mummies date in a range from 2000 to 400 BCE. In one cemetery, of twenty-nine mummies, twenty-one are Mongoloid while eight are Europoid. Mitochondrial DNA testing shows the mummies' genetic characteristics connect to the northwest rather than to Europeans or Mediterranean groups.<sup>782</sup> Old Chinese books from the fifth century BCE describe an ethnic group with

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<sup>780</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 290, f. 48,

<sup>781</sup> Li ho, *Lung yeh yin*, LCKKS, *wai ci*, 14a, quoted in Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 54.

<sup>782</sup> Victor H. Mair, “Mummies of the Tarim Basin,” *Archaeology* 48, no. 2 (March/April 1995): 33.

Caucasian features, called *Yuezhi* or *Ruzhi*. These people had high-bridged noses, deep round eye-sockets with blue or green eyes, substantial beards, and fairish or reddish hair.<sup>783</sup>

Scholars, such as Victor Mair, have concluded that these Tarim Basin Caucasians were ancestors of the Tocharians who left behind manuscripts in an Indo-European dialect dated to the sixth to the eighth century CE. The images of Tocharian aristocrats, tall, thin, with red and blond hair, green and blue eyes, offering their donations, remain in frescos, plastered on a wall in Buddhist cave sites near Kucha, an oasis town in northwestern China. Today, Uyghurs populate that region and carry a mix of Turkish, Chinese-Mongoloid, and Euro-Persian features.<sup>784</sup> Tang texts like the poem above describing the boy, “Chick” with the green eyes, could have been describing local Tocharians. The archaeology, art, and texts from the Bronze Age to the fifth century BCE to the Tang show that people who could be identified as Caucasian did not necessarily come from West Asia or Europe but had lived for over a millennium in Northwest China. Identifying imported European slaves by physical descriptions in Tang literature proves problematic.

### **Evidence of European Slaves for China in Arabic Sources**

Han sources definitely assert that Greek and Roman slaves arrived as tribute in China, albeit through mediating courts in Persia and Burma. After the Han texts, Chinese sources lose their value in identifying Europeans as Westerners have no individual nomenclature. Tang era literature submerged all western peoples into one classification,

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<sup>783</sup> Francis Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) pictures 62-63, Mair, *Mummies*, 33.

<sup>784</sup> Mair, *Mummies*, 34.



*hu*. When the Tang era overlapped with the Abbasid literary explosion, however, Arabic sources show that Europeans were most likely part of the multicultural mix of slaves in China. Arabic writers described the slave trade of European women to China and to the Silk Roads. As the consummate intermediaries from the hub of Euro-Sino trade, these Arabic-speaking informers<sup>785</sup> were in the ideal place to describe the movement of traders and slaves between Europe and China across their empire.

### **The East-West Radhanite Jewish Traders**

The most copied of these sources, Ibn Khurdadhbih's geography book, references Jewish traders bringing Europeans over maritime routes to China.

These merchants speak Arabic, Persian, Roman, Frankish, Spanish, and Slavonic. They travel from the East to the West and from the West to the East by land as well as by sea. They bring from the West eunuchs, slave girls, boys, brocade....to Jidda, then they go to Sind, Hind, and China. (Ibn Khurradadhbah, *The Book of the Routes and the Kingdoms*)

Ibn Khurdadhbih described four different routes that the Radhanite Jewish traders used.

They all began in Europe and ended in China. Another possible source of European slaves in China could be the North-South trade routes over the Baltic-Volga-Caspian that Rus-Norse<sup>786</sup> traders used to bring their trade goods to Central Asian markets located on the Silk Roads.

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<sup>785</sup> Note that Arabic speaking Abbasid traders could be Persian Jews, Nestorian Christians, or Persians of the indigenous faith communities such as Zoroastrian, Manichean, as well as Muslim Persians.

<sup>786</sup> Norse stands for all Scandinavians in this period. *Rus* is what the Arabs called the traders, but later became the name for Russia. *Rhos* is the Byzantine label. Varangian is the Slavic word for Norse from "Vaeringjar" which is linguistically an old Norse word for a mutual protection society. Viking is the term used for western Norsemen. Scholars like Imre Boba debate whether these traders were Scandinavian, Slavic, or a mixed ethnic trading consortium.

## The North-South Rus Norse Traders and the Silk Roads

After describing the Jewish Radhanite traders, Ibn Khurdadhbih tells his mid-ninth century Baghdadi audience that Rus traders of the Saqalibi *jins* (Slavic race or nation) brought their trade goods down the Volga River to the Caspian Sea. There they offloaded their trade goods onto camels to bring them to Baghdad where a Slavic speaking eunuch would translate for the traders.<sup>787</sup> On route, they paid a tax to the Rum (Byzantines), the Khazars, and a Christian head tax, *jizya* to the Baghdadi officials.

The Route of the ar-Rus Merchants: They are a tribe from among the Saqaliba. They bring furs of beavers and of black foxes and swords from the most distant parts of the Saqlabiya [land] to the sea of Rum<sup>788</sup> [where] the ruler of the Rum levies tithes on them. If they want, they travel on the Itil,<sup>789</sup> the river of the as-Saqaliba and pass through Khamlij, the town of the Khazars, [where] the ruler of it levies tithes on them. Then they arrive at the sea of Gurjan and they land on that shore of it, which they choose. The diameter of that sea is 500 farsakhs.<sup>790</sup> On occasion, they bring their merchandise on camels from Gurjan to Baghdad, [where] as-Saqaliba eunuchs serve them as interpreters.<sup>791</sup> They claim to be Christians and pay [only] head tax. (Ibn Khurdadhbih, *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*, Book Six, 154.)<sup>792</sup>

This text and a Byzantine letter from 839 are the first two sources that identify a people or trading group known as the *Rus-Rhos*.<sup>793</sup> From this group, Russia takes its name. East European Historian Imre Boba asserts that the Rus were not an ethnic group

<sup>787</sup> "Paths of the Traders of the Rus" in Ibn Khurdadhbih, *Routes*, 154 in de Goeje, *Kitab al-Masalik*, 154. An English translation is available in Imre Boba, *Nomads, Northmen and Slavs; Eastern Europe in the Ninth Century* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 24.

<sup>788</sup> The Sea of Rum is one medieval Muslim name for the Mediterranean Sea. This section of the text then references trade to Constantinople with the leader of the ir-Rum, i.e. the Byzantine Romans.

<sup>789</sup> The Itil is the Turkish name for the Volga River. It also became the name of the Khazarian capital located at the mouth of the Volga on the north side of the Caspian Sea.

<sup>790</sup> This is probably the Caspian Sea although its Persian name is Mazandaran Sea, its Arabic names are Bahar Qazvin or Bahar Gilan, and in Turkish, Khazar Sea. If Ibn Khurdadhbih was using the Persian farsakh of his ethnic background, the sea would be 3,115 km. If he used the Arabic farsakh of his audience, it would be 2,880 km. The modern Caspian Sea matches these measurements even considering the shrinkage from the loss of water for irrigation.

<sup>791</sup> Below is a discussion of why the Rus were using Slavic interpreters.

<sup>792</sup> Translation in Boba, *Nomads*, 27-28.

<sup>793</sup> For a discussion of the Rus, Rhos and Varangian ethnicities, see H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 57ff.

but a professional group of heterogeneous mercenaries and merchants made up of Varangians (foreigners from the west), Slavs, and Finno-Ugritic peoples who had organized against the Scandinavian Viking raids from the west and the onslaught of steppe nomads from the east. The armed forces of the Rus joined forces with the self-governing cities for a prolonged fight for self-defense and control of the waterways.<sup>794</sup>

Since Ibn Fadlan did not mention any cities on his journey north, it is possible that this is a later settlement of trading centers made possible because of the protection and business provided by the Rus. If Boba is right, then at some point, there had to be trade cooperation or union between the Scandinavians and the Rus traders because the trail of Islamic silver hoards reaches from the riverbanks of Eastern Europe to Russia and directly into the Baltic, especially the emporium at Gotland Island without a chronological pause in Russia.<sup>795</sup>

Markets attracted traders. This steady movement of money into the far north could indicate that traders needed the Baltic to sell their eastern luxury goods and to re-supply at the slave markets in Viking ports like Gotland Island, Helgö, and Hedeby. Buyers flush with silver at the Baltic slave markets would encourage more raiders from North and Western Europe to bring their booty and captives the greater distance to Sweden for a more profitable exchange.<sup>796</sup>

Baghdad, and even the Volga River, seem to be a long way from the Baltic base of the Norse raiders/traders. The Norse trading center of Gotland Island, located between the Swedish mainland and what is today Lithuania, was over 2,000 miles from Itil, where the Volga enters into the Caspian Sea. Those 2,000 miles do not count detours to pass

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<sup>794</sup> Boba, *Nomads*, 15.

<sup>795</sup> Davidson, *Viking Road*, 53.

<sup>796</sup> See below for a fuller discussion of the Viking slave trade and port in the Baltic.

around hills when making portage between rivers or made by boats on meandering rivers. Despite the distance, Beckwith argues that Scandinavians largely belonged to the Central Eurasian Culture complex in the Viking era, being the northwestern outlier of its migrants.<sup>797</sup> Eventually, western Scandinavia, what is now Sweden and Denmark, received more immigrants from Germanic speakers influencing their languages. The evidence for the Uralic connection is that the Scandinavian languages of Finnish and Sami linguistically derive from a Proto-Uralic language originating in the mid-Volga River or perhaps a wider Volga—Kama—Ural—Western Siberian region.<sup>798</sup> Migration had made Scandinavia multilingual and multicultural but also connected them to the Ural Mountains. The traders, at least those with comrades who spoke Uralic or Slavic dialects, may well have been able to navigate linguistically as well as culturally down the Volga River and needed translators only when they moved from the Volga River Basin into the Arab and Persian regions.

One interesting aspect of this description of the mid-ninth century north-south trade network to Baghdad is that Ibn Khurdadhbih does not mention any slaves for sale. He only mentions trade goods consisting of two kinds of *jild*, (furs), one black in color, and swords from the most distant parts of the *Saqlabah* (Slavic land).<sup>799</sup> Russian furs, in contrast to those from further south, grew thicker and more valuable from exposure to the northern cold. Despite the long, hot Iraqi summers, winters were still chilly in Mesopotamia. Summer makes Baghdad one of the hottest cities in the world but winter

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<sup>797</sup> Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 165.

<sup>798</sup> Peter B. Golden, “The Peoples of the Russian Forest Belt,” in *Cambridge History of Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 230-31. The Norse could have consisted of a number of ethnicities. Besides Slavic and Uralic, some Scandinavians also spoke Old Norse, a Proto-Germanic language that evolved into modern Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Icelandic.

<sup>799</sup> Ibn Khurdadhbih, *Routes*, 154.

temperatures average 3.8 Celsius/38.8 Fahrenheit in January with temperatures dropping below zero a couple of times a year.<sup>800</sup> Modern Baghdad measures slightly colder than Oklahoma City, OK in USA, although it is located almost one-degree latitude further south. With few sources for wood to heat rooms which were designed to allow the summer heat to escape, wealthy Baghdadis eagerly consumed furs to line cloaks, boots, and hats. When al-Amin ordered an accounting of his father, Harun al-Rashid's estate, the executor listed separately the items that had fur lining. He found "4,000 silk cloaks lined with sable, mink, and other furs" and "4,000 pairs of half-boots, most of them lined with sable, mink, and other kind of fur."<sup>801</sup> Mas'udi claimed that in the mid-tenth century, the most desired was the black fox skin from Bulghar, used for cloaks and hats cost at least 100 dinars per hide.<sup>802</sup> Furs, along with swords, were also listed in the European exports carried from the Mediterranean by the Radhanites mentioned by Ibn Khurdadhbih in Book Six.<sup>803</sup>

The absence of slaves in the text raises several questions. Were the Rus not selling slaves in the mid-ninth century or just not bringing them on to Constantinople and Baghdad? Later tenth century texts imply that, at that time, they sold their slaves to directly to slave dealers on the Volga River. No further texts describe any extended camel trips to Baghdad to sell their furs, swords, or slaves.

Ibn Khurdadhbih does mention the parallel Rus trade that existed down the Dnieper and on to Constantinople on the Sea of the Rum. The Rus, called Rhos, show up

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<sup>800</sup> "Baghdad, Iraq," in *World Weather & Climate Information*, <https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-Rainfall-Temperature-Sunshine.Bagdad,Iraq> accessed April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>801</sup> Ibn al-Zubayr, *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir wa'l-Tuhaf*, 214-18 in Bernard Lewis, ed. *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople, Vol. II, Religion and Society*, trans. Bernard Lewis (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 140-41.

<sup>802</sup> Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold*, trans. A. Sprenger (London 1941) 17, 412, in Davidson, *Viking Road*, 99.

<sup>803</sup> Lopez, *Medieval Trade*, 31-32.

first in Constantinople in 839, a decade before Ibn Khurdadhbih's account in the Frankish *Annals of St. Bertin* which records a Byzantine embassy at the Carolingian court of Louis the Pious in 839. This text preserved a request from the Greek Emperor to King Louis. His letter asked for help for the strangers traveling with the embassy to return home because "barbarous and savage peoples of exceeding ferocity" blocked their way back home from Constantinople.<sup>804</sup> Suspicious of spies, Louis questioned them further and found them to be *Sueonum* or Swedes. The tribes that had attacked them and blocked their way home were most likely Magyars, soon to be pushed into Hungary and replaced by Pechinegs (alternative spelling Petchenegs).<sup>805</sup>

The geography of the Dnieper River flowing into the Black Sea gave hostile tribes along the river an advantage over mariners compared to the Volga River further east. The river had seven areas of rapids and several places where high banks overlooking the stream gave attackers the advantage. A description of a river trip from 944 describes how the Norse traders got around the worst of the rapids. Some of the crew stood watch in case of attack by the Pechinegs at this vulnerable spot. Others unloaded the boats, probably assisted by the slaves, who could portage the furs and swords for six miles around the rapids, while the remainder either dragged the empty boats or carried them on their shoulders.<sup>806</sup>

The Norse did manage to get to Constantinople in great enough numbers to attack the city in June 860. The Patriarch Photius of Constantiople gave a sermon lamenting the attack of the invaders from "the farthest north' who crept down to attack by way of the

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<sup>804</sup> *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. Waitz (Hanover, 1883), 19-20, in Colin Wells, *Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World* (New York: Delacorte Press/Random House, 2006), 222, Davidson, *Viking Road*, 57, 75.

<sup>805</sup> Wells, *Sailing*, 222,

<sup>806</sup> Davidson, *Viking Road*, 84.

Black Sea. He described them as a fierce and barbarous Scythian tribe, the general epithet for nomads of Eastern Europe. Seven years later, Photios writes more about the attackers. He now labels them *Rhos*, “these people surpassing all others with cruelty and bloodthirst” but reports that now the Rhos have been converted to Christianity and are “now subjects and friends of the Greek Empire.”<sup>807</sup> The Norse attacked again in 907 but the Greeks pacified them with a trade agreement, which gave the Norse a favored trade status in Constantinople.<sup>808</sup> By 911, the Norse had joined many other foreigner mercenaries as members of the Imperial Guard. By 988, they formed their own separate unit, 6,000 strong, known as the Varangian Guard.<sup>809</sup> Other than the stranded envoys going home via King Louis and the Carolingian route north, all of the Rhos-Greek “Rum” encounters that survived in the sources happened after Ibn Khurdadhbih wrote his book.

Norse trade down the Dnieper with Constantinople never matched the Volga River trade with the Islamic world, trade which provided the fantastic amounts of Islamic silver found in hoards. Only in the tenth century did Byzantine coins appear more commonly than the occasional rare coin mixed in with an Islamic silver hoard. Byzantine coins never did match the earlier flood of Kufic Islamic coins.<sup>810</sup>

Other Arabic sources mention the Norse-Rus slave trade and show change in the trade pattern over time. In the early tenth century, Ibn al-Faqih, like Ibn Khurdadhbih, a Persian geographer writing in Arabic, in his *Kitab al-Buldan*, repeats the same story given by Ibn Khurdadhbih, but he identifies the traders only as *Saqaliba* with their

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<sup>807</sup> Wladyslaw Duczko, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 83, Boba, *Nomads, Northmen*, 31.

<sup>808</sup> Davidson, *Viking Road*, 89.

<sup>809</sup> Davidson, *Viking Road*, 177-79.

<sup>810</sup> Davidson, *Viking Road*, 54.

destination not being Baghdad, but Ray, a rich Silk Road city today absorbed by Tehran.<sup>811</sup> Ray also sits on the way heading south to the maritime routes to India and China. These maritime routes gained prominence in the ninth and tenth centuries when peril and Tibetans reigned on the overland routes filling the vacuum left by the loss of Tang and Abbasid central control.

Ibn Khurdadhbih and Ibn al-Faqih do not mention the Rus or Norse selling slave women but other important Arabic sources do. Another Persian writing in Arabic in the early tenth century (903-913), Ibn Rusta (alternative spelling Rosteh), in an extract from his *Book of Precious Jewels*, compiled his detailed accounts on the Rus capturing Slavic slaves from sources now lost.<sup>812</sup>

They have a king who is called khaqan Rus...they make raids against Saqalaba, sailing in ships in order to go out to them, and they take them prisoner and carry them off to Khazar and Bulgar and trade with them there...They have no cultivated lands; they eat only what they carry off from the land of the Saqalaba...their only occupation is trading in sables and grey squirrel and other furs, and in these they trade and they take as price gold and silver... (Ibn Rosteh)<sup>813</sup>

Another Arabic source is a diplomatic report from the Abbasid diplomat, Ibn Fadlan, who visited a Rus encampment on the Upper Volga in 922 CE. He witnessed merchants coming directly to the Rus at Bulghar on the Volga River to buy female slaves. This stopping place for the Rus situated them almost 900 miles north of the Caspian Sea, almost halving the trip and making their products less prone to multiple tax collectors. They were not entirely free of taxes as Ibn Fadlan writes, “When the Rus or any other

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<sup>811</sup> Thomas S. Noonan, *The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750-900; The Numismatic Evidence* (Brookfield: Ashgate Variorum, 1998), II.156.

<sup>812</sup>For a complete discussion of the original source and the three Arab writers who copied or reworked it, see C. A. Macartney, *The Magyars in the Ninth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930, 1968), 4-21. To compare the English translations, side by side of the three accounts, see p. 213.

<sup>813</sup> Macartney, *Magyars*, 213, Davidson, *Viking Road*, 63-64.



people come with slaves, the King of the Saqalibah has the right to choose one in every ten.”<sup>814</sup> Note, this text reveals that others besides the Rus were trafficking in slaves.

The Rus-Slavic traders expected the slave merchants to come to their encampment to buy female slaves. Their ability to attract merchants perhaps reveals that the Rus reliability to arrive with excellent stock and the value of their slaves in further markets was so high that slave dealers found it worthwhile to travel the long-distance to them. Selling slaves in Bulgar appears to have been more profitable than the previous camel trips to Constantinople and Baghdad with furs. Perhaps the Norse traders did both. On the other hand, perhaps the trips to Baghdad ended when merchants realized that they could get first choice of the goods by going north and meeting the Rus. Perhaps, merchants, and therefore, the volumes of business, from the Silk Road cities on the Iranian plateau were more prosperous or competitive in the early tenth century than in the mid-ninth century, showing that the Middle Eastern hub moved east of Baghdad to the Caspian Sea and Iran, closer to China and India. Ibn Fadlan does not seem to be aware that Rus traders had once come to Baghdad, which implies that even before 922, the Norse traders found all the merchants and silver they wanted without having to leave their boats and the familiar Volga River.

Another change between Ibn Khurdadhbih’s and Ibn Fadlan’s descriptions of the Rus traders over the seventy-year period between the two texts is that their major product switched from furs to slaves. One possible reason for the change could be that intensive fur harvesting had reduced the beaver, sable, etc. population similar to how the fad for beaver hats in Europe depleted the beaver population in the early American West. Or

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<sup>814</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Mission*, Section 72 in James E. Montgomery, ed. *Two Arabic Travel Books: Ibn Fadlan Mission to the Volga*, trans. James E. Montgomery (New York: Library of Arabic Literature, 2014), 239. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 3 February 2016.

possibly, intensive slaving such as described above by Ibn Rosteh would destroy, reduce, or scatter the villagers that lived along the rivers and provided the extensive labor on the ground needed to trap and prepare furs.

Ibn Fadlan described how the traders would offer prayers to a large figure, a piece of wood with a face on it.

“Lord, I have come from a distant land, with such and such a number of female slaves and such and such a number of sable pelts.” He lists all his merchandise. Then he says, “And I have brought this offering.” He leaves his offering in front of the piece of wood, saying, “I want you to bless me with a rich merchant with many dinars and dirhams who will buy from me whatever I wish and will not haggle over any price I set.”<sup>815</sup>

Whatever god, represented by the block of wood, apparently answered the traders’ prayers asking for “a rich merchant with many dinars and dirhams” because Islamic silver coins by the thousands are found in hoards all around the Baltic Sea and on the riverine highways through Russia. For example, more Samanid dirham finds exist in Sweden than in Afghanistan where the Samanids ruled.<sup>816</sup> The Swedish island of Gotland, just five days sail from Russia, gave up more than 80,000 Arab silver dirhams alone, with 40,000 more from mainland Sweden and more yet from Denmark, Norway, the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, Russia, and the river systems linking the Caspian and Black Seas with the Baltic.<sup>817</sup> The numbers of coins available for study continually increase as finders report a new hoard almost yearly. Found coins represent only a fraction of what was there. Over the centuries, many more coins were most likely melted down for their silver or in modern times, disappear through illegal “mining” with metal detectors.

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<sup>815</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Mission*, Section 77, pp. 243-45.

<sup>816</sup> Michael Mitchiner, “Evidence for Viking-Islamic Trade Provided by Samanid Silver Coinage,” *East and West* 37, no. ¼ (December 1987): 139.

<sup>817</sup> Anders Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 103.

The stream of Islamic coins began at the end of the eighth century, a time when political peace coincided with a rapid growth in the Abbasid economy. The Abbasid dynasty established peace after the constant warfare for the Caucasus waged by the Umayyad Dynasty. The Abbasids established trade with their northern neighbors, the Khazars. From there, silver dirhams traveled into Russia following furs and slaves. The Rus followed the silver back down the Volga seeking to reach the markets. The transformation of the Abbasid economy influenced the northern Caucasus and Baltic Sea with intense mercantile activities for those who could provide luxury goods.<sup>818</sup> This “intense mercantile activity” changed the lives of many European women who were captured to provide a commodity to trade for silver.

Although the Norse were new players in the trade, the trade was not new. Early Byzantine and Sasanid coins appear in the rich fur lands of the Kama basin and the northern Cis-Urals, showing that furs and slaves traded south in pre-Islamic times, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries—again a time when western slave imports along the Silk Roads to Tang China were intense.<sup>819</sup> The Abbasids/Khazars/Saqaliba-Rus were new partners in old trading patterns.<sup>820</sup>

For two centuries, the Norse dominated this north-south trade or perhaps, the trade dominated Norse culture and development. The oldest Islamic coins in Russia date to 786 CE. They were found in Staraia Ladoga, the only town of significance in northern Russia in this era and a transition point to those coming from the Baltic and the Volga,

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<sup>818</sup> Duczko, *Viking Rus*, 62.

<sup>819</sup> Noonan, *Numismatics*, III.53. For western slave imports to China through Persian Sogdians, see Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, the chap. “Men,” 40-57.

<sup>820</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 40-57.

Don, and Dnieper Rivers flowing south.<sup>821</sup> The inflow of Islamic silver became a flood by the mid-ninth century and then declined by 1000, parallel to the rise, decline, and fall of the Samanid dynasty (819-999), supplier of the later silver coins that sustained Viking trade.<sup>822</sup> Islamic silver across Russia and Northern Europe ends with coins minted in 1009 CE.<sup>823</sup> The major Viking trading towns in the Baltic also fell into ruins at the end of this silver rush like mining ghost towns.<sup>824</sup> The dates and minting of the coins correspond to the discovery of a rich mine in the late ninth century, in Benjahir, Afghanistan, which became the main source for Samanid silver.<sup>825</sup> The vast majority of the coins came, therefore, not from Baghdad, but from autonomous rulers in the eastern Persian areas of the empire.<sup>826</sup> Iraqi realpolitik in the tenth century reflected political and economic decentralization which strengthened the autonomous dynasties in Central Asia. The silver coins in Swedish soil show the moving of the trade hub from Baghdad to the Iranian Persianate societies, revealing that the Arab Empire was losing its economic and political hegemony.<sup>827</sup>

### **The Sources of the Slaves Sold by the Norse**

The vast quantity of coin finds represents a huge number of furs and/or a sizable forced migration of European women shipped to the Muslim world and beyond. The question remains, “Where did all these women come from?” Translators of Ibn Fadlan’s

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<sup>821</sup> Noonan, *Numismatic*, I.343, II.155.

<sup>822</sup> Mitchiner, *Evidence*, 147.

<sup>823</sup> Mitchiner, *Evidence*, 147.

<sup>824</sup> Winroth, *Age*, 106.

<sup>825</sup> Davidson, *Viking Road*, 52.

<sup>826</sup> Winroth, *Age*, 115-16.

<sup>827</sup> Beckwith dates this decline to the death of al-Mutasim in 842 CE. Beckwith, *Empires*, 162.

text call these women “beautiful slave women.”<sup>828</sup> Scholars who know Arabic have a problem. Arabic has many words for slaves. One of the common terms, *saqalibah*, means a number of things: Slav ethnicity, European origins, and/or slave status. It is unclear from the English if the term that the translator had to render referenced the women’s ethnic status, their slave status, or both. The Arabic term for slavewomen used by Ibn Fadlan, however, does not mention ethnicity but references the use of the women as sex slaves. The description of the women, *jawara ruqa litajar*, literally means, “concubines beautiful to trade.”<sup>829</sup> The term implies their slave status because Islamic law forbids sex with a free, unmarried woman as *zina*-adultery (Qur’an 17.32 and 24.2). Concubines were required by definition to be slaves, who were permitted to a man. The euphemism for sex slave in the Qur’an is “those whom your right hand possesses” from the fourth Sura, “The Women” (Qur’an 4:24-25). The term, *jawara*, does not imply ethnicity although it applies only to white slaves purchased for sexual use rather than physical labor. Nomenclature for black slaves had a different descriptive vocabulary. It is most likely that Ibn Fadlan did not know the ethnic origins of the women and from his text, he reveals that probably, he was too appalled or embarrassed by the open sexual use of the women by the Rus traders to ask.

Thomas S. Noonan is one of several scholars who believe that the women were Slavic, of East European origin.<sup>830</sup> Ibn Rosteh’s text above supports this view. This designation with nearby origins solves the problem of transporting the women a long-distance in frigid temperatures. The Norse, however, did not see women as a hindrance to

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<sup>828</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness; Arab Travelers in the Far North* trans. with an introduction Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London, Penguin Books, 2012), 47.

<sup>829</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Mission*, Arabic text, 242, English text, 243.

<sup>830</sup> Noonan, *Numismatic*, II.154.

long-distance travel. One example proves that they carried captive women long-distances. The DNA of a Native American woman is present in four Icelandic families. The sea journey from Canada to Iceland would appear to be a perilous, long, cold journey and yet, the Norse took captive women despite the small space on their boats.<sup>831</sup>

Ibn Fadlan's text, however, reveals good reasons to believe that these women were from North and West Europe rather than only local Slavs from the Urals. First, for vocabulary, Ibn Fadlan could have used the Arabic term "Slav-*saqaliba*," but, instead he describes them with the phrase, *jawara ruqa*, that only implies that they were white and beautiful.<sup>832</sup>

Second, Ibn Fadlan provides several anecdotes that show that at least some of the women had been with the Rus for an extended time. He describes how the Rus traders used the slave women they brought to sell for bathing, sex, and funeral sacrifices. When the chief died, one of his slave woman volunteered to die as a human sacrifice burnt with the ruler's corpse in a ship used as a funeral pyre. Their relationship was of long enough duration that, despite the harsh beginnings, affection had grown between some of the captives and captors. The willingness to volunteer to die to accompany her master would not have been evident in a recently captured slave girl.

The needs of the long journey from the Baltic to Central Asia provide a practical third reason why female slaves were useful if brought from the far north. By bringing slave women from slave depots in their trading towns in the Baltic, the Scandinavians could make the months-long journey much more comfortable. Not only did the men have

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<sup>831</sup> Traci Watson, "American Indian Sailed to Europe with the Vikings?" *National Geographic News*, November 26, 2010, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/11/101123-native-american-indian-vikings-iceland-genetic-dna-science-europe/> accessed, Feb. 9, 2016.

<sup>832</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Mission*, Section 76, 242.

menials to do the work of the camp and cooking, to warm their beds and huts, but also the women would have been useful in helping with the portage. The traders had to carry their boats and their other trade goods for some distances overland. For example, they had to travel on foot from the Lovat River over the Vildai Hills to the sources of either the Dnieper River to the Black Sea, or the Volga River to the Caspian Sea. Bringing the slaves from Northern Europe gave them more shoulders to carry the trade goods and supplies and to pull the ships overland, reducing time on the portage.

The fourth reason is that bringing slaves from Northern Europe also solved the problem of the low population density in Russia. It would not be good business to travel the thousands of miles to the Muslim markets and be without abundant trading goods because of a lack of villagers to plunder. Even if the Rus had initially found slaves by plundering the Slavic river villages on the route, as described by Ibn Rosteh (above), they would have soon depleted this source for slaves and would have lost their sources for supplies and markets. In Eastern Europe, in contrast to Western Europe, the Norse had a reputation as traders and mercenaries rather than raiders.

A fifth reason to bring women from North and West Europe is the large number of captives readily available in the Baltic trading centers like Gotland, due to the relentless raiding by the Vikings in the more populated areas of Europe. Texts and archaeology testify to the volume of the Viking slave trade. Vikings raids traditionally began in 793 with an attack on Lindisfarne in Northumberland just thirty years after the founding of Baghdad. The ability to sell slaves to the silver rich Samanids, however, could well have increased in the volume of raids and slave taking in the ninth and tenth centuries. For example, the people of northern Gaul overtook a Viking stronghold while

the Norsemen were out raiding. They “found great spoils and liberated from captivity 1000 prisoners there.” When the chief of the Norse learned this, he was enraged and “continued carrying out plundering and brigandage as he could.”<sup>833</sup>

Archaeology supports this view of an intense slaving industry. The port of Hedeby on the south shore of the Baltic yielded an iron lock from a set of slave fetters.<sup>834</sup> The texts support the archaeology. The ninth century Archbishop Rimbert of Bremen (d. 888) gave witness to the slave trade at this Viking port. He saw a “large throng of captured Christians being hauled away.” One woman in the line sang psalms to identify herself as a nun and the bishop was able to exchange his horse for her freedom.<sup>835</sup>

Even the Iberian Andalusians were not far enough away to escape the ravages and slave raids of the Viking raiders. Ibn Hayyan and al-Razi describe a three-month attack in 844 on the Spanish coast starting at Lisbon, “...killing the men and enslaving the women and children.” The Viking mode of operation was to disembark on an island from which they would attack and return with their slaves. They would stay on the island for several days after a battle allowing for the “ransom of prisoners and children.”<sup>836</sup> Although the amir, Abd Al-Rahman ibn al-Hakam, was able to mount a defense and finally drive the invaders away, their defense was too late for a number of cities such as Seville, which the Norsemen ravaged, taking slaves. The Andalusian Muslims must have continued to suffer many depredations as three centuries later, Zuhri (d. between 1154 – 1161) looked back on the sources from the era and said,

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<sup>833</sup> Flodoard, *The Annals of Flodoard of Reims, 919-966*, ed. and trans. Steven Fanning and Bernard S. Bachrach (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>834</sup> Winroth, *Vikings*, Figure 14, 109, 265 f. 32.

<sup>835</sup> *Life of Rimbert* 18, ed. Georg Waitz, *Vita Anskarii auctore Rimberti: Accedit Vita Rimberti*, MGH: SS rer. Germ. (Hanover, 1884), 95-96 in Winroth, *Vikings*, 117, 265. f. 35.

<sup>836</sup> Ibn Hayyan, *Kitab al-Muqtabis*, in Ibn Fadlan, *Land of Darkness*, 105-09.



When they attacked, the coastal peoples fled for fear of them. They only appeared every six or seven years, never in fewer than 40 ships and sometimes up to 100. They overcame anyone they met at sea, robbed them and took them captive. (Zuhri, *Kitab al-Ja'fariya*, (*Book of Geography*) 215/240)<sup>837</sup>

The intense slaving pressure forced by the Vikings on the greater population of Western Europe could perhaps be explained by the vast amounts of Islamic found in hoards. The ability to sell women for the quality silver offered in Asia provided incentive and profit for the Vikings in West Europe to capture more slaves to supply the eastern traders headed to Islamic and Byzantine markets. These “Rus” would return to the Baltic with loads of silver and the luxury products of the East to trade. They would be looking to acquire more slaves to take back across Russia the next season to sell on the Volga to merchants from the Silk or maritime routes.

Ibn Fadlan’s diplomatic report which describes the Norse slave trade of women was vetted a generation later by a Syrian geographer. Maqdisi (d. 991) lists Slavic slaves among other products of the far north like amber, walrus tusks, and furs exported from Bulghar in Transoxania during the Samanid epoch.<sup>838</sup> Maqdisi labels these women as Slavs. This identity could have been transferred from the language or ethnicity of their traders, not because they were all captured in Russia or Eastern Europe. Also, *Saqalibas* broadly translates enslaved, white, and European. Another explanation is that Maqdisi wrote towards the end of the Rus-Samanid silver rush when local Slavs from other sources may have been more numerous in the markets. In this century, Bulghar served as the capital of the Bulghars, near the modern city of Kazan. It became the frontier between the Slavs and the Muslim and Turkish realms. The mint markings on the silver coins

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<sup>837</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Land of Darkness*, 110.

<sup>838</sup> *Bibl. Geog. Arab.*, iii, 326-26 in W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (Cambridge, UK: E. J. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1928, 1977), section 245, p. 235.

found in the North show that the majority of trade happened with traders carrying Samanid coins. But where did these Central Asian slave traders who met up with the Rus traders find buyers for the slaves they bought with these coins?

Samanids controlled the Persianate society of what is now Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. This dynasty sat astride a long section of the Silk Roads controlling major oasis trading cities. From Samarkand, (Uzbekistan) they reinvigorated their old Sogdian links with China, Byzantium, India, and the Middle East. From the city where the founders of the dynasty, the Samani family, originated, Balk, (Afghanistan), they traded with India, Tibet, and South East Asia.<sup>839</sup> Samanid coins are found in the Mediterranean, China, India, and Sri Lanka.<sup>840</sup>

The Samanid dynasty reaped huge profits from slavery and slave trade. They captured Turkish slaves from the steppes on an industrial scale. One slave gathering expedition in 893 captured ten to fifteen thousand slaves, including the Turkish chief's wife.<sup>841</sup> Many of these slaves were sold to rulers, including to the caliph in Baghdad to use as mamluk soldiers. They also used these slaves to mine or manufacture the products that they exported. Manacles found in the mines in Afghanistan show that the famous Samanid silver came at the cost of slave labor.<sup>842</sup>

Samanid had a slave exporting industry with the geographical advantage of either shipping wares from the Volga as far as Tang and Song Dynasty China (960-1279) or south through Ray to the maritime routes and the Indian Ocean or west to Baghdad and

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<sup>839</sup>S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment; Central Asia's Gold Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 225? No page numbers in on-line version of the book. pdf. page number 223.

<sup>840</sup> Starr, *Lost*, pdf p.223.

<sup>841</sup> Starr, *Lost*, pdf p.227.

<sup>842</sup> Starr, *Lost*, pdf p.227.

the Abbasid court. For a short time, the Central Asian Samanid cities became the hub. Because of the spokes radiating from their location on the Silk Roads, it is plausible that the European girls seen by Ibn Fadlan or the slavegirls that followed through the next century ended up in India or China via Samanid Persian speaking traders. Cultural factors in Baghdad, in addition to increasingly dismal Abbasid economic factors, may have influenced the merchants to “follow the money” to ship European slaves east or south.

### **White Slaves in Baghdad**

Not everyone valued Slavic or blond slaves in Abbasid Baghdad. In Ibn Butlan’s famous catalogue of slave ethnicity and traits, except for Byzantine Greek slaves, Europeans do not even make the list of desirable slaves.<sup>843</sup> Ibn Butlan also warns potential customers that slave dealers will deceitfully cover whiteness, that they would turn blue eyes kohl dark and blond hair black as well as cover freckles along with other detriments to beauty like tattoos, pockmarks, and scars.<sup>844</sup> Of the twelve caliphs’ mothers whose nationalities are known, only two were Slavic. Al-Musta’in’s Slavic mother was renamed Mukhariq (Clumsy) and al-Mu’tazz’s European mother was called Qabiha, (Ugly).<sup>845</sup> Ibn al-Faqih, an Iraqi writing in 902-3, shows his sense of ethnic superiority and disdain for the coloring of both blond and black slaves.

The people of Iraq have sound minds...and a pale brown color, which is the most apt and proper color. They are the ones who are done to a turn in the womb. They do not come out with something between blond, buff, blanced, and leprous coloring, such as infants dropped from the wombs

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<sup>843</sup>Ibn Butlan, *Risala Jami’a*, 333-89.

<sup>844</sup>Ibn Butlan, *Risala Jami’a*, 379.

<sup>845</sup> Fuad Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad; The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), Appendix II, 274.

of the women of the Slavs and others of similar light complexion; nor are they overdone in the womb until they are burned, so that the child comes out something between black, murky, malodorous, stinking, and crinkly haired.... The Iraqis are neither half-baked dough nor burned crust but between the two. (Ibn al-Faqih, *Kitab al-Buldan*)<sup>846</sup>

Jahiz, a man of letters contemporary with Ibn Khurdadhbih and courtier of the caliph in Baghdad, explained that whiteness was a result of the coldness of the country, which left whites undercooked in the womb.<sup>847</sup> Ninth and tenth century Iraqi writers make clear that some of them considered whiteness, blond hair, and freckles as undesirable traits. A few poets, however, disagreed.<sup>848</sup> This lack of appeal of blonds in Baghdad perhaps made white slaves more valuable east or south on the Silk Road.

### **Archaeological Evidence for Norse Contact with the Silk Road**

The archaeological findings in the Baltic reveal that the Norse interacted not just with traders carrying Islamic coins but with traders who carried products from China and India. Archaeologists uncovered a small Buddha figure on the Swedish island of Helgö in 1956. The style, position, and pedestal of the figure date its manufacture to the Swat Valley in Pakistan between the sixth and ninth centuries. Numismatic finds date the use of the site where the Buddha lay in Sweden to 669-800 CE.<sup>849</sup> The last coin found in Birka dates to 962 giving an absolute end time to the Buddha's arrival if it was at a later

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<sup>846</sup> Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani, *Mukhtasar Kitab al-Buldan*, in M. J. de Goeje, ed. *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* (Leiden: 1885), 5:162, Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 45-46.

<sup>847</sup> Jahiz, *Kitab al-Hayawan*, (Cairo, 1356/1938), 2:314, Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 46.

<sup>848</sup> See Chapter 7 for the texts that show desire for white singers and concubines.

<sup>849</sup> Eric Ramirez-Weaver, "Islamic Silver for Carolingian Reforms and the Buddha-Image of Helgö: Rethinking Carolingian Connections with the East, 790-820" in Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt, ed. *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publisher & Distributors; Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2014), 177.

date, buried into an earlier layer.<sup>850</sup> Silks also traveled back to Birka, Sweden, and other sites where they lay buried in graves although by this time, silk origins could have been anywhere from China to Byzantium.

The Indian Buddha and perhaps the silk both speak of the interlocking trade networks that would have been able to transport cargos of slaves vast distances once they reached the Silk Routes. Edward H. Schafer, who wrote on the influence of foreigners in Tang China, believes that some of slaves labeled “Slavs” in Maqdisi’s list of trade products of the Khwarizm ended up in Tang China.<sup>851</sup> Unlike the Greco-Roman eras, it is impossible to check with Indian or Chinese sources if any medieval European slaves survived the long trek because all Westerners became subsumed under the broad *yavana* or *hu* categories, hiding their Europeans origins. Western *hu* female dancers, musicians, and providers of drink and sex were ubiquitous enough to appear repeatedly in Tang literature with no further indications of whether Western meant Turkish, Arab, Persian, or European.

That Western houri (*hu chi*) with features like a flower—  
 She stands by the wine warmer, and laughs with the breath of spring,  
 Laughs with the breath of spring,  
 Dances in a dress of gauze!  
 “Will you be going somewhere, milord, now, before you are drunk?  
 (Li Po, *Ch’ien yu tsun chiu hsing*)<sup>852</sup>

## Conclusion

The Han Emperor Wudi created a massive demand for foreign and local entertainers in China that lasted for centuries. The Han royal chronicles prove that Greek

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<sup>850</sup> Winroth, *Age*, 110.

<sup>851</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 44, 289, f.34.

<sup>852</sup> Schafer, *Golden Peaches*, 21, 284.

and Roman slaves, trained as circus style performers, survived the long trip to China as tribute payments three centuries before even Roman traders appear in the sources. The Sui-Tang, and later their rebels, adopted and expanded this same tradition of using foreign entertainers as diplomatic players, of whom western slaves proved most popular. The demand for western slaves in China, as in other parts of Asia, continued into the medieval period for those traders who could transport this valuable cargo east.

Early medieval trading networks, which supplied European slaves as far as India and China, appear to have continued this thousand-year plus tradition of long-distance trade. The ninth century, however, represents a period of greater unification and wealth that increased luxury trade in distance and volume. Ibn Khurdadhbih describes how Radhanite Jewish traders from Iraq shipped western slaves to India and China. Other medieval Arabic writers describe European slaves traded to Central Asian stops on the Silk Roads. The desire for slaves in the East provided traders in the West with an export, slaves, that would pay for the eastern luxury goods that they desired. The prestige of possessing a long-distance slave in a harem, retinue, or performance made them worth the trouble and expense of the long trip, but other than Ibn Khurdadhbih's text, we do not know for sure if or how many slaves survived the medieval overland trip across Eurasia or the maritime journey across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

## CHAPTER 7

### HAREM CULTURE IN BAGHDAD: FORCES THAT DROVE DEMAND FOR EUROPEAN CONCUBINES AND EUNUCHS IN ELITE ABBASID CULTURE

He had, they say, 4,000 concubines and slept with each one of them. (Mas'udi, "The Reign of Mutawakkil" VII: 275-277 / 2960-2961" in *The Meadows of Gold*)<sup>853</sup>

Here's the Tigris, with nothing between us and China .... (Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur after the founding of Baghdad in 762 in Tabari, *History* Vol. XXVIII;272.)<sup>854</sup>

The fifth Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid, lived large in Middle Eastern histories and popular accounts due to the splendor of his court. The ribald parts of the lore of that era are the intrigues involving the many denizens of the harem, especially the eunuchs and slave girls. The question that this chapter asks of this Golden Age of the Abbasid reign is why were the portrayals in sources that described royal harem populations so large? The answer to this question explains the forces driving the demand for slave girls, especially white slave girls, in Abbasid Baghdad and in all the Muslim courts and elite homes that followed their example for the next millennium plus.

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<sup>853</sup>Mas'udi, *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*, trans. and ed. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 263.

<sup>854</sup>Tabari in *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*, XXVIII.272 "The History of al-Tabari; 'Abbasid Authority Affirmed," trans. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 238. Tabari also puts these ideas in the mouth of the headman of Baghdad advising al-Mansur. Tabari XXVIII. 275, *History*, 242.

One usual response to this question is that the descriptions of hundreds or thousands of harem girls are hyperbole. A second explanation is that the Abbasid court copied the reputation of the Persian Sasanid court. These two views each sustain some truth, but the practice of supporting huge households of women and eunuchs proves much more nuanced and wide spread.

The direction of influence on the Abbasid court may not be completely discernable because all of these courts across Asia shared similar court values and culture. The Tang dynasty rulers, however, ruling from 618 to 907 CE in an era considered the Golden Era of Chinese history, dominated the medieval court scene across Asia through their political strength, economic influence, and cultural creativity. This chapter analyzes the harem numbers for the early Abbasid family members and argues that despite the closer influence of previous Arab rulers and the Persian empires, the reputation of the splendor, and the sheer size of the Tang harems had more ability to motivate the Abbasid use of slaves to increase harem size than the distant memories of the previous Sasanid rulers.

### **The Records of Abbasid Harem Populations**

The first issue encountered in determining Abbasid household size is the problematic numbers of the residents of the harems in the sources, whether over counted, under counted, and who was counted. Despite the caliphs' reputations for ostentatious display, real numbers do not exist and estimates are rounded. The majority of the records about the lives of the caliphs left no numbers at all. Perhaps the greatest dilemma causing the lacuna in the sources is the Muslim sense of propriety; decent people did not



discuss the women belonging to other men. The names of some princesses and consorts are lost to history because the chroniclers only mentioned them as the lady, *al-Sayyidah*, or by a title, like *Sitt al-Mulk*. Sources describing the households of the caliphs prove to be rarer than their reputations warrant. The following overview examines the few sources that describe the size of feminine households of six caliphs and two royal women who ruled or lived from the eighth to the early tenth centuries during the Golden Age of the Abbasid dynasty.

Harun al-Rashid ascended the Abbasid throne in 786 CE, after the suspicious death of his older brother, al-Hadi. According to Tabari (d. 923), writing over a century later in his *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk (History of Prophets and Kings)*, two accounts of Harun's journey to the throne survived. The first, probably the official government proclamation, states that the caliph, al-Hadi, died from a stomach ulcer.<sup>855</sup> But Tabari also quotes a second, unnamed source, "a Hashemite," who related that the queen mother, Khayzuran (Slender Reed), ordered slave girls to cover the sick al-Hadi's face with a pillow and sit on it until he stopped breathing.<sup>856</sup> According to this version, the queen mother manipulated this murder so she could put her apparently more compliant, younger son, Harun al-Rashid, on the throne. Al-Rashid reigned from 786 to 809. While his mother lived, she exerted a great deal of control over the reins of government and the government fisc, a huge rise in status for a former singing slave girl from Yemen. The court they established provided the standard for ostentatious display, cultural production, and the harem stories that were added to the book of tales that we know as the *1001*

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<sup>855</sup> Tabari XXX.569. *Akhbar al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* "The Early Abbasi Empire Year 193" (25 October 808-14 October 809), ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., trans. John Alden Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 157.

<sup>856</sup> Tabari XXX.571, *Early Abbasid, Year 193*, 158.

*Arabian Nights.*

The actual size of Harun al-Rashid's harem, however, remains problematic. The most respected historian for the era, Tabari, lists the children born to the caliph, and names the twenty-four concubine mothers in his harem, as well as the four wives who outlived him. By Islamic law, all concubines must be slaves, but unlike free wives, the numbers of slaves that a man can keep as concubines is unlimited. Of Harun's wives, only one, Zubayda, produced a child, a son, Amin, the last caliph born to a free woman instead of slave concubines. Tabari does not cite any harem numbers, but he does give an anecdote illustrating how ubiquitous slave girls were in the royal household. He relates that in the hot Iraqi summers, the Sasanids practiced either wetting hemp carpet or canvas or coating the walls with wet mud each day to provide interior air conditioning. Harun al-Rashid, however, decided to provide the same cooling via evaporation through a more interesting venue for his siesta. He ordered rotating groups of seven slave girls, dressed only in thin linen tunics dipped in fragrant perfumes and rose water, to sit on perforated stools placed over incense burners filled with aloes and amber until the room filled with coolness and fragrance.<sup>857</sup>

Modern scholars disagree on the size of al-Rashid's harem size. Nabia Abbott, the biographer of the mother and wife of Harun al-Rashid, uses Tabari, Ibn Athir, 'Iqd, Ya'qubi, and Raghib as sources. She estimates that Harun al-Rashid only had about two hundred slave girls.<sup>858</sup> Hugh Kennedy, however, in his chapter on the Abbasid harems, uses al-Isfahani's (d. 967) *Kitab al-Alghani (Book of Songs)* to describe al-Rashid's

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<sup>857</sup> Tabari, *Early Abbasid, Year 193*, 308.

<sup>858</sup> Nabia Abbot, *Two Queens of Baghdad; Mother and Wife of Harun al-Rashid* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1946, 1986), 138.

harem as having 2,000 women.<sup>859</sup> Fuad Caswell, in his introduction to *The Slave Girls of Baghdad; The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era*, claims that al-Rashid and his wife, Zubayda, each owned 1,000 slave girls, relying on the account by al-Isfahani.<sup>860</sup>

One explanation for the discrepancy is that Kennedy might have assumed that Harun and Zubayda lived in the same palace. In the earliest, richest years of the Abbasid Empire, however, wives, like Harun's mother, who was freed and married by the caliph, lived in their own palaces and ruled their own establishments. Kennedy's number of 2,000 women for Harun al-Rashid's household must be based on joining households of husband and wife. The texts do not indicate mutual households. Zubayda once gifted ten beautiful slaves to her husband, Harun, to distract him from an especially captivating singing girl, an act which would indicate that the couple did not share ownership of slaves.<sup>861</sup> Caswell also references 1,000 concubines belonging to each of al-Rashid's two sons who also became caliphs, al-Amin and al-Ma'mun, as well as the subsequent caliphs al-Wathiq and al-Mu'tasim.<sup>862</sup> Al-Isfahani's *Kitab al-Aghani* is an untranslated twenty plus volume encyclopedic treasure house of musical and poetic production in the Golden Age of the Abbasid court which still awaits full exploration of its content for social history.

The number of one thousand slave girls listed for the household of Harun al-

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<sup>859</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World; The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press/Perseus Books Group, 2004), 165, 306. This is the American publication of Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004). Kennedy's notes say that for household of Harun al Rashid and Zubayda (Abu Jafar), he used Al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Aghani*, ed. Yusuf al-Biqā'i and Gharid al-Shaykh (Beirut, 2000), x:145. This edition is not cited in World Cat but the Beirut edition published by Dar Thaqaḥ in 1957 has the same pagination.

<sup>860</sup> Al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Aghani* (Bayrut: Dar al-Thaqāḥ, 1957), x:182. Cited by Fuad Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad; the Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era* (London, I. B. Tauris, 2011). Please note that the page numbers that Caswell cites should be in the Beirut edition, not the Cairo edition of *Aghani* listed in his footnotes. By using Caswell's Cairo edition page numbers in the Bayrūt/Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāḥ 1955-1961 edition of *Al-Aghani*, the citations can be read in the original Arabic.

<sup>861</sup> Al-Isfahani, *Aghani*, 16:137 (Bulaq 1868 edition) in Abbott, *Two Queens*, 140.

<sup>862</sup> Caswell, *The Slave Girls*, 13.

Rashid, his mother, his wife, each of his two sons, and two more following caliphs may have another explanation besides just generally rounding it up. The number one thousand could be rhetoric for “a large number that is not known.” An example of this usage outside of the harem is the work called the *Arabian Nights*, or in its earliest mention in Arabic, *A Thousand Nights (Alf Layla)*, cited by Mas’udi, Ibn al-Nadim, and al-Jahshiyari. They report that it is a translation of an earlier work in Persian called *A Thousand Stories*. Scholars believe that this story collection from India or Iran grew as it absorbed stories from each culture that adapted it before passing it on. The oldest surviving text of the work from the fourteenth century, however, only has stories for two hundred and seventy-one nights, falling quite short of the promise of a thousand.<sup>863</sup> If 271 stories can be titled, *One Thousand Nights*, then perhaps, in Isfahani’s citation of harems of “a thousand,” he could be just using a medieval troupe that means “a lot.” Caliph al-Mutawawakil and two caliphs that follow him, however, defy this explanation, perhaps signaling a different attitude towards harem numbers.

Mas’udi (d. 956) provides another description of caliphal harems in the mid-ninth century (ca. 947). He relates that the Caliph al-Mutawawakil (r.847- 861) bragged of sleeping with each of his 4,000 concubines.<sup>864</sup> Isfahani (d. 967) also reports that al-Mutawakkil had 4,000 concubines.<sup>865</sup> These two writers were contemporaries, born a year apart and dying eleven years apart, a generation after al-Mutawakkil, so it is difficult to know who copied from whom or if they used a common source. Caliph al-Mutawakkil did not lack in entertainers either. Besides the usual cadre of scholars, clerics, classical

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<sup>863</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen, ed. *The Arabian Nights*, trans. Husain Haddawy, based on the text by ed. Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Norton, 2010), vii-ix, 520.

<sup>864</sup> Mas’udi, “The Reign of Mutawakkil VII: 275-277 / 2960-2961” in *The Meadows of Gold: the Abbasids*, trans. and ed. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 263.

<sup>865</sup> Isfahani, *Al-Alghani*, V:254.

poets, musicians, and instrumentalists required by court society, he reputedly spent half a million dirhams supporting lowbrow performers. His payroll listed comedians, clowns, jesters, ram and cock holders, trainers of fighting dogs, and fart makers (*darratun*).<sup>866</sup> Tabari (838-923) was a contemporary of al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) and Mas'udi but he, again, politely refrains from mentioning the caliph's sexual exploits, the number of his women, or his ribald entertainment.

Two more Abbasid caliphs, al-Muktafi (r. 902 - 908) and al-Muqtadir (r. 908-932), have the size of their household described by an insider, perhaps to illustrate the contrast between their prosperous reigns and the ruin that later fell upon the caliphal household after civil wars. Abu al-Hasan Hilal (d.1056) relied heavily on his grandfather, Ibrahim b. Hilal, (d. 994), a court official, for his accounts that preserve the rules and regulations, the etiquette and protocol in the caliphal court. He begins by describing the size of the palace grounds burnt by the civil wars that displaced its inhabitants following the deposition of the caliphs, al-Muqtadir and al-Qahir. In contrast to the desolation all around him, he looks back to the reigns of al-Muktafi and al-Muqtadir and the relative prosperity of their tenures. Note that the author only gives the number of harem women for al-Muqtadir the second, longer reigning caliph.

The Residence contained, among other things, farms and farmers, private livestock and four hundred baths for its inhabitants and retinues. However, during the reign of al-Muktafi bi-Allah, may the blessings of Allah be upon him, it had 20,000 *dariyyah ghilman*, (domestic servants) and 10,000 servants—blacks and Slavs. It is generally believed that in the days of al-Muqtadir bi-Allah, may the blessings of Allah be upon him, the Residence contained 11,000 servants—7,000 blacks and 4,000 white Slavs—4,000 free and white slave girls and thousands of *hujri ghilman* (chamber servants). Each of the shifts in charge of guarding the

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<sup>866</sup> al-Rashid b. al-Zubayr, *Dhakha'ir*, 220 cited in Shmuel Moren, *Live Theater and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (New York University Press, 1992), 66. Using Mas'udi as a source, Moren gives examples of performances by jesters and fart makers working for al-Mutawakkil in pp. 65-71.

Residence consisted of 5,000 bodyguards, 400 sentries, and 800 attendants.... (Hilal al-Sabi, *Rusum Dar Al-Khilafah*, 9-10.)<sup>867</sup>

This passage leaves a few questions. It describes the *dar* or household of two caliphs. The first description, that of the dar of al-Muktafi, does not specifically mention women. If the female servants of the household are included in the collective term *dariyyah ghilman* and are approximately 40% of servants, as they appear to be with the second caliph, then al-Muktafi would have had about 12,000 women out of 30,000 servants, but this is only an assumption. The text uses *ghilman*, a term that can mean either boy servants, eunuchs, or a plural for servants of both sexes. Ghilman does not require slavery, only subservience. When describing al-Muqtadir, the second caliph's household, al-Sabi uses the term *kadam*, yet another term that meant servant but also served as a euphemism for eunuch.

Salem's translation of the phrase describing the women in al-Muqtadir's household is vague. The exact wording of the Arabic text, "four thousand women between free women and *mamluka*,"<sup>868</sup> reminds us that many of the women in the harem were either noble or freed women. The term *mamluka* for the non-free women refers only to their original entry to the Islamic world as a possession, not necessarily to their final status. The multiplicity of words in Arabic differentiating female slaves reveals how common and complex slavery was in medieval Islamic society. The *mamluka*, mentioned above, could be: domestic female slaves-*ama* ' pl. *amawat* or *ima* ', menial servants-*mahin*, pl. *muhhan*, black slave women-'*abda*, pl. '*abdaat*, habasha, pl. *ahbas*, or

<sup>867</sup> Hilal Al-Sabi, *Rusum Dar Al-Khilafah* "The Rules and Regulations of the 'Abbasid Court," trans. from the Arabic with introduction and notes by Elie A. Salem (Beirut: Lebanese Commission for the Translation of Great Works, 1977), section 9-10, p. 13-14.

<sup>868</sup> My translation from the Arabic comes from Hilal al-Sabi, *Rusum Dar al-Khilafah* "The etiquette, protocol, and diplomacy of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad 970-1056," ed. with preface, notes, and indices by Mikha'il 'Awad (Baghdad: Al-'Ani Press, 1964), 7.

*zanja*, pl. *zunuj*, white slaves named after the frequently enslaved Slavs=*saqaliba*, (only plural), foreign or imported slaves-*jaliba*, pl. *jalba* or *julaba*’, female captives of war/slave girls-*asira*, pl. *asirat*, female attendants-*tabi’a* pl. *tawabi*’, lady’s maids/servant girls-*wasifa*, pl. *wasifat*, or *wasaf*, or even administrators-*qahramana*. Greek women were especially valued and purchased for the last task because they had a reputation for being meticulous and not very overly generous.<sup>869</sup>

The slave women chosen and trained for the sexual and/or the entertainment staff also had many terms to differentiate them. Concubines were most often called *jariya*, pl. *jariyat*, *jawari*, or *jawarin*. Other words referring to girls purchased strictly for sex are ‘*alla*’ pl. ‘*allat*’, or a term derived from the root word for pleasure-*surriya*, pl. *sarariy*. Concubines, who bore the child of their master, and thereby legally, at least in Sunni law codes, could not be sold and should be freed upon the death of their owner, were called “mother of a child” or *umm walad*.<sup>870</sup> Lower level singing girls were called *muqayyina* or *mughanniya*, pl. *mugannim* or *mughanniyat*, while highly trained, very expensive courtesans were *qaina* pl. *qainat* or *qiyana*. Slave girl poets were *ima’ shawa’ir*. It is no wonder that al-Sabi just called them all mamluka- “owned females”.

Perhaps al-Sabi mentioned the feminine household of the Caliph Muqtadir because of the pronounced feminine influence on his reign. Muqtadir ascended the throne in 908 at age thirteen. He ruled for twenty-four years, a relatively long reign in an era when Mamluk generals found that replacing caliphs faster than worn out shoes

<sup>869</sup>Ibn Butlan, “Shira al-Raqiq,” in Bernard Lewis, ed. *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople: Religion and Society*, trans. Bernard Lewis (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 2:243-52.

<sup>870</sup> Shi’i scholars allowed the sale of slave mothers because Umar, not Ali, instituted this law. A number of Sunni scholars also contested the law as *bid’a*, an innovation. Younus Y. Mirza, “Remembering the *Umm al-Walad*: Ibn Kathir’s Treatise on the Sale of the Concubine” in *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, forthcoming).

guaranteed them frequent donatives needed to pay the troops and buy their loyalty. Caliph Muqtadir survived on the throne because his mother was adept at financial administration. The queen mother paid her son's donative (a "donation" paid to the army for their loyalty to a new ruler) and made many more contributions of cash to the military through the troubled years.<sup>871</sup> Still, many Arab sources blame his powerful mother, her chief female administrator of the harem, and his concubines for the destruction that fell on the kingdom.

It was an empire whose affairs turned around the management of women and servants while he [al-Muqtadir] was distracted with his pleasures. In his days, rebellions took place, the treasury was empty and there were conflicts of opinion. (Ibn al-Tiqtaqa, *al-Fakhri*)<sup>872</sup>

In summary, the known census figures for female slaves in the early caliphal households show a pattern:

- Khayruzan (queenmother)-1000
- Al-Rashid-1000
- Zubayda (al-Rashid's wife)-1000
- Al-Amin-1000
- Al-Ma'mun-1000
- Al-Mu'tasim-1000
- Al-Wathiq-1000
- Al-Mutawakkil-4,000
- Al-Muktafi-12,000?
- Al-Muqtadir-4,000

These figures show the amazing phenomena that, in the second century of the dynasty, after al-Mutawakkil ascended the throne in 847, the households, or at least the portrayal of the size of the household, increased significantly even though the Abbasid Empire had passed the early era of its greatest wealth. This change perhaps indicates

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<sup>871</sup> Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Gender and Politics in the Harem of al-Muqtadir" in Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith, ed. *Gender in the Early Medieval World; East and West, 300-900*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 153-55.

<sup>872</sup> Ibn al-Tiqtaqa, *al-Fakhri fi al-adab al-sultaniyya wa al-duwal al-islamiyya*, (Beirut, 1966), 3:84, in El Cheikh, *Gender*, 148.



increased cultural influence on the court from outside, probably from either Persia courtiers or Chinese contacts or both. It appears that the culture changed enough that Abbasid authors saw large harems as a more prominent aspect of court prestige.

One piece of evidence exists in Tabari's history that in this era, the Abbasids associated large harems with the former Persian courts.<sup>873</sup> From the two sources available to him in the tenth century, Tabari described the harem of the last Sasanid ruler to have a long reign before the Muslims, Kisra Abarwiz, better known as Khosrow II (r. 590 to 628). This text demonstrates the reputation that the previous Persian monarch still had three centuries later.

This Kisra Abarwiz had accumulated more wealth than any other monarch...It is said that he had twelve thousand women and slave-girls, 999 elephants, and fifty thousand riding beasts comprising finely bred horses ...another source, not Hisham, has stated that he had in his palace three thousand women with whom he had sexual relations and thousands of slave girls employed as servants, for music making and singing, and such. He also had three thousand male servants at his hand.... (Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, V376)<sup>874</sup>

These numbers elicit a number of other questions and problems. A number of scholars doubt the descriptions of these and other large royal harems of every era as no more than exaggeration. Maria Brosius, scholar of the court of Achaemenid Persia, asserts that the numbers of concubines and slaves in the palace need to be viewed skeptically since opponents often cite the numbers as examples of the opulence and

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<sup>873</sup> More evidence for Persian and Chinese influence comes below.

<sup>874</sup> Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari, The Sassanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., trans. and annotated by C. E. Bosworth (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 367. Tabari, I 1041 (Leiden edition) or Volume V 376 Bosworth SUNY translation. For a description of a perfect concubine in Sasanid culture, see Tabari, I, 1025-1029 Leiden edition or Volume V 352-58 Bosworth SUNY translation. Thanks to Luke Kelly for these references.

decadence of the court.<sup>875</sup> The opposite could also be true, that admirers exaggerate the numbers to emphasize the power and wealth of a ruler or an era.

The large numbers pose other questions. Did the number of slave girls represent an average daily attendance in the harem? Or, was it the total number of women who passed through the palace doors during the caliph's reign? Did the number count all the servants of the royal women left over from previous caliphs? Did the numbers include the women from the sexual staff who went into early retirement when the caliph tired of them or they aged out? Did it include all the female domestic servants and female administrators? Did it include all the women who arrived as diplomatic gifts? Did the harem house the caliphs' one-fifth share of any booty taken from conquered cities or the tribute that was required from autonomous governors of outlying provinces in the years that followed conquest? Most royal families in any era require a huge number of support staff. When added to the war captives and concubines, the numbers of women seem enormous to the modern mind, even more than the "one thousand" figure quoted for Harun al-Rashid, his mother, wife, sons, and grandsons. Several customs in the acquisition of women illustrated in the sources support the belief that caliphs supported enough women to make up a small town.

One traditional source of new slave women for royals came from the custom of sending the best of female captives to the palace. By the time of al-Rashid, the major Islamic conquests of new territory had ended, but cities, especially in the Persian highlands, had to be retaken when their rulers rebelled against Baghdad. When these cities were reconquered, the rebel rulers' households: their female relatives, daughters,

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<sup>875</sup> Heracleides, FGrH 689 F 2; ap Athen 4.145 in Maria Brosius "New out of Old: Court and Court Ceremonies in Achaemenid Persia," in A. J. Spawforth, ed. *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 43.

concubines, and all their slaves became captives. The royals and their attendants would be given to the caliph, along with or as part of the caliph's one-fifth share of the captives and booty. Several caliph's mothers had been princesses, captured in Persian rebellions and brought to the court to serve as concubines. These Persian women included the mothers of Mansur (son of the Caliph Mahdi and so half-brother to al-Hadi and al-Rashid), the caliph Ma'mun, and the caliph Mu'tasim.<sup>876</sup> The aura of royal status aided these women's climb to power in the harem which required bearing a son for the caliph. Perhaps they were chosen for the royal seed because their offspring would tie the conquered region more closely to the dynasty.<sup>877</sup>

The dependent royal women of conquered rivals resulting from the conquests of a caliph's father and grandfather could also be the court's responsibility to feed and clothe until their deaths. The custom of the conqueror being responsible for the women of the conquered was so prevalent that during the time of al-Rashid's father, one of the widows<sup>878</sup> of the defeated Umayyad royal family, assassinated by the Abbasids, showed up at the door of the palace in Baghdad asking for refuge and sustenance. Although disdained by the Abbasid princess, she was not refused support. Al-Rashid's mother, still a young concubine, with the permission of the caliph, extended kindness to the widow, who lived out her days with a stipend in the Abbasid harem.

Not only did the caliph inherit the women from the harem of his father and in al-Rashid's case, the harem of his brother and the harems of the rulers that they had both conquered, but also their numerous slave attendants or "ladies (and eunuchs) in waiting."

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<sup>876</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 172-73.

<sup>877</sup> For examples of Muslim use of this practice from Timurid Iran to Almohad North Africa, see Gordon and Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans*, forthcoming.

<sup>878</sup> Sources differ whether the woman, Muznah, was the widow or daughter of the former Umayyad Caliph, Marwan II. Abbot, *Two Queens*, 43-45.

Al-Rashid's mother, Khayzuran, had her own palace and household of one thousand slaves, but when she died, they all would have become al-Rashid's property.<sup>879</sup>

When al-Rashid executed Ja'far and deposed his famous Barmakid family of viziers, their slaves would have become royal property. Ja'far's mother alone had a retinue of 400 serving girls. It appears that all of her slave girls were confiscated as Mas'udi describes her in rags, yearning for even a sheepskin to sleep on.<sup>880</sup> A biographical dictionary of caliphal women mentions three of the Barmakid slave women. For Haylanah, (meaning Voilà), the source says, "Al-Rashid got her from Yahya ibn Khalid the Barmakid, (Ja'far's father). She was extraordinarily lovely and accomplished."<sup>881</sup> Arib al-Ma'muniyyah, perhaps the most famous of all the qiyān in Baghdad, claimed that she was freeborn, a daughter of Ja'far and a noble woman, who as a child in the midst of the chaos of the assassinations was kidnapped from Ja'far's 360 room palace and sold.<sup>882</sup> The Barmakids owned a third slave women, Faridah (Solitaire), noted in the biographical dictionary. When they were disgraced, she went into hiding even though Caliph al-Rashid searched for her without success. When he died, she entered Caliph al-Amin's household until he was killed, when she fled again.<sup>883</sup> These references to harem women reveal that the transition of women from the harem of the defeated to the victor did not go as smoothly as the ruler might wish. Also, the fame, beauty, or financial value of some of the women appear to be well enough known beyond the walls of their household that even the caliph took time to assign officials to hunt for

<sup>879</sup> Ibn Taghribirdi, I, 469. in Abbott, *Two Queens*, 127.

<sup>880</sup> Mas'udi, "The Mother of Ja'far VI: 406-07 / 2611" in *Meadows of Gold*, 126.

<sup>881</sup> Ibn al-Sa'i, *Consorts of the Caliphs; Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa, trans. the editors of the Library of Arabic Literature (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.1 p. 23.

<sup>882</sup> Ibn al-Sa'i, *Consorts*, 6.1-3, p. 25-31. Description of the palace is in the section dedicated to Buran, p. 47.

<sup>883</sup> Ibn-Sa'i, *Consorts*, 11.1, p. 59.

them.

In addition to the women of rivals who joined the royal harem because of defeat in war or political intrigue, gifts of concubines and singers also contributed to the harem census. Courtiers of all kinds used gifts of slave girls in huge numbers as currency to buy power. This choice of gift possessed a voice to praise the giver. The girl could also act as an informant for her former owner on the power machinations within the harem. One such generous gift of girls was given to Mansur on the death of his wife, Umm Musa. She was a Yemenite aristocrat when she married the still impoverished Abbasid before the revolution, so her family could impose a prenuptial agreement forbidding wives or concubines during their marriage. Once Mansur gained wealth and power, he tried to annul the agreement, but Umm Musa was always able to bribe the judge to decide in her favor for ten years into Mansur's reign. After her death, his courtiers celebrated his freedom with a gift of one hundred virgins.<sup>884</sup> As the first two centuries of Abbasid courtiers grew richer, the gifts of concubines become more ostentatious. In a biographical entry for the famous singer, Mahbubah (Beloved), it states,

.....of mixed parentage. She was foremost of her generation both as a poet and as a singer. 'Ubayd Allah ibn Tahir gave her to al-Mutawakkil when he became caliph, (in 847) as one of a group of four hundred slaves, some of them musically trained, others not. In his eyes, she surpassed them all. (*Al-Sabi* 15.2)<sup>885</sup>

The text illustrates the importance of gifts of large, very large, groups of trained slave girls in the economy of courtiers. This luxurious choice of gift impacted slave procurement in Baghdad by creating pressure on slave dealers to find pretty girls still young enough to train in singing in Arabic or to play instruments or dance. This market

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<sup>884</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 166.

<sup>885</sup> al-Sa'i, *Consorts*, 15.2, p. 77.

demand caused slave raiders to push deep into regions that produced the preferred white girls who could be captured, enslaved, transported east, and sold. Europe in this period experienced Muslim raids into Sicily, Italy, France, Switzerland, and the Mediterranean Islands as well as Viking slave raids across North and West Europe. At the same time, slave dealers enriched Europe. Michael McCormick argues that the evidence of a surge in silks, spices, and Islamic coins supports the argument of ninth century Europe thriving from a brisk export business in slaves.<sup>886</sup>

Since the Abbasid harem descriptions in the sources usually consist of only 1,000 slaves, only twice reaching to 4,000 slave girls, it is possible that the Abbasids freed, married off, sold, or gave away excess slaves, which included aging concubines without children, serving girls, and singers. This practice was common, even among the much wealthier Tang, who customarily allowed women over thirty-five to marry and leave the palace and occasionally also purged the harem in time of financial restraint.<sup>887</sup> For women leaving the harem, their time inside the palace served as an exclusive “finishing school” which gave them important networks and social skills, increasing their value as political spouses. Recycling women among the elite Abbasids also does not appear to have been shameful. Al-Rashid appropriated and married his dead brother’s favorite concubine, Ghadir, even at the cost of walking to Mecca barefoot on carpets as propitiation for breaking his vow to his brother not to take her.<sup>888</sup> He also married at least three noble women, divorced by someone else.<sup>889</sup>

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<sup>886</sup> Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy; Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>887</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 182-85.

<sup>888</sup> Ibn al-Sa’i, *Consorts*, 2.1-2, 7-9. Tabari adds to this subject and says that al-Rashid took another one of al-Hadi’s concubines known as Amat al’Aziz.

<sup>889</sup> Tabari, *Early Abbasi, Year 193*, 757-58.

So, the answer to the question of the size of Abbasid harems remains in shadows even after examining the sources. Numbers are scant and those that are given seem to be the opinion of viewers from a distance or rhetorical, and/or rounded up. A number of customs revealed in the sources, however, show many different reasons for women of all ages to enter the court. The sources of women from booty, tribute, confiscations, inheritance, and gifts could overwhelm the fiscal ability of the court to support their upkeep. The problem for a ruler (or the powerful queen mother) in the early years of an empire's expansion seems to be keeping the harem to a reasonable administrative size or within a budget the *vizier* could cover from tax receipts. The demand to provide slaves for Baghdad before the empire contracted in size or influence came not so much from the palace but from others. Rulers on the frontiers needed slave women to use for the tribute payment. Slave dealers needed desirable stock to sell to those going to visit the court and needed a gift that would buy them influence. Elites or minor rulers also sought slave musicians, concubines, domestics, and eunuchs to build harems that imitated the court's use of luxury slaves.

### **Definitions and Functions of a Court**

To understand the Abbasid caliphal courts and their reasons to possess large numbers of servants and women, it is imperative to define what "court" meant and what happened at court. The term in English comes from the Latin, *cohors*, which has a double meaning, both enclosure and entourage, implying a meaning that is both place and participants. Abbasid writers use the term *dar* (household) either alone or as *dar al-khilafa* or *dar al-sultan*, to refer to both the caliphal palace and to the human

establishment surrounding the emperor.<sup>890</sup> The Arabic term *balat* meaning pavement is another term used for the definition of court and reveals the role that a palace, mosque,<sup>891</sup> and other architectural components played as stages for the actors and rituals in the drama of kingship. While much of kingship was routine, the splendor of the buildings and the numbers, deference, and dress of the entourage added awe. This aids in understanding the importance that the Abbasids put on building not just a palace and mosque complex, but an entire imperial city to house the members of their court.

The rulers' reliance on royal architecture and a huge household of servants contrasts sharply with the simple abode of a row of huts next to the mosque in Medina traditionally pictured as Mohammed's household. The previous Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads, built smaller palaces, plentiful desert retreats, and the jewel-like, but physically small, Dome of the Rock as a holy site. In contrast, Abbasid imperial palaces could almost be considered huge peripatetic cities as the court moved from Kāfir ibn Ḥubayra between Kufa and Baghdad to al-Hashimiyah in Anbar to Madinat al Mansur near Kufa to Baghdad near Seleucia—Ctesiphon on the Euphrates to Merv back to Baghdad on to Samarra and then back to Baghdad.<sup>892</sup> There the court remained, probably because the later caliphs no longer possessed the financial resources or autonomy to migrate. Unfortunately, the lack of durable building materials in Mesopotamia combined with the conquest of Hulegu, a grandson of Chingiz Khan, in 1258 and the scorched earth policy of Tamerlane in 1401, covered by the overlying modern city have left negligible

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<sup>890</sup> Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "Courts and Courtiers; A preliminary investigation of Abbasid terminology" in Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung, ed. *Court Cultures in the Muslim World; Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 82.

<sup>891</sup> In later years, a tent played the same role for the newly Muslim Turkish rulers.

<sup>892</sup> Justin Marozzi, *Baghdad; City of Peace, City of Blood—A History in Thirteen Centuries* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014), 1-3.



archaeological remains to study the physical aspect of Abbasid court culture, except in Samarra.

Little analytical work exists on the human cultural side of court life. Most work is by scholars of early modern courts in Europe. Norbert Elias described the institution as “Both the first household of the extended royal family and the central organ of the entire state administration, the government.”<sup>893</sup> Ronald G. Asch discusses further the court’s role as a series of periodical events.<sup>894</sup> It served as a stronghold of aristocratic influence over the ruler and as a bulwark of the nobility against the non-noble elites who were excluded.<sup>895</sup> Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung expand the definition more by portraying the institution as a more or less permanent court society that congregates around a monarch.<sup>896</sup>

Some scholarship exists on medieval Muslim court culture. Hugh Kennedy’s study, *The Court of the Caliphs*, and Nadia Maria El Cheikh’s several articles on the women and household of the tenth century Caliph al-Muqtadir (908-932 CE) laid the foundation. *Court Cultures in the Muslim World; Seventh to nineteenth centuries*, a volume of conference papers compiled by Fuess and Hartung, expands the work started by Kennedy and El Cheikh. This work distills rituals or royal events to delineate three tasks that the rulers and courtiers of “courts” must accomplish.<sup>897</sup> To their list, a fourth, gendered function must be added.

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<sup>893</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1983), 1.

<sup>894</sup> Ronald G. Asch, “Introduction: Court and Household from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries,” in Ronald G. Asch and Adolf M. Birke, ed. *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility; The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age c. 1450-1650*, (Oxford, UK: The German Historical Institute London/Oxford University Press, 1991), 9.

<sup>895</sup> Asch, *Introduction*, 4.

<sup>896</sup> Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung, “Introduction” in Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung, ed. *Court Cultures in the Muslim World; Seventh to Nineteenth centuries*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 4.

<sup>897</sup> Fuess and Hartung, *Court Cultures*, 3.

The first task of the court was to legitimize political rule in the eyes of those subjugated and in the view of vassals, allies, and aspirants to the crown. Those who wished to sit and stay on the throne validated their rule by giving themselves and their descendants a title that referenced their influence with the divine. Monarchs everywhere claimed a divine mandate, to differentiate themselves from other elite power holders and to make a distinction between legitimate authority and mere power.<sup>898</sup> Asian rulers all sanctified their reigns by identifying themselves as the presence or authority of God on earth. The Chinese emperors ruled as “Sons of Heaven.” When destruction, desolation, or famine befell the Chinese people, the devastation signaled open revolt against the dynasty since the ruin and hardships served as signs that the gods were not pleased with the ruler and removed the mandate. Byzantine emperors, titled *basileus* pl. *basileoi*, meaning king, spoke for God when they ruled over their many counsels to determine an acceptable, orthodox, theological stance. Western European monarchs ruled under the concept of kingship as one of the divine gifts or *charismata*<sup>899</sup> and often had their rule, marriages, and decisions vetted by the pope’s legate in their court. Creating a title proclaiming God’s authority was not unique to Muslim courts.

The Muslim rendition of this divine relationship between ruler and divinity is encapsulated by the term *Khilafat Allah*, pointing to Quranic verses like 2:30, which refers to the deputyship of God on earth according to the *mufasssirun*, scholars of post-Quranic exegesis.<sup>900</sup> This term traditionally traced back to Abu Bakr, who assumed rule over the Muslims after the death of Mohammed, appropriating the term *khalifat rasul*

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<sup>898</sup> Anne Walthall, “Introducing Palace Women” in Anne Walthall, ed. *Servants of the Dynasty*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>899</sup> Paul discusses *charismata* in 1 Corinthians. 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4 of the New Testament.

<sup>900</sup> The term “caliph” in the Qur’an referenced Adam.

*Allah* “deputy of Mohammed, the messenger of God” to describe the divine authority manifested in his authority.<sup>901</sup>

The authority of the title, “caliph”, endured, albeit with increasingly reduced power. This title proved to be malleable. When the Abbasids massacred the Umayyad dynasty, they appropriated the turban and the title of caliph. The new dynasty needed authority. The divine authority imputed by the title justified their rule with other Muslims and probably enhanced their authority within the court culture in Asia that they wanted to join. In the tenth century, the title stretched to grace three caliphs, the ruler in Baghdad, and competitive dynasties in Umayyad Cordoba and Fatimid Cairo.

The Mongols executed the last Abbasid caliph in 1258. The Mamluks, newly established in Egypt, however, needed to validate their rule. They received a royal or fictive refugee from the Abbasid court and revived the caliphate in Cairo, as symbolic rule over the Muslims. When the Ottomans defeated the Mamluks in 1517, Suleyman the Great appropriated the caliphate, and moved the current Abbasid caliph title holder to Istanbul.

The second task after a ruler claimed a share of God’s authority on earth was to establish a recognizable court by adaption to the long traditions of governance in the region. In their study of Muslim court cultures, Fuess and Hartung cite coinage, taxation, and architecture as three examples where the Muslim rulers originally copied Byzantine and Sasanid patterns, but eventually Islamized those forms into a hybrid, which became

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<sup>901</sup>Scholars debate the early use of this title. Crone and Hinds use Muslim sources, especially coins, to show that the Umayyads first used this term in 644 on coins. Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8, 11. An opposing scholar, A. Hakim, argues that ‘Umar and Abu Bakr accepted the title *khalifat Allah* based on the Islamic Tradition which dates two centuries after Abu Bakr. A. Hakim, “Umar b. al-Khattab and the Title *khalifat Allah*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 30 (2005): 207-30.

the pattern for Muslim courts.<sup>902</sup> These scholars considered the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem to be nascent Islamic architecture.

The archaeological recovery of a fifth century octagon Byzantine church foundation, the Kathisma, just three miles from the Dome of the Rock on the road to Bethlehem, shows how this hybridization worked. The octagon shape and size of this fifth-century church appears to be the pattern that the architects used for this Muslim holy site.<sup>903</sup> The diameter of the Dome of the Rock measures slightly larger at twenty meters compared to the 18.3 meters of the Kathisma, but the shape is the same.<sup>904</sup> The ambulatory built around the Dome's rock in the center mirrored the Christian practice of circling Jesus's tomb or Mary's seat in the nearby Christian holy places, but had no function in a religion that bowed towards Mecca to pray instead of praying while circling.<sup>905</sup> Neither architecture nor ritual originated with Islam.

Islam influenced the interior, however. Instead of the Christian icons of the saints and holy events decorating the walls, the Muslim builders chose to use mosaics to portray nonfigurative botanical shapes with the pearl decorative style of the Sasanids. At the top of the walls, instead of the figurative art found on church walls, they decorated with Arabic calligraphy and verses that later, slightly modified, are found in extant versions of the Qur'an.

This first Islamic structure, the Dome of the Rock, was not an Umayyad invention, but rather belongs to the family of early Byzantine concentric memorial

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<sup>902</sup> Fuess and Hartung, "Introduction" in *Court Cultures*, 7.

<sup>903</sup> Other Byzantine churches on the Mount of Olives, Capernaum, and Caesarea had octagonal elements within them. Rina Avner, "The Dome of the Rock in Light of the Development of Concentric Martyria in Jerusalem," *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 32-33.

<sup>904</sup> Avner, *Kathisma*, 39.

<sup>905</sup> R. Ettinghausen, O. Grabar, and M. Jenkins-Medina, ed. *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650-1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 17-19.

structures.<sup>906</sup> It exhibits the creative adaptation of existing architectural styles, in this case, contemporary Byzantine churches and Sasanid art styles.<sup>907</sup> It stands as an example that cultural innovations and styles, including court cultures, upon examination, prove to be a synthesis or hybridization of a borrowing from one or more previous cultures mixed with something new. The Dome of the Rock was meant to exhibit to the old Christian majority and the new returning Jewish residents of Jerusalem that the Arab Umayyad dynasty had replaced the glory of the Jews, the Byzantines, and the Sasanids. Muslim court culture can be seen in the same light. Perhaps, even the Abbasid court and harems were meant to exhibit that their dynasty could compete with the reputations of past and present harems

The Islamization argument based on coins, taxation, and architecture still misses the incorporating the traditions and values of the prophet, who should have been the main influence on the form that Muslim court culture assumed. Mohammed, the Muslim ideal ruler in Islamic tradition, had an austere, egalitarian, and accessible household. According to the ninth century source, Ibn Hisham, Mohammed exercised authority in a simple and straightforward manner. In sharp contrast to the Abbasids, according to Islamic tradition, he had no palace, no court of assembly, no gates, no chamberlain to decide who had access to him, no throne or raised dais, no elaborate robes, no protocol governing how you related to him, no prostration, no kissing of his hand, and no social hierarchy.<sup>908</sup>

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<sup>906</sup> Avner, *Kathisma*, 37.

<sup>907</sup> Avner, "Dome of the Rock," 31-49 and a popular version albeit with a number of inaccuracies, Miriam Feinberg Vamouth, "The Kathisma: The Most Important Ancient Church You Never Heard Of," *Haaretz*, Feb. 24, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/travel/tourist-tip-of-the-day/1.564737> accessed May 2, 2016.

<sup>908</sup> Michael Cook, "Did the Prophet Muhammad keep Court?" in Fuess and Hartung, *Court Cultures*, 23-25.

The Abbasid revolutionaries advertised their movement as a correction to the Umayyad court in that they were the family of the prophet.<sup>909</sup> Ironically, however, the Abbasids did not recreate Mohammed's ruling style. Instead, they created a court that other East Asian, South-East Asia, Indian, Central Asian, West Asian, and Egyptian rulers would recognize and respect. If they created a hybrid court culture, it leaned towards the ostentation of eastern courts. Rather than reformation and imitation of Mohammed, the court pattern established by the Abbasids more closely followed traditional Asian court practices. They "Persianized or "Asianized" Muslim rule more than introducing the supposed simplicity and egalitarianism of their prophet.

The secluded, elaborate, and ostentatious court under the reign of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid and his mother was almost "mythically glorified" and served as the high water mark, becoming the "central reference point for the formation of future Muslim court culture."<sup>910</sup> Harun al-Rashid's ostentatious court set the pattern for Muslim courts from Iberia to India and beyond, not a hybrid court that showed influence from the humble courts of Mohammed and the first four caliphs as portrayed by the *ulama*, religious scholars opposing the Abbasids. Perhaps, the main Islamic element within this eastern court scene was the caliph's protection over and sometimes participation in the yearly *hajj* to Mecca.

Fuess and Hartung describe the third task of a court, "elaboration of splendid court culture."<sup>911</sup> This "image" campaign went far beyond public processions of the rulers. The task encompassed religious, intellectual, and cultural leadership.

The caliphs promoted justice, religious law, and scholarship. They bought

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<sup>909</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 8.

<sup>910</sup> Fuess and Hartung, "Introduction" in *Court Cultures*, 8.

<sup>911</sup> Fuess and Hartung, "Introduction" in *Court Cultures*, 8-10.

religious and social influence with charity. Members of the court, often the queen mothers and favorite concubines, sponsored public works like mosques, charities, water fountains, religious schools, Sufi lodges, and help for the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Scholarship outside of theology and law was almost a state monopoly with intellectuals reliant on court patronage. Intellectual clients living off of a royal allowance or gifts, produced calligraphy, translations, books etc., all dedicated to the ruler. Harun al-Rashid founded a House of Wisdom to propagate translation. The other Abbasid rulers, reaching the zenith with Ma'mun (813-833), continued sponsoring translations, which brought Greek knowledge into the Arabic speaking world.<sup>912</sup> Even Abbasid rivals, for example, the Fatimids who conquered Cairo from the Ikhshidids (who were autonomous rulers recognizing the Abbasid caliph in the *kutbah*, naming of authority in the mosque, if not in actual tax receipts), adapted the Abbasid House of Wisdom. The Fatimids built al-Azhar. This educational institution is today known as al-Azhar University, a leading Sunni institution that claims the honor of being the oldest functioning university in the world.

Paper-making technology, probably carried by captives from the Battle of Talus in 753, combined with the Abbasid sponsorship of scholarship and translation resulted in an explosion of book production. The *Souk al-Warrakin* (Market of Papers) in west Baghdad boasted of more than a hundred booksellers during the Abbasid era.<sup>913</sup> Owners bought or trained slave girls to copy manuscripts so they could build a library or sell books. The greatest production of new titles originated from the palace courtiers. Ibn Khurdadhbih, writing as a boon companion to the caliph, is an example of this production

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<sup>912</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 253-60.

<sup>913</sup> Marozzi, *City of Peace*, 23.

of scholarship centered on the palace. A ruler's intellectual hunger played less of a role than his desire to compete with other kings by having a court with the reputation as the center of brilliance and cultural production.<sup>914</sup> Scholarship was just another form of ostentatious display.

Another aspect of the third task, the “elaboration of splendid court culture,” happened in the arts.<sup>915</sup> In Abbasid culture, *adab* or high culture was not just academic achievement but also songs, poems, miniatures, frescos, instrumental music, etc. In addition to religion and scholarship, rulers showed their sophistication by sponsoring artisans, musicians, and, especially in the Abbasid court, poets. In the Islamic world, the male performers were usually free, but female entertainers tended to be slaves or freed slaves. The most highly trained female musicians and poets were known as *qiyan*, a word usually translated as “courtesans,” despite their slave status. Once trained, they brought astounding prices. Abu Uthman al-Dallal, a dealer in elite slaves, described why the process of producing an expensive *jariya*, white concubine, started very young. “Assuming good stock for a start, the ideal would be to get hold of her in her ninth year, then make her spend three years in the famous music school in Medina followed by three more in Mecca. She will then arrive as a 15-year-old in Iraq.”<sup>916</sup> The implication of high prices paid for trained slaves and the expenses of the many years needed to teach them both the Arabic language and the intricate music and poetry rhythms meant that slave dealers were especially looking for very young girls to buy and bring to Baghdad.

Abbasid sources show that originally, slave girls of all races held these elite

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<sup>914</sup> W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust/Luzac & Company, 1928, 1977) section 306, p. 289., also Stewart Gordon, *When Asia was the World* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), 182.

<sup>915</sup> Fuess and Hartung, “Introduction” in *Court Cultures*, 8-10.

<sup>916</sup> Ibn Butlan, *Risala Jami'a li-funun nafi'a fi shira' al-rafiq*, 374, in Caswell, *Slave Girls*, 14-15.



positions. For example, Caliph al-Mahdi (d. 785) bought a talented black slave, Maknuna, for the price of 100,000 dirhams, early in the Abbasid period.<sup>917</sup> Over time, white girls gained dominance in the market for singing girls. Ishaq, dealer in qiyān, claimed that his father changed the fashion to a preference for white girls.<sup>918</sup> Abbasid era poetry also extolls white prostitutes, “The beautiful white ones. In my life, there is pleasure.”<sup>919</sup> Or “Oh Lord, why is it that Ibn Ramin has women with bewitching eyes, whilst all we have are nags? O Sa’da, the white qayna, you are a joy to us since you are in the house of Ibn Ramin.”<sup>920</sup> Other Abbasid male writers disparaged blond hair and too pale skin and preferred darker women.<sup>921</sup> It is unknown how the demand for European women compared with those who preferred light Turkish or Berber women in the slave market.

Not all artistic ostentation was entertainment. Zubayda, wife to Harun al-Rashid, trained a hundred of her many slave girls to chant the Qur’an in successive relays of tens so her palace would resonate with the sound of the holy text throughout the day.<sup>922</sup>

From turbaned intellectuals to fashionably clad singing girls, what this crowd of clients, sponsored by the royals, shared in common was they were all part of the human backdrop required to demonstrate to locals and to diplomats that a court possessed enough sophistication and prestige to claim authority to rule. The status of the ruler depended on the quality and quantity of the talented people that he patronized. Elite families sponsored some scholars by providing them a stipend to tutor their children.

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<sup>917</sup> Caswell, *Slave Girls*, 5.

<sup>918</sup> Al-Isfahani, *Aghani*, III, 251, in Caswell, *Slave Girls*, 17. For example of prices paid for qiyān, see 28.

<sup>919</sup> Abu l-Hindi in Ibn al-Mu’tazz, *Tabaqat al-shu’ara*, 138 in Caswell, *Slave Girls*, 31, 283.

<sup>920</sup> Al-Isfahani, *Aghani*, xv:61-1, xi:365-7 in Caswell, *Slave Girls*, 26, 282.

<sup>921</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>922</sup> Ibn Khallikan I.533 ff, in Abbott, *Two Queens*, 160.

Literary salons provided popular qiyān entertainers for the public who could pay. These venues, however, provided only secondary support for scholars and entertainers.

Religion, scholarship, and entertainment were not completely state monopolies, but that was not for lack of effort on the part of the courts.

Providing an elaborate court culture required a reputation for conspicuous consumption, especially for items not available locally. The court expected to lead the way, not only in religion, scholarship, and artistic performance, but also in consumption of silk garments, elaborate foods, exotic animals and plants, new books in their libraries, and multi-ethnic slave performers providing their entertainments. Diplomats brought new plants, birds, and wild animals for the collection of foreign novelties standard in royal botanical gardens, aviaries, and zoos. Decorative gardens with exotic plants and trees mirrored paradise. New foods and recipes spread from court to court. The multi-lingual, multiracial, multi-ethnic slaves captured by conquests on the distant frontiers or presented as tribute from distant vassals or given as gifts from traders or courtiers might be considered as just another collection underscoring the benefits of conquest. The geographical distance these slaves traveled to the court highlighted the extent of a ruler's power and influence. The large harems, consisting mostly of foreign slave concubines, singing girls, and eunuchs, served as the ultimate form of conspicuous consumption.

One major form of a court's conspicuous consumption, luxury fabrics, especially silk, deserves attention. Middle Eastern and Central Asian rulers used the bestowal of a silk robe to stamp their approval on everyone from a "boon companion" drinking buddy to new rulers from the frontier seeking legitimacy.<sup>923</sup> The Abbasids appropriated

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<sup>923</sup> Gordon, *When Asia*, 181.

wholesale this Late Antique practice of literal “investure”<sup>924</sup> used by the Byzantines and Sasanids.<sup>925</sup> For example, the diplomat, Ibn Fadlan, carried black robes from the Abbasid caliph to Almish, ruler of the Bulgurs, and his wife, in response to the message that the new king wished to convert to Islam and join the Abbasid orbit.<sup>926</sup> The break-away rulers following the Abbasid example, including the Andalusian Umayyads and Egyptian Fatimids, used robes in their signature colors with their names embroidered or woven into the fabric to symbolically mark their authority over their clients. These robes, given in the presence of the audience of local courtiers, established the relationship of dominance and submission and mutual support between giver and recipient.<sup>927</sup> Subordinate rulers would wear the robes like modern athlete’s “branding” on their clothing to advertise their sponsors.

Courts set up royal ateliers to produce these robes with royal insignia known as *tiraz*, a textile embellished by borders that are printed, embroidered, or woven, often in silk, with the caliph’s name in calligraphy.<sup>928</sup> As gifts, these robes signified relationship and loyalty, but the elite also hoarded them as treasures or used them as an alternative

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<sup>924</sup> Investure comes from the Medieval Latin term for “in” and “vestment” to confer the meaning of donning regalia and gaining admission to an elite group. The practice was already old by Late Antiquity. An early version of it appears in the book of Esther in the Old Testament when the ruler of the first Persian Empire honors a Jewish courtier, Mordachai, for exposing an assassination plot, by having him wear the king’s robe in a public procession. Esther 6: 3-11.

<sup>925</sup> The Chinese sent rolls of silk, banners, and edicts to their allies. For example see “New Tang History” (*Hsin Tang-shu*) on the History of the Uighurs Chan 217A.3a-B.1b in *The Uighur Empire According to the Tang Dynastic Histories*, trans. and notes Colin Mackerras, (2004) 55. <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/tangshu/tangshu.html> Accessed Feb. 25, 2016. Reference thanks to Dr. Mel Thatcher.

<sup>926</sup> Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness; Arab Travellers in the Far North*, translated with an introduction by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 25.

<sup>927</sup> Gordon, *When Asia*, 181.

<sup>928</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran; A Moment in World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 54-55.

currency.<sup>929</sup> One early Abbasid example of conspicuous silk consumption by members of the court comes from the records of the estate of the mother of Harun al-Rashid.

Khayzuran entered the Abbasid household as a lowly, singing slave concubine, purchased in the Meccan slave market during the caliphal hajj. At the time of her death, this now powerful queen mother possessed a yearly income that equaled half the land taxes of the empire, a huge palace of her own with over a thousand slaves to serve her, gold, jewels, and 18,000 silk brocade garments.<sup>930</sup> Her consumption of silk alone stands out in the sources 1200 years later. Perhaps, one use for a large harem population is that a good number of these slaves worked embroidering or weaving these robes as a stream of wealth production. If so, the Abbasid rulers mirrored the Chinese courts where the harem women produced luxury fabrics.<sup>931</sup>

Fuess and Hartung's list of three tasks of a court: legitimizing political rule through divine titles, establishing a recognizable court, and elaborating a splendid court culture using conspicuous consumption, needs a fourth task added. This task remains gendered, requiring the contribution of the court women. Women provided both the heirs and the financial stability for the succession, which protected the ruling dynasty. Most Islamic dynasties relied on polygamy and concubinage to ensure an adequate number of surviving sons.<sup>932</sup> The high number of women not only illustrated conspicuous consumption, but they fulfilled the cultural value that the measure of ideal masculinity was the virility and volume of sexual relations of the ruler. The Persian and Chinese courts used concubines to exhibit their rulers' masculine sexual vigor, but legally married

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<sup>929</sup> Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs : The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 145.

<sup>930</sup> Tabari, III.569, in Abbott, *Two Queens*, 125.

<sup>931</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 192.

<sup>932</sup> Walthall, *Palace Women*, 13.

wives predominantly provided the heirs to the throne. The Abbasids chose another means to produce heirs and prove virility. The caliphs married princesses and elite women for diplomatic and political reasons, but the court did not use free wives for reproduction after Harun al-Rashid's cousin-wife, Zubaydah. Only three of the Abbasid caliphs had free mothers.<sup>933</sup> A monarch's most essential responsibility was to produce an heir. The Abbasid dynasty after 809 depended on foreign slave concubines for this task.

The harem's task of succession was not just reproductive. The consort/queen mother provided more than just a son for an heir; in times of crisis, she sometimes also served as a powerful back-up to maintain political and financial stability. When the ruler was a child or was weak, usually his mother, or sometimes, an assertive consort, wielded her financial clout and her carefully constructed patronage networks to push through political decisions to protect the realm. These royal women did more than bolster the standing of the dynasty by providing regent rule and numerous charity endowments (sing. *waqf*, pl. *awqaf*). When the financial situation of the ruler was in peril, the royal women served as the government's emergency treasury.

Donatives were a huge expense that fell on the mothers of the caliph's sons. Often, which surviving son came to rule depended on which mother had the needed funds. During more prosperous times, at the death of al-Mahdi in 785, the troops demanded three years pay or even more but were "given two year's pay and were quiet," before allowing the enthronement of his son, al-Hadi (r. 785-786).<sup>934</sup> The vizier went to Khayzuran, mother of the next two caliphs, al-Hadi and Harun al-Rashid, to find the

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<sup>933</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 170, Caswell, *Slave Girls*, 20.

<sup>934</sup> Tabari, "Year 169 (785-6 CE) The Caliphate of Musa al-Hadi," in *The Early 'Abbasi Empire*, vol. 2, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., trans. John Alden Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 138-9, 547. Tabari also quotes a second source, Al-Fadh b. Sulayman, who sets the donative at eighteen months' pay.

money needed to pay the troops.

The queen mother, Shaghab (Trouble), ruler of Muqtadir's harem (mentioned earlier), demonstrates several times how harem finances were tapped for the survival of the caliph. Shaghab came to power when her son, al-Muqtadir (r. 908-932), half-brother of the former caliph, was chosen for the succession because of his youth (age thirteen) and supposedly, his powerlessness.<sup>935</sup> The viziers had underestimated his mother. This former Byzantine slave proved to be politically and financially astute, setting up a bureau of both male and female officials to handle her many estates. Besides the income from her property, she accumulated funds from bribes given for her influence in choosing appointees to high offices and from confiscating the savings of her own retinue.<sup>936</sup> During one crisis, the Abbasid state was on the brink of bankruptcy and suffering attacks by Qaramita raiders. These Isma'ili dissidents from Bahrain fought relentlessly to overthrow the Sunni Abbasids. Over time, the threat grew as they robbed the hajj caravans, sacked Basra, and advanced all the way to the capital itself in 927 CE. The vizier went to the caliph to intercede with his mother,

Fear God, O Commander of the Faithful, and speak to the Queen Mother, who is a pious, excellent woman and if she has any hoard she has amassed against any necessity that may over take her of the empire, then this is the time to bring it out. (Miskawayh, *Eclipse*, 204.)<sup>937</sup>

Umm al-Muqtadir ordered her private funds to the sum of half a million dinars to pay the troops fighting the Qaramita. She also used her funds to support the long-standing border war with Byzantium, ironically the place of her origin before enslavement. She built a fortress on the border that could house and supply 150 Mamluk soldiers fighting on the

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<sup>935</sup> El Cheikh, *Gender*, 149.

<sup>936</sup> El Cheikh, *Gender*, 157-58.

<sup>937</sup> Miskawayh, *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, ed. and trans. H. I. Amedroz and D. S. Margoliouth (London, 1921), I:204 in El Cheikh, *Gender*, 155.

frontier against the Christian realm.

Shaghab had given so many donations to the imperial fisc and funded so many *awqaf*, pious charities, that in her old age, the new caliph, al-Qahir (r. 932-934) in his time of financial need, “had her suspended by one foot and beat her mercilessly on the soft parts of her body.”<sup>938</sup> The torture ensued when the elderly woman refused the new caliph’s demand to dissolve her endowments which would make her funds accessible to confiscation by him. Shaghab was so weakened from his beatings that she soon died from her injuries. The incident of al-Qahir’s brutality, imposed on a former queen mother who had previously protected him, shows the strong position in the palace that harem women held on quickly available cash and the desperation of needy caliphs to pay the required and sizable donatives to the army upon enthronement. The harem women acted as financial sponges that sucked up the resources of the ruler, but also could be squeezed in times of need to preserve the dynasty from ruin.

Harem women proved essential in propagation and preservation of the dynasty, as well as being one of the essential elements required for ostentatious court culture. Streams of slave women arriving as gifts, war captives, inheritances, or from confiscated harems make these Abbasid royal harems numbering a thousand or even a few thousand appear to be normative for rulers with imperial power. In this elite world, the possession of slaves, beautiful concubines, eunuchs, bodyguards, and, especially, trained musicians, poets, and entertainers, demonstrated a ruler’s wealth, status, and virile masculinity if they did not bankrupt him. These members of the court, all beautifully clothed in silks, were still slaves, their lives a sharp contrast to the fate of the majority of slaves who existed only as tools for labor and growth of wealth. The work of participants of the

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<sup>938</sup> Miskawayh, *Eclipse* I:274-75 in El Cheikh, *Gender*, 158-59.

Abbasid court, slave and free, male and female, was to help fulfill the tasks of royal courts: divine governance, leadership in education, and cultural production, plus conspicuous consumption, but their most important task—preserving the dynasty—required slave women.

### **Transmitters of Court Culture across Asia**

This chapter asserts that the Abbasids adopted the traditional court culture shared either in the neighborhood of Baghdad, located less than twenty-five miles from Ctesiphon, Seleucia, and Babylon, and/or from other courts ranging further across West, Central, South, and East Asia. This court culture required either the portrayal of large numbers or actual extensive retinues of women under the ruler. Understanding how information about harems as well as other aspects of court culture moved from court to court reveals how the Abbasids and other rulers were able to learn what was required to create a court culture with a reputation that could compete with other courts.

Courts across medieval Eurasia possessed a shared language of diplomatic intercourse: pageantry, status ranking, displays of obeisance, gift exchanges, and feasting.<sup>939</sup> Court formation required following a number of intricate customs, but how did knowledge of these customs spread or could they have been co-invented? Any court with diplomats coming and going could be susceptible to homogeneity between rulers. Diplomats were the chief carriers of court culture. Ambassadors brought gifts that represented the best of their home region and returned with “rewards” representing the court and country of the recipient. The diplomats also acted as spies to carry home

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<sup>939</sup> Jonathan Karam Kraff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors; Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 135.



information about the newest trends being practiced in the rival or allied courts.<sup>940</sup> In the medieval period, diplomatic networks intensified after the Tang expanded west and extended their protection over the Silk Road, from after 581CE. Persian embassies to China increased but also ambassadors from Byzantium visited the Tang court, creating “overlapping diplomatic exchanges.”<sup>941</sup>

Diplomats were not the only ones to spread trends. Court culture was also spread by the custom of having royal children raised (or held hostage against their father’s good behavior) by more powerful courts. If a client king died, the ruler holding his son as a “guest” could send the royal prince back to his native home to rule as a hopefully secure vassal, well steeped in the overlord’s customs and language. Courts also gave refuge to dissidents, disgraced aristocrats, philosophers, theologians, missionaries, monks, and military commanders after defeat, all of whom could provide insider information on the character and culture of the neighboring royals.<sup>942</sup> Traders came with new products. Musicians, entertainers, and skilled artisans came looking for patronage or were captured in war. These brought new styles and technologies. For example, either traders or war brought papermakers from Central Asia to Baghdad and introduced papermaking after the Battle of Talas.<sup>943</sup> Slaves (and royal daughters) gifted between courts could spy and inform about the machinations of power within the harems. Using contacts from royal princes to lowly dancing girls, rival kings could keep informed and copy each other’s styles of luxurious living.

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<sup>940</sup> Gordon, *When Asia*, 185.

<sup>941</sup> Matthew P. Canepa, “Distant Displays of Power: Understanding Cross-Cultural Interaction among the Ancient and Early Medieval Mediterranean, Near East and Asia,” *Ars Orientalis* 38 (2010): 124.

<sup>942</sup> Canepa, “Distant,” 123.

<sup>943</sup> Maejima, “Tarasu Senko: Honsho,” 28-29, in Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic World: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Premodern Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25, 209.

## Shared Court Culture across Asia

Jonathan Karam Kraff describes the many shared diplomatic customs and relationships shared across medieval Eurasia.<sup>944</sup> Matthew Canepa, however, claims that “The final transformative conflicts between Heraclius I (r. 610-41) and Khosrow II (r. 590-628), which were followed in 633-42 by the Arab invasions, swept away this interconnected world,” and the diplomatic ties running from Constantinople to Ctesiphon to Chang’an ended.<sup>945</sup> Canepa probably bases his argument on Persia being the hub from which styles and trade traveled to the rest of the world. However, both the Umayyads and Abbasids sent diplomats and gifts to the Tang from their very earliest days on the throne. The diplomatic forays of the Arabs to Chang’an, China and Constantinople, dispel Canepa’s conclusions and perhaps show that the Muslims fully expected to be the hub in place of Ctesiphon

Even the relentless war between the Abbasids and Byzantium did not stop mutual visits of ambassadors between them, especially when the emperors needed contact to arrange for peace treaties, tribute, or exchanges of prisoners of war. A 917 visit by Byzantine envoys to Baghdad to arrange an exchange of prisoners serves as an example of the value placed on these visits. The Greek Christian ambassadors were kept waiting in Tikrit for two months so that the Abbasid court could prepare for a sumptuous tour that included everything from trained exotic animals, to a tree of silver and gold with mechanical singing birds, to the contents of twenty-three palaces.<sup>946</sup> The Abbasid courtiers and caliphs were the “new kids on the block,” but they gained access to all the same avenues of information to learn how to mold a court culture that would garner

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<sup>944</sup> Kraff, *Sui-Tang China*, 148-55.

<sup>945</sup> Canepa, *Distant*, 124.

<sup>946</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 152-56, Marozzi, *City of Peace*, 93-97.

respect in a world with long-established formulas for the proper presentation of rulers.

Immediately standing out in this shared court culture were the visual and auditory elements, which highlighted the presence and supremacy of the ruler, both to palace insiders and to foreign visitors. Thrones or daises, canopies or parasols, fans or fly whisks, pendants, special head gear and jewelry, jeweled weapons, all worked together, without need of translation, to point out who was the ruler. Drums, gongs, or horns announced the daily arrival of a monarch or signaled the beginning of a new reign.<sup>947</sup> Activities considered appropriate for royals spread among courts across Asia. Kings considered hunting as a royal prerogative from the earliest dates, a habit that probably co-originated everywhere. However, the games of polo, chess, and backgammon moved from court to court.<sup>948</sup>

Royals utilized the visual elements of dominance: ceremonies, titles, royal signifiers from crowns to gongs, collections that emphasized the extent of their reign, patronage of cultural and intellectual production, and portrayals of large harems to create at least the illusion of power. Many of the later Abbasid caliphs were prime examples of rulers who had all the royal trappings, but retained little actual power or wealth.

These court values shared across Asia remain key to understanding why the Abbasids adopted large harems. The need to fill and replenish large harems required by this shared court culture explains why the slave traders brought European women and eunuchs to Baghdad and onto East, South, West, and Central Asia. Looking at Arab, Persian, and Chinese court traditions helps not only to unravel who all influenced the Abbasid court formation, but also, who dominated the direction of this cultural exchange.

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<sup>947</sup> Gordon, *When Asia*, 181, Jeroen Duindam, *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires* (Boston: Brill, 2011), 2.

<sup>948</sup> Canepa, *Distant*, 135.

## Arab Experience with Rule and Court Culture

Scholars from Mas'udi to Wink have proposed that the Abbasid court pattern of a ruler surrounded by an elaborate palace, castrated courtiers, and a harem of hundreds if not thousands of women resulted from an Arab attempt to copy the Sasanid Persian court that Arab armies had defeated a century earlier in 651 CE. Some would say that the Abbasids succeeded in recreating Persian style harems, but if you compare al-Rashid and his family member's harems of 1000 with that of Khosrow II's 12,000 women, the early caliphs had less than 10% success competing with the Persian ruler. Al-Mutawawakil and al-Muktadir in the later, more Persian influenced era were 30% successful reaching the standard set by the Persian rulers before them. Even the largest of the Arab harems are notably smaller. Of course, any or all of these figures may be fanciful, based only on later opinions or portrayals of the harems.

One major inadequacy with Persian influence stems from the fact that the Arab invaders were no strangers to Eurasian court culture.<sup>949</sup> After the Arabs swallowed whole the weakened empire of the Persians and bit off the Syrian and North African regions of the Byzantine Romans, they needed to govern their empire. The Muslim traditions, as written down by the Abbasids, painted a picture of Bedouins coming out of a pristine desert to discover urban life and court culture. This portrayal of pre-Islamic Arab history as pagan or *jahiliyya* (ignorance) does not conform to the reality and connectedness of the seventh century Near East, especially for those who supposedly traced their roots to traders who traveled far and wide with camel caravans bringing back experiences with royal courts from Yemen to Mesopotamia. Only a small proportion of Arabs lived in the

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<sup>949</sup> Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold*, II.158 (not translated), André Wink, *Al-Hind; The Making of the Indo-Islamic World; Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1:17-20.

wilderness. Many more Arabic speakers had lived for centuries in the settled regions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, in close proximity to and under the suzerainty of kings, patriarchs, and empires. Sometimes, they even ruled these lands.

Pre-Islamic Arab rulers created their own courts which were sometimes matriarchal, such as that of Zabibi who paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser III in 738 BCE,<sup>950</sup> Samsi who broke an oath to the same Tiglath-Pileser in 732<sup>951</sup> but ruled long enough to send tribute to Sargon II (722-705),<sup>952</sup> Iati'e who aided Babylon against the Assyrian Sennacherib in 703,<sup>953</sup> and so on.<sup>954</sup> The accountants wedging these records into clay tablets or cylinders were only interested in the names of the defeated and the lists of tribute payments from them so no information survived about their courts. An illustration, however, of the human makeup of Near Eastern court culture in the same era, although perhaps not in the same economic bracket as that of the Arab queens above, lies in a description by Sennacherib. He captured the Babylonian court in 702 BCE from Marduk-apla-iddina II known in the Bible as Merodach-Baladan,

In joy of heart and with a radiant face I hastened to Babylon and entered the palace of Merodach-Baladan, to take charge of the property and goods (laid up) therein. I opened his treasure house. Gold, silver, . . . an enormous treasure—his wife, his harem, his slave girls (?), his officials, his nobles, his courtiers, the male and female musicians, the palace slaves who gladdened his princely mind, all of the artisans, as many as there were, his palace menials—these I brought forth and counted as spoil. (Sennacherib, *The First Campaign*)<sup>955</sup>

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<sup>950</sup> Alois Musil, *Arabia Deserta; a Topographical Itinerary* (New York: The American Geographical Society; Prague: Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts and of Charles R. Crane, 1927), 477. Translation of cuneiform text in Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia; Historical Records of Assyria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 1: 276.

<sup>951</sup> Musil, *Deserta*, 477, Luckenbill, *Records*, 1: 279, 293.

<sup>952</sup> Musil, *Deserta*, 480, Luckenbill, *Records*, f.7

<sup>953</sup> Musil, *Deserta*, 480, Luckenbill, *Records*, 2:130.

<sup>954</sup> More queens in Nabia Abbott, "Pre-Islamic Arab Queens," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58, no. 1 (January 1941): 4-5.

<sup>955</sup> Written on a cylinder now in the British Museum (No. 113,203) Luckinbill, *Records*, 2:129.

Several other Arab queens wrote themselves into history by their boldness. The Queen of Sheba/Queen of the South/Bilqis ruled a legendary kingdom encompassing Yemen and possibly East Africa. The reputation of her fame, wealth, and travels to gain wisdom persisted in the Tanach/Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. A second queen, Zenobia, Zanab in Arabic, (r. 267-271) conquered the whole Eastern Mediterranean with her Arab army. She forced Aurelian and the Roman army to march across the empire to squash her imperial ambitions. Although more famous for riding, drinking, and hunting with her Bedouin troops, Zenobia also left behind a reputation of a court that patronized architects, sculptors, and Greek intellectuals.<sup>956</sup>

Zenobia was perhaps emulating the great Syrian Arab empress of Rome, Julia Domna (d. 217), beloved wife of the Roman Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus and mother of Emperors Geta and Caracalla. She is remembered as a lover of philosophy who created a court that was a "glittering firmament of Greek men of letters" including Philostratus, famous for writing *Life of Apollonius*.<sup>957</sup> Her sister, Julia Maesa (d. 226 CE), gained equal fame for political power behind the throne when she manipulated for the enthronement of both of her grandsons, the Roman emperors Elagabalus and Alexander Severus. The portraits of both of these Arab women grace Roman coins.

Although their careers were not nearly as colorful as those of the Arab queens, Arab male royals also reached high places, allowing them magnificent courts. Marcus Julius Philippus, nick-named Philip the Arab due to his birth in the Roman province of Arabia, ruled the Roman Empire from 244-249 CE, giving Syrian Arabs another taste of administration and court life on the imperial level.

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<sup>956</sup> Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and Its Empire; Zenobia's Revolt Against Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 121-31.

<sup>957</sup> Stoneman, *Palmyra*, 131.

Nabatean Arab kings ruled from their court in Petra. The reputation of their courts proved sophisticated enough that Strabo mentions their singing girls and that “the king holds many drinking-bouts in magnificent style” with golden cups.<sup>958</sup> Rome’s ally, Herod the Great, reduced the Nabateans to Roman clients.<sup>959</sup> Herod, himself, had roots closely related to the desert Arabs, being the son of an Edomite who converted to Judaism. Trajan completed the subjugation of the Nabatean kingdom in 106. The local leadership over Greater Syria then passed to Arabs in Palmyra. Odaenathus (d. 267), ruled as *phylarch* in Palmyra, protecting the Roman Syrian frontier from depredations by the Persians. He is remembered more for his second wife, widow, and rumored murderer, the famous Queen Zenobia, previously mentioned, who set out to extend his kingdom eastward into the Mediterranean until the Romans ended the family aspirations in the debacle and defeat of 272.

Closer in memory to the rise of Islam was the *foederati* style governance provided by Arabs in alliance with the empires. After the fall of Palmyra, according to Islamic tradition, the region came under the control of tribes newly arrived from the south, the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids. The Lakhmids established a court near ancient Babylon, in Hira, so celebrated for its music and culture that the Sasanids sent their prince, Bahram Ghur (r. 430-8), to them for education before becoming shah.<sup>960</sup> A century later, the Persians crowned the rule of Mundhir Ibn Nu’mān (504-54) over the Lakhm tribes as their client.

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<sup>958</sup> Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo* XVI . iv. 26, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930) 367.

<sup>959</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish Wars*, 1:363-91, trans. G. A. Williamson, revision. ed. Mary Smallwood (1959; repr., New York: Dorset Press, 1970), 75-79.

<sup>960</sup> Mas’udi, *Meadows of Gold*, III. 157, in Henry George Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music to the XIIIth Century* (London: Luzac & Co., 1967), 4.

The Byzantines, rivals of the Sasanids, countered the Arab Lakhmid incursions over their eastern desert border by crowning the Ghassanid chief, Harith ibn Jabala (529-69), as their client ruler over the Arab tribes of the Syrian Desert.<sup>961</sup> The emperor Justinian I in 529 CE gave him the title of “Supreme Phylarch” and “King”—which according to Procopius was “a thing which had never been done by the Romans before.”<sup>962</sup> The Ghassanid court at Jabiyah in the Golan Heights gained a reputation for its building projects and patronage of artisans, poets, and musicians. Hassan ibn Thabit, later a famous poet for Mohammed, described the court’s multicultural female entertainers.

I saw ten singing-girls, five of them Byzantines, singing the songs of their country to the accompaniment of the barbat (lute or barbiton) and five others from Al-Hira, who had been given to King Jabala by Iyas ibn Qabisa, singing the songs of their country. Arab singers also came from Mecca and elsewhere for his [Jabala’s] pleasure. (*Aghani*, xvi, 15)<sup>963</sup>

Both of these Arab tribes converted to Christianity, although to non-Orthodox denominations considered heretical by the Byzantines. Within a few decades, the military might of the Ghassanid and Lakhmid rulers became powerful enough to appear as a threat to the emperors who had crowned them. The Persians ended Lakhmid rule by having Nu’man III, last of the line, trampled by elephants or more likely poisoned.<sup>964</sup> The Byzantines subdued the Ghassanids by exiling their scion, Mundhir, first to

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<sup>961</sup>Robert C. Hoyland, *In God’s Path; The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>962</sup> Procopius, *History*, I. xviii, 47-48. Procopius most likely knew that the Romans had conferred the title of king and king of kings on an earlier Arab ruler, Odaenathus, founder of Palmyra and doomed husband of Zenobia, so this protest may have been the scribe’s desire to embarrass Justinian. Irfan Shahid, “Procopius and Arethas II” in Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988): 366-67.

<sup>963</sup> Quoted in Farmer, *Arabian Music*, 12.

<sup>964</sup> Tabari, I, 1024-29.



Constantinople and later to Sicily with his family.<sup>965</sup>

The Arab conquest of Syria split the Ghassanid tribe. Part of the tribe members continued living in Syria, served as generals, and intermarried with the Umayyad royals. King Jabala emigrated with another part of the Ghassanid tribe to Anatolia.<sup>966</sup> His tribe settled in central Anatolia and later produced the Byzantine patriarch, Ignatius, and the Byzantine emperor, Nikephoros I, (ruled 802-811) who faced Harun al-Rashid and Charlemagne. He founded the Arab dynasty, the Phocids, who ruled Constantinople for a short time until their defeat in battle against the Bulgars.<sup>967</sup> The Muslim traditional view of their origins as Bedouins bursting out of the desert is inadequate. Arabs had spread across the Fertile Crescent and in Yemen in Antiquity and carried centuries of tradition of royal court formation and contact with other Eurasian courts.

### **The Persian Influence on Courts**

Arabs could have carried court traditions with them or adopted and adapted shared court culture. Many scholars, including the early tenth century historian, Mas'udi, however, wrote that the Abbasid court copied the Persian courts.<sup>968</sup> They have a strong case. The Sasanids, who had ruled from Ctesiphon, just twenty miles south of Baghdad, indeed had a long heritage of court life. The Sasanid dynasty constituted the fourth resurrected Persian Empire within the millennium.

Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon to establish the Median Persian Empire (728-

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<sup>965</sup> Irhan Shahid, "The Arabs in the Peace Treaty of A.D. 561, VII," in Irhan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1988): 207. Greg Fisher, *Between Empires; Arabs, Romans, Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7, 176-78.

<sup>966</sup> Irfan Shahid, "Ghassan post Ghassan," in *Festschrift; The Islamic World - From Classical to Modern Times*, (Darwin Press, 1989), 329 f.

<sup>967</sup> Shahid, "Ghassan," 325-28.

<sup>968</sup> Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold*, II.158. (not translated)

549 BCE) followed immediately by a second Persian empire, the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE). Alexander the Great conquered Darius III, ruler of the Achaemenid Persians and sacked Persepolis (330 BCE), but within a short time, Alexander's Macedonian troops complained that Persian royal court culture had conquered Alexander. They expressed their displeasure when Alexander adopted Median style purple robes and had their weddings with conquered women done in the Persian, not Greek manner.<sup>969</sup> The Greeks, accustomed to a more egalitarian and austere court, criticized Alexander's adoption of a Persian bodyguards, his new chamberlains controlling access to the ruler, the Persian protocol of bowing before the ruler, and the ostentatious drinking parties.<sup>970</sup> Whether Alexander was conquered by Persian culture, especially court culture, or he managed to produce a hybrid Greek and Asian culture known as Hellenism remains a debated issue.<sup>971</sup>

Alexander the Great, the Hellenistic Asian empire of the Seleucids, and their Indian rivals, the Mauryan Guptas, interrupted Persian rule, at least in name if not in form, for less than a century. A third Persian empire, known as that of the Parthians, arose in 247 BCE. This third Persian dynasty challenged contemporaries Rome and Han China. The Parthians fell to Ardashir I in 224 CE, who founded the fourth rendition of the Persian Empire, known as the Sasanid Empire.

The Sasanid heritage of court and harem formation, however, extended back over a millennium to Cyrus's original conquest of Babylon in 559 BCE. Their harems serve as an excellent example of their continuing heritage. One predecessor of the Sasanid

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<sup>969</sup> Arrian 7:6.2., *The Campaigns of Alexander; Anabasis Alexandrou*, ed. James Romm, trans. Pamela Mensch (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), 281.

<sup>970</sup> Tony Spawforth, "The Court of Alexander the Great" in Spawforth, *Court Society*, 93-94.

<sup>971</sup> For a full discussion of whether Alexander was attempting Persianization or fusion see James Romm, "Alexander's Policy of Perso-Macedonian Fusion (Appendix K)," in Arrian, *Campaigns*, 380-87.

reputation for large harems exists in the second Persian Empire, that of the Achaemenids (550-330 BCE), who seem to have had the largest harems if the number of surviving sons can be considered a measure of harem populations. Artaxerxes I (r. 465-424 BCE) had at least eighteen sons from his concubines and Artaxerxes II (r. 404-358) had 115 sons by 360 concubines.<sup>972</sup> A description of collecting women for an extensive royal harem, that of Xerxes/Khshayarshan (Persian) (r. 486-465), comes from the book of Esther in the Tanach/Old Testament. The large households of the Achaemenids can also be deduced from the description of their daily royal budget which included one thousand animals slaughtered daily for the king's table, not including the many birds, including Arabian ostriches.<sup>973</sup>

The Arab invasion ended the Sasanid Empire in Merv, today known as Mary in Turkmenistan. The last Sasanid ruler, Yazdegerd III, was headed for Merv although it is not known if he was in retreat to this Persian stronghold or planning to continue on the Silk Road to China when his own people killed him in 651 CE. The Sasanid army surrendered to the Arabs, who then sent a large number of Arabs to colonize this critical frontier region and international trunk line. Tabari related that when the Iranian plateau fell in 637, the women “were taken as concubines and bore their Muslim masters’ offspring.”<sup>974</sup>

One century after the Arab conquest, in 747, the people of Iran again took a

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<sup>972</sup>A. Shapur Shahbazi, “HAREM i. IN ANCIENT IRAN” in IranicaOnline, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/harem-i>, R. Schmitt, “Artaxersxes ii” in Encyclopaedia Iranica accessed May 5, 2016 <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/artaxerxes-ii-achaemenid-king>. Please note that even though both articles use Justin 9 and 10 as a source, the first article lists 150 sons, and the second, 115 sons.

<sup>973</sup> Heracleides, FGrH 689 F 2; ap Athen 4.145 in Brosius, “New out of Old,” 43.

<sup>974</sup> Tabari, *Ta'rikh*, 1, 2464 quoted in Jamsheed K. Choksy, “Women during the Transition from Sasanian to Early Islamic Times,” in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800* ed. Guity Nashat and Lois Beck (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 54, 64.

central political role. The Abbasid black banners of revolt against the Syrian Umayyad Dynasty arose in Merv. This Silk Road city was home to a hard fighting, mixed-blood frontier population that descended from the colonization in Iran. Abu-Muslim led the last stage of the revolution. Scholars medieval and modern pondered his origins: a slave or freeman, Arab or Persian. What all scholars agree on, however, is that his ambiguity was intentional.<sup>975</sup> This mysterious and deliberately ethnically anonymous figure, native to eastern Iran, was able to unify the *dihqans*, the local experienced formerly Sasanid leadership and fighters in the Persian hinterlands, into a revolt that defeated the Arab Umayyads.<sup>976</sup> Even after the Abbasid family established themselves as the foreseen “Family of the Prophet” for whom the revolution was ostensibly fought, Abu-Muslim continued to rule Khurasan and much of the rest of the Persian and mixed population in the East.<sup>977</sup>

The Abu Muslim stage of the Abbasid revolt could be seen as a first attempt to Persianize the Arab Empire. Of the three classical traditions of Late Antiquity: Greece, India, and Persia, only the Persian tradition was completely conquered by the Arabs. The Persian imperial tradition could not exist anywhere outside of Islam, so as a result, had to re-emerge within it.<sup>978</sup> The Persian tree gained new life by grafting onto the Arab rootstock in Iran. Hugh Kennedy states that many who followed Abu-Muslim “secretly or openly wanted to drive out all the Arabs, reject Islam and restore the old Sasanid dispensation.”<sup>979</sup> Saleh Said Agha sees the origins of the revolution as more complex,

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<sup>975</sup> Saleh Said Agha, *The Revolution Which Toppled the Umayyads; Neither Arab nor ‘Abbasid* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 53-55.

<sup>976</sup> Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 186.

<sup>977</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 8-9.

<sup>978</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, 17.

<sup>979</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 19.

that the region was multicultural, and no cohesive Persian national identity may have existed at the time, but rather race, language, culture, and shared history might have taken precedence in the face of perceived economic disadvantage at the hands of the distant Umayyads.<sup>980</sup> If there was a Persianizing influence, it was slowed when Mansur (r. 754-775), the second Abbasid caliph, ordered Abu-Muslim's assassination. His Khorasani commanders accepted bribes to acquiesce to the Abbasid side but many soldiers complained that they had sold their master for silver.<sup>981</sup>

Despite the Abu Muslim incident, Persians, especially the powerful Merv ruling family of the Barmakids, found high places in the early administrations of the Abbasid caliphs. The Barmakids ruled in tandem with the Abbasids, closely bonded to members of the court, and grew immensely wealthy. Eventually, however, in spite of the close ties and apparent friendship, Harun al-Rashid felt so threatened by this elite family from Iran that he killed their scion Ja'far (supposedly his best friend from childhood), arrested and tortured others, and confiscated their wealth. Hugh Kennedy gives a number of possible reasons why the Barmakids fell from favor after their deep support for the dynasty. He summarizes this puzzling situation with "What we cannot be sure of is the reason why..." and "the fall of the Barmakids puzzled contemporaries."<sup>982</sup> Perhaps their sophistication, power, and prosperity eventually galled the caliph and cost them their lives. Perhaps it was because they were Persian.

Persian influence soon re-emerged during the civil war between al-Rashid's sons. Al-Rashid's son by his Arab wife Zubayda, Amin, was proclaimed caliph by supporters and troops in Baghdad. Ma'mun, al-Rashid's son by a Persian Afghani concubine, was

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<sup>980</sup> Agha, *Revolution*, 168-9.

<sup>981</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 19-21.

<sup>982</sup> Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 73,79.

serving as governor in Merv when his father died. His supporters and troops in the Persian side of the empire simultaneously proclaimed this half-Persian son of Harun al-Rashid as caliph. The superior Persian troops wielded by Ma'mun ended Amin's rule after a bloody four-year civil war that ruined Baghdad. Initially, Ma'mun attempted to rule the empire from the Persian stronghold of Merv but finally realized that he must return to Baghdad to effectively control the whole empire. He brought his Persian courtiers, supporters, and scholars to the Abbasid court.

André Wink offers an alternative narrative, placing the Persian take-over of Arab culture much earlier than Ma'mun. The early Muslim Arabs disparaged Persian culture and Sasanid tradition of governance as a morally repugnant feature of the *jahiliyya*.<sup>983</sup> However, by the seventh century, during Umayyad rule, the governors of Iraq reconstituted Persian principles of rule including a bureaucratic system of urban citadels, walls and gates, audience halls, professional bureaucracy, personal submission and kissing of the floor required of those of lower status, all of which restricted access to the ruler.<sup>984</sup>

With the founding of Bagdad, the Muslims turned their back on the Mediterranean. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the massive cultural weight of Persia pulled the Abbasid Empire eastward to Central Asia, India, and China. André Wink believes that Khurasanis created a Persian empire in Islamic garb, most decisively in the reign of Harun al-Rashid. By the ninth century, the eastern Persianate world gained more power with the Tahirid governors who were de facto autonomous rulers by 821 as well as the Samanids (819-1005), the Saffarids (867-1003), and the Dailamite Buyids (932-

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<sup>983</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, 17.

<sup>984</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, 18.

1062).<sup>985</sup>

Persian influence on the Abbasid court extended beyond their growing political power. Their influence included cultural change within. Persian women, some of them captured princesses, influenced court culture from their position as concubines and powerful queen mothers. The ethnicities of the mothers of a majority of the twenty-six Abbasid caliphs did not survive in the sources, but of the twelve mothers whose ethnicity is known, three were Persian: the aforementioned, al-Ma'mun's mother, Marajil, from present-day Afghanistan, and al-Mutawakkil's mother, Shuja and al-Mu'tamid's mother, Fityan, listed only as Persian.<sup>986</sup>

Some of the Persian concubines' contributions to the court culture can be gleaned from reading between the lines. The Abbasid courtier and man of letters, al-Jahiz, records that the Abbasid court was celebrating Zoroastrian festivals like that of *Nawruz* (New Year's Celebration on the spring equinox).<sup>987</sup> Another Persian influence on the court to survive in the sources is culinary. Writing books of royal recipes and culinary standards demonstrated sophistication and good taste.<sup>988</sup> Several caliphs and men of letters wrote recipes, but Ibrahim (d. 839 A.D.) proved to be the most famous of these "power chefs."<sup>989</sup> After a clash for the throne, Harun al-Rashid made peace with this same Ibrahim, his younger brother, by sending the gift of a Persian concubine, Badi'a. She kept Ibrahim's favor for many years, perhaps by her cooking skills, especially the cold dishes so favored in the heat of Baghdad. Persian recipes predominate in Ibrahim's cookbook,

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<sup>985</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, 17-20.

<sup>986</sup> Caswell, *Slave Girls*, Appendix II.

<sup>987</sup> Choksy, *Women*, 56, 65. This celebration continues in Arab society as Mother's Day.

<sup>988</sup> David Waines, *In a Caliph's Kitchen* (London: Riad el-Rayyes Books, 1989), 8.

<sup>989</sup> This royal, Ibrahim (d. 839 A.D.) was born of a Persian or African slave, Shikla, and after his father, the third Abbasid Caliph, al-Mahdi died, he was put on the throne for a short time as a boy and then hidden to survive a number of court intrigues and finally, to end his days as a court companion of the caliph.

*Kitab al-Tabikh* (Book of Cooking), the first of its kind in Arabic and repeatedly copied through the centuries.<sup>990</sup>

Those who think that the Abbasids copied the Sasanids in harem formation have good evidence. Persian culture and imperial aspirations certainly proved tenacious over the centuries. Persians, however, were not the only ones to embellish their courts with numerous women. Persian weaknesses in the face of the Arab onslaught underlie the argument that the Abbasid court chose to follow the example of the Sasanids. The Persian government had fallen to the Arab invaders. When the Abbasids needed a pattern, the Persian court had been extinct for over a century. Ninth century Baghdad had 300-500,000 people, ten times bigger than Ctesiphon.<sup>991</sup> Rather, the view of where the Abbasids looked for court culture might not be limited to the extinct Sasanid court. Perhaps one reason that Mansur's friends gave the new widower a hundred virgins or why al-Rashid and the other caliphs went to the expense to house a thousand or more women was the desire to move the image of the Abbasids from rebel upstarts to a grandiose court worthy of respect. The requirement to use slaves, especially women and eunuchs, to form a splendid court was a tradition, not just in Arab Lakhmid Hira or Persian Sasanid Ctesiphon, but shared across Asia. The four Persian empires and early Arab rulers all appear to have used slave concubines, musicians, and entertainers to bolster prestige, but none of them matched the reputation of the courts of the rulers of Tang China.

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<sup>990</sup> Waines, *Caliph's Kitchen*, 11-13.

<sup>991</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5.



## **Tang Influence on Persians**

Without a doubt, the Abbasid court adopted many features of a Sasanid court. However, the Sasanid Persian court, despite its long heritage, possibly displays some influences coming from another contemporary court, the Chinese Tang Dynasty. The Tang influenced all the Chinese dynasties that followed them, but their influence was also felt across Asia. Influences labeled Persian in the formation of the Abbasid court could be Chinese influences adopted by the Persian court and passed on as “Persian” culture.

The Persians and Chinese courts interacted despite the vast distance between Ctestiphon and Chang’an (3,640 miles/5,857 kilometers/five times zones). The earlier Chinese empire, the Han Dynasty, conquered and governed through Turkish tribes on the Silk Road to the west far into Inner Asia. When they reached the border of the Persian Empire, they ceased their western advance and made an alliance with the Parthian emperor.<sup>992</sup> The Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties all chose as their capital, Chang’an, located where the Silk Road could disgorge its traders and products onto barges on the Chinese canal system, showing the importance of overland contact and trade with Inner Asia to the early dynasties.

The question of whether the Sasanids were allies or vassals of the Tang remains indiscernible from the Chinese texts. The distance required for Chinese armies to reach Afghanistan and regions west of its rugged mountains protected Middle Eastern leaders from any Chinese military threat. These elite beyond the borders of China still wanted to engage in trade and so their envoys traveled to China with gifts and/or trade items. The Chinese viewed these visitors and gifts from an ethno-centric worldview where the

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<sup>992</sup> See Chapter 4 for details. This is the time when the Seleucid slaves came as tribute to the Chinese court from the Parthians.

emperor as Son of Heaven governed the world.<sup>993</sup> In the eyes of the Chinese, most foreign territories were subordinate and missions from these countries recorded as “tribute missions.” The exception was states that earned the status of “Equal Adversary,” which applied to powers who represented a strong military threat. Persia was not one of these states. The Chinese only applied the title to the First Turkic Empire in the seventh century and probably Tibet in the late eighth century.<sup>994</sup> Otherwise, any foreigner that entered their orbit found themselves in a highly-structured hierarchy where their gifts, acknowledged as tribute, demonstrated their subordinate status....at least in the eyes of the Chinese officials.<sup>995</sup>

When rulers sent letters to the Chinese emperor, the scribes recorded the letters in the archives using Chinese imperial terminology to translate and rephrase or even invent wording for the letters. After revision, the letters have the foreign kings referring to themselves as the emperor’s “subjects” or “slaves” and the foreign rulers are “kowtowing” to the Chinese emperor.<sup>996</sup>

The Chinese rulers interpreted the valuable gifts and titles as signs of the subservience of their so-called “vassals”. The recipients across Inner Asia, well out of danger of the Chinese army, however, probably superficially accepted this relationship as a matter of necessity to trade with China.<sup>997</sup> Since all diplomats and traders brought gifts for the ruler, and the government scribes recorded all gifts as tribute, then using Chinese government records of correspondence as a measure of hierarchy proves useless. These

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<sup>993</sup> Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589-1276* (Leiden, Brill, 2005), 5.

<sup>994</sup> Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors; Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 108.

<sup>995</sup> Canepa, “*Distant*,” 125.

<sup>996</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 6.

<sup>997</sup> Skaff, *Sui-Tang*, 7.

texts obscure whether the Sasanids were coming as equals or subjects. The Chinese chronicles certainly record them as subjects, but until 651, the Persians being vassals of the Chinese in fact, is unlikely. Until their defeat to the Arabs, they were most likely favored allies. As powerful empires and allies connected by the Silk Roads, the Persians and Chinese mutually influenced each other's courts through diplomats, entertainers, and gifts.

The number of diplomatic trips made by Persian envoys (Po-ssu) to the Chinese court points to a desire on the part of the Sasanids for close relations with China. Even during the unsettled centuries before the Sui-Tang reign, the Persian delegates are recorded to have made two or three official visits to the Liang from 530 to 535, nine or ten trips to the Northern Wei from 437 to 522, and one or two visits to the closer Western Wei rulers from 553 to 555.<sup>998</sup> When the Sui emperor reunited China, Emperor Yang (r. 605-618) sent a high-ranking commander to Khosrow II. The Persians sent back two envoys to the Sui court to present gifts.<sup>999</sup> The last Sasanid ruler, Yazdegerd III, sent envoys to Persia with gifts (including a ferret that would catch mice) and a request for help against the Arabs in 638 and 647. In the same period, in 642, the Old Tang History also records another embassy sent from Constantinople.<sup>1000</sup> No military assistance came from China and Yazdegerd III was assassinated in Merv in 651, as recorded in Chinese histories. The Persian diplomats had tried, but failed, in their attempts to enlist the Chinese in their defense. Events following this period, towards the end of their dynasty, signal that the waning Sasanids became subservient to the Chinese.

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<sup>998</sup> The number of visits differ between the secondary works. Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 355. Edwin G. Pulleyblank, CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS i. In Pre-Islamic Times, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed March 7, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/chinese-iranian-i>

<sup>999</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 355.

<sup>1000</sup> Canepa, *Distant*, 124.

Firuz, a son of Yazdegerd III, again requested Chinese troops to fight the Arabs in 661. The Chinese responded to his request by creating more bureaucracy. They re-organized Central Asia and Iran into eight Area Commands and made a title for Firuz, the Military Governor of Persia, with a capital in Sistan. Persians continued to send envoys and gifts to China during and after the Arab onslaught. Finally, in 675, Firuz fled to Chang'an to join the Persian community there. The Chinese emperor, Kao-tsung, allowed him to build his own temple (one of four Zoroastrian temples in the capital city) and appointed him yet another title, General of the Martial Guards of the Left. Shortly after Firuz's death, the emperor sent troops to escort Firuz's son, Ni-nieh-shih (his Chinese name), back to Persia to reinstall him as king. The expeditionary force diverted and Ni-nieh-shih remained stranded as a guest of the Tokharia king for decades. Eventually, he made it back to the Chinese capital where he died, albeit with another grand title. His son remained in Chang'an. The titles that the various Persian nobles received stamp their relationship as vassals, not allies, since titles are given by the stronger to the weaker partner.<sup>1001</sup>

Interestingly enough, the Persian holdouts in the highlands seem to have believed that the Arab conquest would prove to be a temporary setback. They acted as if Persian sovereignty and/or diplomatic relationship with the Tang had passed to them. The Chinese continued recording Persian missions, often led by "royal sons of the Persian king." The Persian diplomatic trips to the Chinese court came regularly throughout the Umayyad period and into the Abbasid period to 824 bringing gifts such as a lion, aromatics, a rhinoceros, an elephant, a carnelian couch, four leopards, pearls without

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<sup>1001</sup> Skaff, *Sui-Tang*, 9.

holes, amber, and the last recorded Persian gift, *gharu* wood.<sup>1002</sup> The mode of transport for these Persian ambassador/traders change from ship to land in the 640s, reflecting the Arab conquest of the south including the ports leading to the Indian Ocean routes. These missions could also have been mainly efforts to expedite trade on the part of the Persians. Foreign diplomats expected payment for their gifts and sometimes even stated what they expected in return.<sup>1003</sup>

A second element of Asian diplomacy that reveals the nature of the Persian-Chinese bond is the evidence that the sons of the defeated Persian kings lived as political hostages in the Tang court. For example, Narse, son of Peroz III and grandson of the last Sasanian emperor, lived as one of these respected hostages. These royal Persians under Tang protection would not have been lonely for fellow compatriots as the early Tang period had brought massive immigration of Sogdian and other Persian-speaking traders and craftsmen to Chang'an where they had their own districts and temples for their many religions.<sup>1004</sup> Trade was robust. Coin finds from twelve different rulers, from Shapur II (310-79) to Yazdegerd III, appear on the Silk Road or in China.<sup>1005</sup>

The Chinese texts referring to the Persians as their submissive subjects are an unreliable indicator of hegemony in that the Chinese considered all regions of the world under their suzerainty. The large number of diplomatic envoys sent to China and the evidence that some of the Persian royal princes lived in the Tang court as royal refugees or hostages hint that the two royal houses had close contact and that the later Sasanids

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<sup>1002</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 355-56.

<sup>1003</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 7.

<sup>1004</sup> Chen Da-Sheng, "CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS vii. Persian Settlements in Southeastern China during the Tang, Sung, and Yuan Dynasties" *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed March 7, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/chinese-iranian-vii> and Pulleyblank, CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS, accessed March 7, 2015.

<sup>1005</sup> Pulleyblank, CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS, accessed March 7, 2015.

became clients of the Tang, after they weakened in the seventh century. Some survivors of the Sasanid defeat fled to China for refuge and succor, but other Persians who stayed on in the highlands continued to deal with the Tang court as if they were still sovereign.<sup>1006</sup> Together these paint a picture of Persian contact, cultural sharing, and ultimately submission to China after the 651 death of Yazdegerd III.

This close relationship between the courts, first as allies and later as vassals, would have mutually influenced or reinforced their patterns of court formation and perhaps inspired competition between the rulers on the sizes of their entourages. Khosrow II, the Persian royal whom Tabari had used as an example of ostentatious wealth with the harem of 12,000, was ruling contemporary with the Sui emperors and the early Tang, both eras of Chinese conquest providing abundant slave stock to supply harems of stupendous size.<sup>1007</sup> The Persians may have had large harems in their past traditions, but the Tang emperors trumped them and probably every other court in South, East, Central, and West Asia in extravagance and sheer numbers.

### **Chinese Influence on Abbasid Culture: Diplomacy**

Evidence exists of cross-pollination between the Persian and Tang courts before (and after) the Arab conquests which could have then been carried to Baghdad by the Persian courtiers traveling to the Abbasid court. Another route of creative stimulus and change affecting the Abbasid court culture could have come directly from China to Baghdad. To be convinced that the Abbasid dynasty took elements from the Tang in

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<sup>1006</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 355-56.

<sup>1007</sup> Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari; The Sassanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., trans. and annotated by C. E. Bosworth (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 5: 367 or I: 1041 (Leiden edition). The numbers of household women given for Sui and Tang harems is discussed further in this chapter.

creating the hybrid of Islamic court formation, it is essential to understand the bonds between Chang'an and Baghdad.

Abbasid literature and archaeology speak to the influence of China on their culture. A hadith quotes Mohammed as saying, “*Utlub il ‘ilma wa law fis-Sin*—Seek knowledge even in China.” Traditionally bound scholars judge this hadith as famous but only give it a “fair” or “weak” rating in authenticity.<sup>1008</sup> Many scholars question the authenticity of all hadiths and view them mainly as a reflection of Abbasid issues. This hadith reveals the respect that the Baghdadi audience held for China. Perhaps, putting this conjectured saying on the lips of Mohammed served to pacify Arab traditionalists who deplored the outside, outsized influence from non-Muslim idol worshipers.

Chinese sources *Tazik*, from *Ta-Shih*, a transliteration of the Persian word for Arabs or Muslims, *Tadjik*, originally from the name of the Arab tribe of Tayyi in pre-Islamic Mesopotamia.<sup>1009</sup> The Chinese rulers first noticed the Arabs in 638 when the Sasanids requested help repelling the invasion of their land. Thirteen years later, on Aug. 25, 651, Arab envoys from the “king of the Arabs” arrived in Chang'an with gifts and tribute for the Tang.<sup>1010</sup> Either this embassy or the one who came in 655 explained to the Chinese “that thirty-six years had passed since his country was established and that changes had occurred among their political leaders, the caliphs.”<sup>1011</sup> Umayyad ambassadors attempted to increase the Chinese court's perception of the importance of

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<sup>1008</sup> ‘*Utlub il ‘ilma wa law fis-Sin*. [http://www.sunnah.org/sources/hadith\\_utlub\\_ilm.htm](http://www.sunnah.org/sources/hadith_utlub_ilm.htm) accessed November 17, 2015.

<sup>1009</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 356.

<sup>1010</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It; A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1997), 243. Sebeos writing in 660, records one of these embassies. Sebeos, *The Armenian History*, trans. R. W. Thomas (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 135. The Chinese source is Chiu Tang Shu 4:3a; 198:17a; Ts'e-fu Yuan-kuei. 5025 in Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 357.

<sup>1011</sup> Park, *Mapping the Chinese*, 23.

their empire during a 713 embassy visit. The ambassador did not kowtow or bow in obeisance to the emperor. The court officials in charge of teaching ritual etiquette to envoys “exposed his crime.” Emperor Xuan Zong benevolently pardoned the ambassador because he was ignorant of “civilized” customs. However, an Umayyad ambassador came a few years later refusing to prostrate himself because “In my native country we only bow down to worship to god; even if we have an audience with a king, we do not have a law requiring us to prostrate to him.” Xuan Zong was still on the throne and he was not pleased. The Umayyad ambassador was harshly rebuked until he properly kowtowed with his head touching the ground.<sup>1012</sup>

The Tang differentiated between the Umayyads (White Cloth *Ta-shih*) and the Abbasids (The Black Cloth *Ta-shih*). Just ten years after the Abbasids defeated the Umayyads, another “White Cloth” diplomatic mission arrived at the Tang court.<sup>1013</sup> These Umayyad emissaries perhaps came representing Abd al-Rahman who had escaped the Umayyad family massacre and fled to Iberia where he established a capital for Umayyad refugees in Cordoba.

The Arab desire for diplomatic ties with the Tang may explain why they did not complete their eastward conquest of the Silk Road. The Umayyad-Abbasid regime change and Battle of Talas in 751, for possession of the Transoxiana in Central Asia, now the border of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, between the allies of the Tang and the Abbasids, proved only to be a short interruption of the diplomatic traffic. Only two years after the battle, the Abbasid Black Cloth *Ta-shih* caliph, al-Saffah, the founder of the dynasty, sent his representatives to China. Chinese chronicles record that two groups of

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<sup>1012</sup> Skaff, *Sui-Tang*, 139, 152.

<sup>1013</sup> According to the official records of the Emperor Su Zong for the year 760. Zhang Jun-Yan, “Relations between China and the Arabs,” *Journal of Oman Studies* 6, no. 1 (1983): 93.



envoys from the Black Robed Arabs “offered regional objects” in 753. A year later in December of 754, the new caliph, Mansur, sent more envoys with a gift of thirty horses.<sup>1014</sup>

The Tang court chronicles caught a humorous incident involving the Abbasid envoys in the imperial court. The Abbasids brought their gifts to the Tang court on June 11, 758. Unfortunately, the six Abbasid envoys arrived at the entrance at exactly the same time as eighty Uighur representatives. A fight broke out over who would enter first. The skirmish required a special decree to mandate protocol for the occasion. The officials allowed both embassies to enter at the same time, but from opposite directions, the Eastern and Western gates.<sup>1015</sup> Arab envoys continued their frequent trips. The Tang records of the Arab envoys end with a diplomatic mission from Harun al-Rashid who proposed an alliance against their mutual enemy, the Tibetans, who were taking advantage of the Tang civil unrest to take control of the Silk Road between Iraq and China. The many diplomatic envoys indicate that the Abbasids valued diplomacy and trade with China over further eastern military expansion.

As a sign that the Tang regarded themselves as superior over the Abbasids, the Chinese gave these envoys the title of “Generals of the Gentlemen-of the Household.” The greater power grants titles to the lesser entity. After the Tang lost power, all records of Abbasid diplomatic trips appear in the Liao and Song chronicles. Much later, in the eleventh century, the Abbasid caliph sent envoys to China twice to request a caliphal marriage to a Liao princess, a request granted in 1021.<sup>1016</sup>

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<sup>1014</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 358.

<sup>1015</sup> *Chiu Tang Shu*, 10, 3089b. in Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand; A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 26, and Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 358.

<sup>1016</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 362-63.

The evidence that the courts of both Baghdad and Cordoba sent ambassadors incredible distances to China again emphasizes the potential influence that the Tang court had on early Islamic courts. These ambassadors brought home official reports of the courts. Historical reconstruction of the visits can be imagined between the lines of the routine reports contained in the government archives. Chinese diplomatic procedure required that diplomats receive hospitality, entertainments, and feasts.<sup>1017</sup> The concubines and entertainers, who provided their hospitality, or who were taken home as gifts, served as conduits for shared court culture<sup>1018</sup> (see Figure 7.1).

### **Abbasid-Chinese Trade Relations**

The Persians had long been the hub, serving as middlemen for Silk Road Trade between Han China and Rome, then between the Tang and the Byzantines. Most likely, many of the same Persian-speaking trading diaspora groups or families who had worked the Silk Roads for generations paid their custom duties to the new Abbasid rulers and carried on their extensive networks across the Silk Roads and maritime routes. Moving the capital from Damascus to Iraq allowed the Abbasids to sit astride and control the major east-west routes by land or sea. Caliph al-Mansur showed his eastward focus on China when he founded Baghdad on the Tigris River so that, “there is no obstacle that separates us from China.”<sup>1019</sup>

Al-Jahiz, court intellectual for the Abbasids, wrote an economic essay which reveals the importance of Chinese imports to Baghdad. Of the thirty-one geographical regions listed in his description, China had by far the greatest number of products

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<sup>1017</sup> Skaff, *Sui-Tang*, 136.

<sup>1018</sup> Skaff, *Sui-Tang*, 8 ff.

<sup>1019</sup> Tabari XXVIII; 272

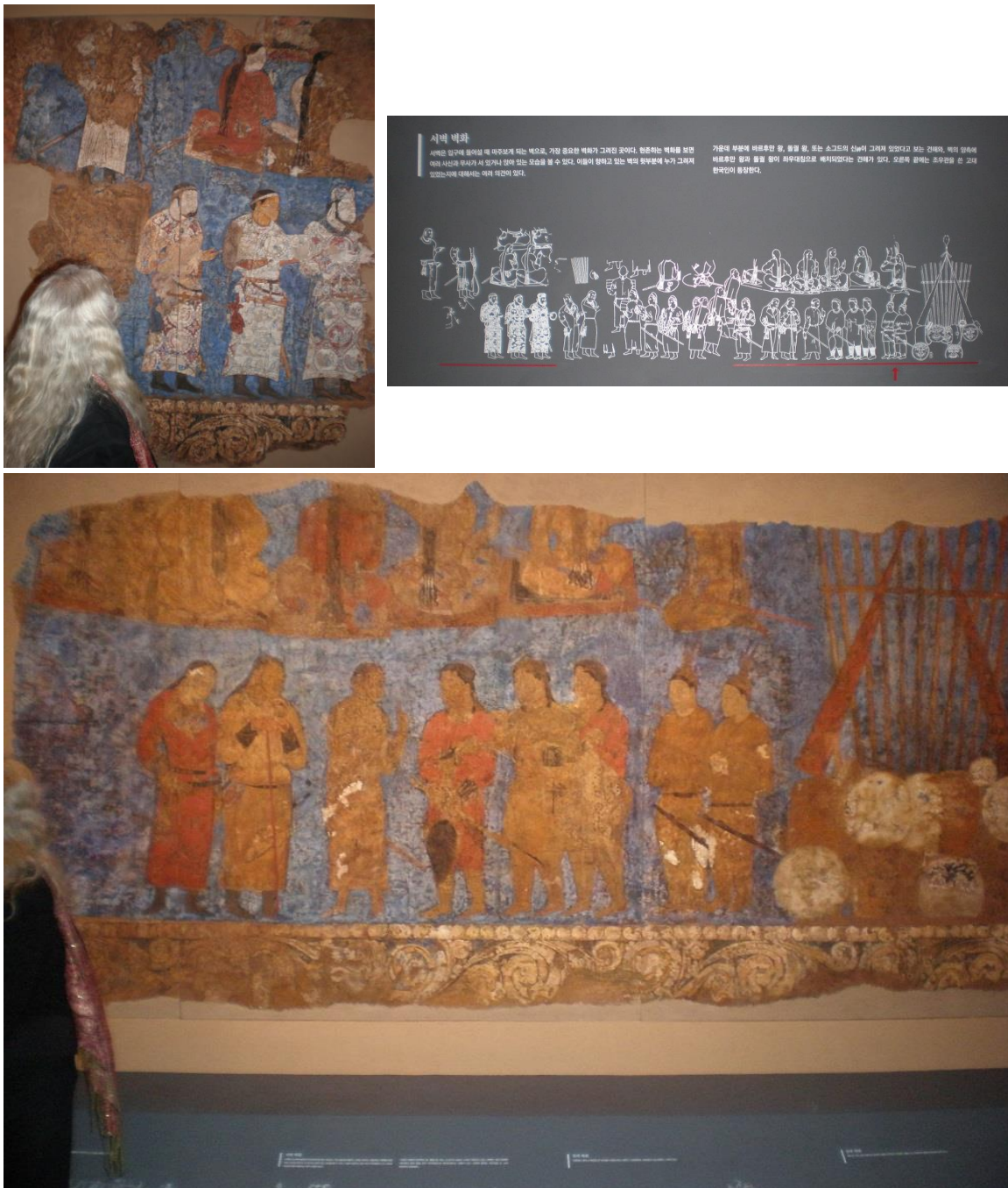


Figure 7.1

Diplomates' Fresco from the Silk Road.

This wall painting from the Ambassador's Hall in Afrosiab, Samarkand shows the presence of women, probably slaves, in Silk Road diplomacy. Note that a seated woman flanks each ambassador.

Fresco from the Silk Road exhibit in the National Museum of Korea, Seoul, Korea.  
January 2015 Photograph by Raymond Hain.

imported by Baghdad.

From China are imported silk stuffs, silk, chinaware, paper, ink, peacocks, racing horses, saddles, felts, cinnamon, Greek unblended rhubarb. [Also] are imported utensils of gold and silver, qaysarani (probably Caesar-ish) dinars of pure gold, drugs, brocades, racing horses, female slaves, knickknacks with human figures, fast locks, ...hydraulic engineers, expert agronomists, marble workers, and eunuchs. (Al-Jahiz, *The Investigation of Commerce*)<sup>1020</sup>

The silks, spices, and drugs are expected from China. What is surprising is the human capital exported from China. Female slaves and eunuchs were a common luxury trade item. However, the technical experts: hydraulic engineers, expert agronomists, and marble workers probably required permission from the Chinese government to leave, especially the hydraulic engineers. Both Chang'an and Baghdad depended on numerous canals for irrigation to provide intensive food production for large urban populations and for transport of people and grain between the two rivers surrounding both of their heartlands.

Sending the water works experts may well have been in response to a royal request. Zubaydah (al-Rashid's wife) and Khayzuran (his mother) were both famous for their *awqaf* endowments providing wells for the desert pilgrimage to Mecca and canals to expand the agricultural land.<sup>1021</sup> When the Caliph Mu'tasim left Baghdad with his rowdy Turkish mamluk troops to build the new capital of Samarra, he also would have required extensive hydraulic engineers to build new canals that the city would need for water supply and irrigation.<sup>1022</sup>

Tang sources fill in more concerning this human exchange. After the Battle of

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<sup>1020</sup> Al-Jahiz, *The Investigation of Commerce*, excerpted in Robert S. Lopez & Irving W. Raymond, ed. *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World; Illustrative Documents*, trans. Robert S. Lopez & Irving W. Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 28-29.

<sup>1021</sup> Abbott, *Two Queens*, 119-20, 238.

<sup>1022</sup> Mas'udi, *The New Capital of Samara, VII: 118-123/2801-2805* in *Meadows of Gold*, 228-29.

Talas, 20,000 captured prisoners of war entered the Islamic world.<sup>1023</sup> The Abbasids brought an elite Chinese prisoner of war, Du Huan, to Kufa and kept him prisoner for twelve years. This scholar wrote about Chinese paper makers, silk weavers, painters, gold and silversmiths, all working for the Abbasids.<sup>1024</sup> He stated,

Chinese craftsmen originated the crafts of fine silk weaving, gold and silver working, and painting. Painters there [in Abbasid Society] are Fan Shu and Liu Ci from Chang'an and silk weavers are Yue Huan and Lu Li from Hedong (Du You 193:5280)<sup>1025</sup>

People moved by war or traded as a commodity transmitted not just their skills, but also aspects of their culture influencing Abbasid life. Those prisoners of war who served in the Abbasid palace could have shared the customs of the Chinese court and elite households.

Chinese manufactured products also influenced Abbasid culture. Among the many trade items exchanged between China and the Abbasids, the archaeological remnants of pottery show the mutual influence between them. Abbasid potters adopted Tang pottery styles and vice versa. Shipwrecks contained cargos, which, in the main, originated in China, but contained items from the Middle East. The dates of two of these shipwrecks bookend our era, providing the physical artifact proof texts for the literary texts describing numerous merchants and the maritime trade between the two empires.

The first wreck, the Belitung in the South China Sea, dated to 830 CE, provides the first physical evidence that merchants exported Chinese products in huge quantities to Persian-Arab markets on Arab dhows as early as the ninth century. The Belitung ship had been built of African hardwoods stitched together with coir rope, a construction typical of

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<sup>1023</sup> Maejima, *Tarasu Senko*, 25, 209.

<sup>1024</sup> Du Huan, *Jing Xing Ji (Traveling Records)*, parts preserved in Du Dian, *Reservoir of Source Material on Political and Social History* in Jun-Yan, *Relations*, 98.

<sup>1025</sup> Du You 193:5280 in Park, *Mapping*, 26, 209.

the Gulf, allowing the hull to flex under pounding waves. Interestingly enough, this ship was not found on the shortest route (16,000 kilometers) between Guangzhou, China (Arabic *Khanfu*. English *Canton*) and Siraf, Iran, which served as the main port until it was destroyed by an earthquake in 977. The ship is located several hundreds of miles south of this route where, instead of taking the short way home through the Malacca Straits, it was traveling south to Sumatra, Borneo, or Java, perhaps to be restitched.<sup>1026</sup> It held the single largest depository of Tang artifacts yet found. The cargo consisted of thousands of Chinese manufactured objects, mostly pottery. A repeated motif of Persian or western dancing girls decorates one of the rare gold vessels in the wreck. Ceramic finds in Siraf, and across Iraq, match those on the Belitung wreck showing the high-volume trade on the maritime “Porcelain Route” between the two empires.

The second ship to go down and be recovered just after our era of interest is the Intan, found in the north-west Java Sea, south-east of Banka. Coins and the style of the ceramics in the wreck narrow the dating to between 918 and 960 CE.<sup>1027</sup> This smaller ship, made locally with lash-lug construction using dowels of Borneo ironwood and stitched planks of durian lumber,<sup>1028</sup> could navigate up rivers to reach interior markets and products and cross the sea among the islands of Indonesia.<sup>1029</sup> The cargo on this Malay *prahu* shows that it most likely was redistributing products that had arrived on the

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<sup>1026</sup> Krahrl, *Shipwrecked*, Map 2-3.

<sup>1027</sup> Flecker, *Intan*, 12, 121.

<sup>1028</sup> Durian is an infamous Southeast Asian fruit that has a sweet, custardy taste but an unforgettable odor like that of raw sewage and rotten eggs.

<sup>1029</sup> Michael Flecker, *The Archaeological Excavation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century Intan Shipwreck* (Oxford, England: Archaeopress: British Archaeological Reports, 2002), 140. John Guy, “The Intan Shipwreck: A 10<sup>th</sup> Century Cargo in South-east Asian Waters” in *Song Ceramics; Art History, Archaeology and Technology, Colloquies on Art & Archaeology in Asia*, No. 22, Held June 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003, ed. Stacey Pierson, (London: University of London Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 2004), 171.

long-distance Arab dhows or Chinese junks to the outlying districts.<sup>1030</sup>

In this period, regional trade may have profited from the decrease in trade between the Chinese powerhouse and the Abbasid hub due to the riots, increasing xenophobia of the Tang, and the Huang Ch'ao massacre in 878 CE. Weakening central administration of the Tang in the period allowed bandit armies and popular rebellions. Huang Ch'ao, who led one of these renegade forces, which numbered one million in Chinese sources,<sup>1031</sup> menaced the court but turned south planning to “surrender” and rule as military governor of the prosperous port of Canton/Guangzhou. When the Tang governor, Li T'iao, refused his “offer,” Huang assassinated him and his troops sacked Canton with a fury that lived on in contemporary Arab accounts.<sup>1032</sup> Records describing this slaughter reveal the huge numbers of traders traveling between Iraq and China. Of the dead, an estimated 120,000<sup>1033</sup> (Abu Zaid) or 200,000<sup>1034</sup> (Mas'udi) were foreign merchants—Indians, South East Asians, Persians, and Arabs—Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian.<sup>1035</sup> Mas'udi claimed that while the Chinese counted only their own dead, his figures came from the registers of protected foreigners (*dhimmi*) kept by the government. In either case, the repercussions of the loss and instability quickly reached back to the Abbasid Empire. Mas'udi blamed the battle and the subsequent destruction of the region's mulberry trees for the lack of Chinese silk in Islamic countries.<sup>1036</sup>

In addition to the massacre of regional traders several decades earlier, Baghdad

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<sup>1030</sup> Guy, *Shipwreck*, 174.

<sup>1031</sup> Howard S. Levy, *Biography of Huang Ch'ao* trans. and annotated Howard S. Levy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 114.

<sup>1032</sup> For a full discussion of both Arabic and Chinese accounts of the battle, see Levy, *Biography*, 110-29.

<sup>1033</sup> Abu Zaid, *Account of the Huang Ch'ao Rebellion*, in Levy, *Biography*, 117.

<sup>1034</sup> Mas'udi, *Fields of Gold, Account of the Huang Ch'ao Rebellion*, in Levy, *Biography*, 121.

<sup>1035</sup> Robert M. Somers, “The End of the Tang” in Denis Twitchett, ed. *The Cambridge History of China: Sui and Tang China, 589-906, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3: 740.

<sup>1036</sup> Mas'udi, *Rebellion*, in Levy, *Biography*, 122.

was experiencing its own reduction in imperial power and economic influence expressed in riots and civil war, 907-945. Whatever the cause, only small amounts of Middle Eastern glass and glazing were found in the Intan cargo. The Middle Eastern products on the ship were glass shards and glazed pieces of four large amphora-type storage jars, contents unknown, with the containers probably reused for organic products now dispersed in the sea. The distinctive turquoise-green glaze on the broken bases was not produced in East or South Asia but was common to storage jars produced in the Persian highlands in the eighth or ninth century.<sup>1037</sup>

The found glass in the Intan wreck comprised only shards of various colors. Disparity between the numbers of bases and mouth fragments reveal that this consignment of glass was broken before the shipwreck. This part of the shipment might have been raw materials directed for recycling in a bead factory, an industry known in tenth century central Java.<sup>1038</sup> Both stylistic evidence and chemical analysis prove that the glass did not originate in China. The shards could be Middle Eastern glass which appears in a number of other Indonesian and Malaysian sites.<sup>1039</sup>

What makes this shipwreck interesting to our study of slave trade are human femur bones.<sup>1040</sup> By the end of the Intan excavation, 44 bones or pieces of bone had been recovered. Bones are rare in marine archaeology because crew and passengers of a shipwreck often floated great distances away from the ship, to be rescued or join the marine food chain. The few shipwrecked bones that are found are usually buried under

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<sup>1037</sup> Flecker, *Intan*, 118.

<sup>1038</sup> Flecker, *Intan*, 88-89.

<sup>1039</sup> Flecker, *Intan*, 89.

<sup>1040</sup> Bones are seldom found in thousand-year-old shipwrecks so when the divers brought up the first bone, the marine archaeologists assumed that it had come from the fishermen who had first salvaged artifacts from the wreck. Fishermen discover wrecks from either trawling nets which bring up artifacts or from following the birds which follow the schools of reef fish which find food and shelter in deep ocean water around wrecks. Flecker, *Intan*, 2.



layers of fine sediment or protected by a thick hull. In this case, the bones outlasted the wood of the ship. Many were femur, the largest bone in the body and presumably, the last to dissolve or decay. These bones then represent a large number of people who were trapped deep in the hold of the ship, most likely slaves. Slaving by pirates in these seas is verified by Song Dynasty texts describing pirates selling male and female slaves.<sup>1041</sup>

The presence of a tiger bone (a paw) and two teeth<sup>1042</sup> in the wreck presents another interpretation of the human remains. Although the bones would still be from slaves, the owners would not be pirates. Diplomats, including Muslims, often carried wild animals, especially big cats, to be gifted to rulers.<sup>1043</sup> Perhaps a diplomatic envoy was carrying both tiger and slaves to or from the nearby Srivijayan capital.

Chinese Song ceramics dominate the cargo, especially white ware, showing the same popularity for this style in South East Asia that these bowls found in the Abbasid Empire. Numerous pottery shards of this style exist in the archaeological record across the Middle East and beyond into Iberia and eventually Christian Europe, showing the influence of Chinese ceramic styles and technology.

These shards of Chinese imports show one aspect of Chinese cultural influence in the Abbasid Empire. The Chinese styles inspired a ninth century pottery revolution. The change did not consist of new colors nor technology. It was the imported Chinese technology for glazing techniques which transformed Islamic pottery.<sup>1044</sup> Glazing consists of ground glass and coloring agents mixed with water which are then applied to a dry clay pot—either by dipping, dripping, or applying in artistic patterns. The dry clay

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<sup>1041</sup> Flecker, *Intan*, 93.

<sup>1042</sup> Flecker, *Intan*, 94.

<sup>1043</sup> Bielenstein, *Diplomacy*, 357-62.

<sup>1044</sup> Oliver Watson, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc. in association with the al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait National Museum, 2004), 45.

absorbs the water, leaving the residue of glaze powder on the surface. Refiring the pot remelts the glass particles into a hard, uniform glass coating over the surface, now making the clay pot impervious to liquids.

Ironically, glazing came to China from the Near East. The first glass and glazing appeared in the Fertile Crescent by the third millennium. The Bronze Age Persian glass industry used a blue-green alkaline glaze. Rome exported glass beads and vessels to Han China. What China exported back to the region where glass originated was style and scale of production from improved kilns. Chinese white ware used translucent glazes and “polychrome glass painting” and bi-chrome glazes.<sup>1045</sup> The Chinese style of green spotted or splashed decorations on a white or yellow translucent glaze was first copied meticulously in Iraq, but then the local craftsmen hybridized the style using the local cobalt blue to draw animal, floral, and human designs, inscriptions, and geometrical shapes. Artisans first copied typical Chinese bowl shape but then, over time, morphed the borrowed styles into local shapes.<sup>1046</sup> This adaption and then hybridization of Chinese shapes and opaque white glazes spread to potters across the Islamic realm and now remains the sign to identify Islamic ceramics.

The traditional view holds that Chinese ceramic shapes and glazing styles across the Muslim world spread from the entry point of the royal capital of Samarra after 836.<sup>1047</sup> New archaeological finds, however, cause historians of Islamic ceramics to debunk this view of “one-ware, one site” mode of production. Abbasid potters reproduced Chinese style pottery using Chinese technology of advanced kilns, which protected the glazes during the firing process at sites across Iraq, greater Syria, and across

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<sup>1045</sup> Watson, *Ceramics*, 36-38.

<sup>1046</sup> Watson, *Ceramics*, 47, 174.

<sup>1047</sup> Watson, *Ceramics*, 14.

the empire by the late eighth century.<sup>1048</sup>

The cobalt blue coloring in the glaze used by Persian potters had its own long journey of cultural transmission. Artisans used this mineral to color Persian beads and tiles as early as the third millennium. It spread west to Egypt by the eighteenth dynasty (1550-1292 BCE). While the Chinese style of white ware with green dots spread to the medieval Islamic world, the cobalt blue of the Persians was exported to the East. By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Chinese potters perfected drawing with the blue lines, creating the blue and white porcelain for which the Ming were famous. This pottery found its way to Europe where it inspired the potters of Antwerp to produce the famous Dutch blue delftware, another ceramic witness to cultural transmission across Eurasia. Dutch Jews donated delftware blue tiles to decorate the synagogue of their co-religionists in Cochin, India, speaking to the contribution of long-standing Jewish trade networks in the process.

Another traveling technology eclipsed the impact of Chinese porcelain styles and techniques on Abbasid society. The transfer of Chinese papermaking technology from Central Asia to Samarkand to Baghdad created an information boom that equaled the reinvention of Gutenberg's printing press or the creation of the internet. A major element of the Abbasid Golden Age was a literary production which was made possible by now plentiful paper. The definition of sophistication was the *adib*, the cultured and educated writer or reader of science, medicine, astronomy, poetry, histories, geographies, and *rihla* or travelogues. Owning books became the mark of a cultured man.

In the ninth century, China figured prominently as a topic in books like *Akhbar as-Sind wal-Hind (News of China and India)* attributed to Suleyman the Merchant but

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<sup>1048</sup> Watson, *Ceramics*, 14.

probably written from bits of hearsay by an anonymous author around 851. Abu Zayd al-Sira followed this popular book with his own, *Silsilat al-Tawarikh (Chain of Chronicles)*, again, a hodge-podge of mariner's accounts of China, which covered the second half of the ninth century. The genre grew to include stories of miracles or adventures that, because of the distance to China, could not be fact-checked by the average reader.<sup>1049</sup> One of these accounts has survived time and translation to end up on modern library shelves as the *Adventures of Sindbad the Sailor*. The more reliable historians, such as Tabari, Mas'udi, Ibn Khurdadhbih, Maqdisi, and al-Istakhri, also copied from lost sources and each other to describe China.

Baghdad even had a dedicated *suq* or "China Town" to sell Chinese imports in Khudayr Market<sup>1050</sup> and a bridge named *Sin Siniyat*, which referenced either China or Chinese porcelain.<sup>1051</sup> Manifold connections existed between the Abbasid and Tang empires: Chinese records of multiple Arab diplomatic envoys from the time of the third caliph, Chinese workers in Iraq, trade products, Arab trade diasporas in China, exchange of pottery glazes, styles, and technology, and Arabic literature all reveal how much Abbasid looked towards China. The two societies gained from mutual trade and exchange of ideas and technology. Pottery technology and styles traveling back and forth exhibit how ideas changed or hybridized as they passed through the new culture. They are a visible evidence for Tang-Abbasid cultural transmission that is harder to see in the ideas contributing to large harem formation.

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<sup>1049</sup> Raphael Israeli, "Medieval Muslim Travelers to China," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2000), 316-17.

<sup>1050</sup> Guy Le Strange, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate* (1901; repr., New York, Cosimo Classics, 2011), 197. Page numbers are the same in the 1901 edition.

<sup>1051</sup> Le Strange, *Baghdad*, 148. The modern Arabic term for serving trays, *siniyah*, still refers to China.

## Chinese Harems

In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Tang Chinese court served as the epitome, the ultimate in Asian court culture with cultural influence that had traditionally reached as far as Byzantium through diplomats and trade. The great Sui and Tang reunification of China created an empire that surpassed the glories of the Han. Once the Tang made China into an East Asian powerhouse, the Persians and later, the Arabs must have seen the Chinese as political, economic, and cultural leaders to emulate or, at least, their competition in portraying prestige and grandeur. The Tang rebuilt the Han capital, Chang'an, which attracted one million taxable residents to the greater urban area, the largest city in the world dwarfing Baghdad, Constantinople, and Cordoba. The Sui and Tang emperors used their conquests and wealth to build huge palaces filled with thousands of women. The emperors revived the Han entertainment complex of "a hundred entertainments" to employ again thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of state-sponsored performers to entertain the court and locals and to impress the visiting diplomats. Diplomats and traders returned to their countries with tales of the sophisticated court culture, especially the varied entertainers and trained courtesans found in Chang'an and the Tang court.<sup>1052</sup>

The first Abbasid diplomats would have carried back to Baghdad descriptions of the tremendous wealth of the Tang Emperor Xuan Zong as demonstrated by his palatial household and entertainment staff. This emperor was nearing the end of a long and successful reign (r. 712-756) when the Abbasids gained power in 750. Chinese poets guessed that Xuan Zong's harem ranged from three to eight thousand women.<sup>1053</sup> His

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<sup>1052</sup> See Chapter 6 for a full description.

<sup>1053</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 178.

Chinese biography, however, states that this long-lived emperor had "concubines about reaching to 40,000" in addition to his 4,000 eunuchs.<sup>1054</sup>

One explanation for such a huge number is that due to this emperor's long rule and prosperity extending over forty-three years, perhaps his biographers gave a cumulative number from estimating that an average of a thousand women a year passed through his harem. Another possible explanation for the exorbitant numbers could be that the biographer counted the court-sponsored female entertainers. The royal feasts for the ambassadors involved thousands of state-sponsored performers. Chinese historians consider Xuan Zong's reign the pinnacle of Chinese cultural flowering and political power, adding evidence for the thesis that the possession of large numbers of concubines and entertainers provided and proved a ruler's power and prestige.

Emperor Xuan Zong's harem, while stupendous, was probably not so rare if compared to the reputation earned by earlier Chinese rulers owning large harems. The practice of huge households of women had a long heritage from the very first emperor, founder of the Qin Dynasty, Qin Shi Huang (d. 210 BCE). This emperor conquered the Warring States in 221 BC to unite China. His short rule gained long-lasting fame for building the initial Great Wall of China, the Lingqu canal to provide water transport between north and south China, and a city size mausoleum including a terracotta army with 8,000 personalized replicas of soldiers, entertainers, etc. His harem, in life and death, inspires awe. He built huge palaces and filled them with the harems of the rulers he had conquered. His biographer counted 700 palaces and described, "Curtains, bells and

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<sup>1054</sup> *Xin Tang Shu*, "Biography 132: Eunuchs, Part 1," *Xin Tang Shu*, 207: 4249. 新唐书 : [225卷]  
*Xin Tang shu* : [225 juan] 欧阳修, 1007-1072. ; Ouyang, Xiu, 1007-1072. 宋祁, 998-1061; 王小甫; Song, Qi, 998-1061.; Wang, Xiaofu. 1995 Changchun: Jilin ren min chu ban she; 长春 : 吉林人民出版社, (hard copy) also, in <http://gj.zdic.net/archive.php?aid=7331> (October 6, 2015).

drums, and beautiful girls filled the palaces; each was registered and assigned to a place and never transferred.”<sup>1055</sup> His “rear palace” alone had over 10,000 women.<sup>1056</sup> Over his lifetime, he fathered around 50 children.<sup>1057</sup>

The earliest Han emperors had harems reaching to a thousand women. Wudi, however, had a harem that grew with his conquests that brought Han China to borders that almost matched modern China. The sources describe his harem as “several thousand,” a trope that gets much use for the later Han and succeeding emperors such as the third century ruler, Wu of the Three Kingdoms and the fourth century Wudi of Jin.<sup>1058</sup>

The Sui short-lived dynasty reunited China. Novels describe the harem of the second Sui emperor, Yangdi (r. 604-618) as having had 100,000 women.<sup>1059</sup> He would have had numerous captured harems from reunifying China but even then, this number has to be more commentary on the extent of his conquests or fantasy than accurate assessment. Novels do not serve as a reliable source for fact, but they do illustrate a society’s imaginative fictions and values; having power equaled women. Gaining more power and conquering more territory equaled more women.

Chinese emperors from multiple dynasties had allowed harems to increase to several thousand women for a thousand years by the time of the Tang. These rulers kept adding women in the face of financial, emotional, and managerial costs, as well as criticisms from Confucians. Patricia Ebrey, an authority on women of the Song dynasty,

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<sup>1055</sup> Ssu-ma Ch’ien, “The First Emperor of Ch’in, Basic Annals 6”, in William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed. *The Grand Scribe’s Records; Vol 1., The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, trans. Tsai-fa Cheng, Zongli Lu, William H. Nienhauser, Jr. and Robert Reynolds (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 149.

<sup>1056</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 178.

<sup>1057</sup> Zhang Wenli, *Qin shi huang di ping zhuan* (Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1996).

张文立：《秦始皇帝评传》，陕西人民教育出版社，1996，第325～326页。

My gratitude to Dr. Mel Thatcher for this source.

<sup>1058</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 178.

<sup>1059</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 178.

which followed the Tang, and also overlapped with the mid-Abbasid Empire, asked why this practice continued throughout Chinese history in all the dynasties. By studying the offspring of Song emperors, she found that few of the Song emperors used more than one or two dozen palace women at a time for sex. Even so, an average of 500 women a year were admitted to the palace, while another 200 or more girls who had not distinguished themselves were released yearly. The size of the women's households increased, even when the emperor was a child or restricted himself to one or few women. Erotic appeal and sexual appetite cannot explain the motivation to possess harems over a couple of hundred women.<sup>1060</sup>

Ebrey identifies five factors in Chinese cultural logic underpinning their court culture that may explain the inner, even subconscious, reasons behind the fantastic harem censuses. The first two reasons stem from institutional practices of the palace. The first factor stems from the responsibility of the incoming ruler to provide housing for the titled consorts of all previous emperors and their servants. New arrivals to this "city of women" enlarged the company and influence of the older women.

The second factor and the second Chinese court institutional practice resulted from dependence on female administrators rather than on eunuchs, thereby requiring a large number of women to work in the management of the harem. Compared to the Abbasid court, the Chinese court used eunuchs in a more limited capacity. For example, the Abbasid Caliph al-Muktafi (r. 902-908) had 11,000 eunuchs or male servants<sup>1061</sup> (or more) compared to 4,000 women while Xuan Zong's harem had 4,000 eunuchs to 40,000 women. Priscilla Chung, in a study of the Northern Song Dynasty, shows that female

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<sup>1060</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 185-87.

<sup>1061</sup> The reference uses the term "gilman" which references youth but does not indicate castration status.



administrators had served the imperial consorts and princesses as personal attendants since the time of the Qin Dynasty (r. 221-206 BCE).<sup>1062</sup> The six administrative bureaus staffed by palace women needed a minimum of 279 officials, but a memorial shows that the female administrative network had grown to 2,000-3,000 women by 1041.<sup>1063</sup> They were responsible for all personal and ceremonial needs: education, music, guests, audiences, mail, documents, wardrobes, jewelry, security, punishments, cooking, ceremonial vessels, food and wine, medicinal affairs, living quarters, lights and coal, chariots, regalia, gardens, remunerations, and the like.<sup>1064</sup>

A third cultural factor determining the use of women in the Chinese court resulted from the emperors' propensity to build numerous palaces across their empire. The sources describe how the emperors would recruit women in the hundreds to decorate these new buildings. Ebrey suggests that the Chinese rulers decorated their environment with women, especially women who could play musical instruments, similar to the way that French monarchs at Versailles used gardens, paintings, tapestries, sculptures, furnishings, and well-dressed servants, usually male, to decorate their opulent rooms. In China, rulers did not feel constricted like their European peers by Catholic requirements for an appearance of monogamy.<sup>1065</sup> They preferred sumptuously dressed palace women as decor. For example, when Wudi built the Mingguang palace, he recruited 3,000 beauties to fill it. Ban Gu wrote of the hundreds of "Red-gauzed beauties, sleeves dangling, with silk-braided ribbons" who decorated the Western Palace.<sup>1066</sup> A Han era

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<sup>1062</sup> Priscilla Ching, *Palace Women in the Northern Sung* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 11.

<sup>1063</sup> Ching, *Palace Women*, 11-17.

<sup>1064</sup> Ching, *Palace Women*, 11.

<sup>1065</sup> The exception would be the Norman king, Roger, who kept a harem like the Muslim rulers from whom he had conquered Sicily.

<sup>1066</sup> Ebrey, *Women*, 189.

poem by Sima Xiangru describes the “lovely maidens and fair princesses” who accompanied the king on a hunt.

Robed in fine silk cloth  
And trailing rich silks and crepes,  
Girdled in sheer netting  
And draped with scarves like mist,  
Beneath which their skirts, gathered in close pleats,  
Gently swirl and sway...  
Lightly and nimbly they come  
Like a vision of goddesses. (Sima Xiangru)<sup>1067</sup>

The view of Daoist paradise created a fourth cultural factor for a large harem. Richly clad palace women did more than inspire poets to impute divinity to their mere presence. Daoists pictured paradise as a palace where elegantly dressed “Jade Maidens” wandered about the brightly painted halls and flower gardens. The women created an image of paradise that any emperor relating himself to divine power aspired to recreate.<sup>1068</sup> Palace women played the part of the “immortals.”

One needs little imagination to see the parallels between the Daoist paradise and the Islamic paradise. The Persian word *firdos* used for the Muslim paradise means “walled garden.” The Qur’an vaguely defines the *houris* that are waiting for the faithful in Islamic paradise. Nerina Rustomji argues persuasively that Abbasid era hadith authors/collectors and eschatological commentators fleshed out the image of the *houris* based on the presence of the singing *qiyan* in the Abbasid palaces, elite homes, and literary salons.<sup>1069</sup> The singing, beautiful, dark-eyed *houris* who, in the Islamic Tradition, populated the Islamic version of paradise mirror the Daoist “Jade Maidens” or

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<sup>1067</sup>Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian, Han Dynasty II*, trans. Burton Watson, rev.ed. (1961; New York: Columbia University Press Book, 1993), 266-67.

<sup>1068</sup>Ebrey, *Women*, 190.

<sup>1069</sup>Nerina Rustomji, “Are Houris Heavenly Concubines?” in Gordon and Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans*, forthcoming.

immortals. They were not the only ones. Indian palace women, slave and free, portrayed goddesses in Hindu Indian retinues. Buxom *bodhisattvas* populated Buddhist eschatology and art in pre-Islamic Central Asia, especially along the Silk Road. Beautiful women secluded in the palaces and gardens of the Tang and the Abbasids carry on this wide spread conflation of beautiful women and divinity.<sup>1070</sup>

The fifth Chinese cultural reason affecting harem size is the “Yellow Emperor” tradition. Derived from the Qin and Han eras, the foundation of proper conduct for a king builds on the legend of the Yellow Emperor who was militarily powerful, presided over various paradises, and exhibited the fountainhead of medical knowledge and sexual arts. For the Yellow Emperor, the basic premise of immortality required absorbing the *yin* essence from as many women as possible. An unlimited supply of young virgins used properly in a strict regime of sexual acrobatic control became the ultimate Chinese medicine to ensure health, long life, or even eternity through the emperor’s *yang*. Ideals of kingship, virility, power, and majesty from the superhuman Yellow Emperor required a backdrop of abundant, desirable women.

This fifth Chinese reason, imitating the appetites of the libidinal Yellow Emperor, brings the argument for huge harems back to the underlying stereotype of harems, that the reason for these collections of women is to provide abundant sexual partners. This motivation, of course, always existed among powerful men. The Umayyad bath houses on royal desert hunting estates contain frescos, some of the earliest Islamic art, that depict

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<sup>1070</sup> See Chapter 5 on the role of palace women in portraying celestial women in Hindu Indian retinues. Even Uighur artistic portrayals of Mohammed’s night journey included houri or angel-like *miraj-names*. (Thanks to Nerina Rustomji for this last suggestion.) Picture of these *miraj-names*: Jon Thompson and Sheila R. Canby ed., *Hunt for Paradise, Court Art of Safavid Iran, 1501-1576*, cat. exh. (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2003-2004; Skira Editore, Milan, Italy: 2003), 117-18, n°4.29.  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b5/Miraj\\_by\\_Sultan\\_Muhammad.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b5/Miraj_by_Sultan_Muhammad.jpg)  
 Accessed March 25, 2016.

numerous nude or semiclad women bathing, dancing, or fixing their gaze on the observer.<sup>1071</sup> These paintings bear witness to the many women whose lives and bodies intertwined with royal and elite men because of their slavery and beauty. Their numbers and portrayals through reports or gossip brought their owners prestige, but that can never be divorced from the pleasure that they also provided.

Huge harems, fictive, exaggerated, or real, provided more than just an abundance of potential sexual partners. In China, harem women also provided a community for the retired dowagers, female eunuchs for administration, décor for numerous palaces, symbolic images of paradise, and the possibility of immortality accessed through the feminine yin. Confucian scholars criticized huge harems as wasteful and dangerous. Palace women like the Empress Wu and the fat concubine, Yang Yuhuan, proved that potential for danger by causing political upheaval and regime change.

Huge harems had survived for over a millennium by the time of the Tang. Chinese imperial harem populations probably reached a peak at the exact point when the Abbasid rulers gained power and formed their court. The Abbasids had the reputations of numerous courts from their combined Arab and Persian heritages after which they could pattern themselves, but the Sui-Tang emperors exceeded and excelled them all in size and splendor. The Chinese had no other rival court in 750 CE. If the Abbasids wanted prestige on the Eurasian stage in the eighth century, they had to compete with Chang'an. Since all of these rulers, Arab, Persian, and Chinese, used slave women and eunuchs, entertainers and singers, to project prestige, it is impossible to know where the influence of one court started and stopped. Rather, they all shared a court culture that used wealth

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<sup>1071</sup> Garth Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2004).

and power to provide themselves huge retinues, especially of talented, beautiful slave women.

## **Conclusion**

When the Abbasids highjacked Abu Muslim's rebellion and seized rule over the Arab Empire, they were just another bloody rebel group. The Abbasid's success was based on assassinating the leader of the revolt. Very soon, it became evident that their propaganda of belonging to the Prophet's family did not mean that they descended from Ali. In order to legitimize their bloody grasp for control, they had to prove their ability to establish a noteworthy court in a region rife with long-lived, sophisticated court traditions. Their large harem populations, ostentatious in size and presentation, appear to be a statement in the language of prestige of the day, that their dynasty could stand on the same playing field as the Persians and the Chinese.

The Tang court at the time of the Abbasid revolt was the most splendid in all of Chinese or probably, even world history. Perhaps, it was the Tang emperors who filled their many palaces with beautiful concubines and female entertainers, who inspired or stimulated the Abbasids to collect numerous luxury slaves. Perhaps, it was the legends of the grandeur and spectacular harems of the long-dead Persian emperors who inspired them. Perhaps, the Abbasids, who carried a long heritage of Arab queens and kings, did not need outside inspiration to know that any aspiring emperor must prove his sophistication, virility, and power through a vast collection of women. Because the practice of huge harems appears throughout time and place across Asia and the Middle East, influences or independent co-creations are difficult or ultimately, impossible to

trace for certain. However, the original two assumptions that Abbasid harem sizes were either hyperbole or a re-enactment of the Persian courts do not tell the complete story of the reasons to collect hundreds, if not thousands of slave women.

The Abbasid court influenced the Muslim world's use of slave women in royal courts, elite homes, literary salons, courtesan houses, and drinking establishments. The example the Abbasids set for all the Muslim courts and elite who followed them created a long-lasting demand for slaves. Europeans were enslaved for the next millennium to provide for this cultural value that held that beautiful women from far places enclosed in the harem demonstrated wealth and prestige.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION: THE LONGEVITY OF ABBASID HAREM FORMATION ACROSS EURASIA

Harun al-Rashid's harem had a long shelf life despite difficulties. The Abbasid version of the East Asian, Southeast Asian, Indian Sub-continent, Central Asian, and West Asian outsized households of eunuchs, concubines, wives, elderly relatives, dowagers, children, servants, and entertainers, however, depended on the financial health of the imperial fisc for support. These huge feminine households of the Abbasid caliphs and Baghdadi elite eventually shrank along with the size of the treasury, tax income, and empire.

The use of huge households made up mostly of luxury, prestige slaves who served as a secluded retinue, however, became enshrined in the aspirations of Muslim courts from Delhi to Cordoba. Many of these Muslim rulers collected huge numbers of eunuchs, concubines, and *qiyan*, attempting to replicate the glory of Islam's Golden Age. Moulay Ismail (d. 1727), ruler of Morocco, a contemporary of the French king, Louis XIV, serves as an example of how this ancient and medieval Asian court practice still showed up in the Mediterranean in the Early Modern Period. Moulay Ismail took advantage of the Barbary corsairs to enslave thousands of European men to build him an ornate palace. These corsairs also captured European women to fill his halls with

concubines. Contemporaries reported that his harem had 2,000 women.<sup>1072</sup> From these women, he produced 888 children during his long life, a feat that earned him a place in academic scientific journals arguing if this rate of reproduction is even possible, and in the Guinness Book of World Records.<sup>1073</sup>

The huge harems, however, did not survive modernity. The Ottoman harem (*Harem-i Hümayûn* in Turkish) followed the Abbasid pattern of using slave concubines to reproduce the next sultans. Most of their harems were of comparatively modest size, between 200 and 1200 women. Sometimes, the queen mother, called Valide Sultan, wielded so much power that Ottoman rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was branded, the “Sultanate of Women.”<sup>1074</sup> Leslie Pierce argues that this period began with Hürrem (d. 1558) and ended when Mehmet Köprülü became grand vizier in 1656. Betül Ipsirli Argit, however, argues that the Valide Sultan, Rabia Gülnuş Emetullah wielded political power similarly to the previous powerful queen mothers. For example, she was complicit in the decision to behead Kara Mustafa Pasha in 1683 after the defeat at the Battle of Vienna in 1683. Her active role in internal and foreign politics implies that the “Sultanate of Women” lasted much longer.<sup>1075</sup>

The Ottoman harem lost power in tandem with the fading power of the Ottoman emperor confronting nationalism and modernity. When Rahime Perestu Sultan, the

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<sup>1072</sup>Robert C. Davis, *Holy War and Human Bondage; Tales of Christian-Muslim Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO, 2009), 233.

<sup>1073</sup>Richard G. Gould, “How Many Children could Moulay Ismail have had?,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 21, no. 4 (July 2000), 295–296, DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138\(00\)00043-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138(00)00043-X) Accessed March 10, 2016.

<sup>1074</sup>Leslie P. Pierce, *The Imperial Harem, Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 55.

<sup>1075</sup>Betül Ipsirli Argit, “A Queen Mother and the Ottoman Imperial Harem: Rabia Gülnuş Emetullah Valide Sultan (1640-1715),” in Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain, ed. *Concubines and Courtesans, Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, forthcoming) A full biography of this queenmother is available in Turkish: Betül Ipsirli Argit, *Rabia Gülnuş Emetullah Sultan, 1640-1715* (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2014).



reigning Valide Sultan, died in 1904, even the titled position ended. The young Turks pushing for an end to the ancient regime forced modernity onto the Ottoman sultan, Abdul Hamid II. The beleaguered sultan agreed to emancipate the palace slaves, but before any actions could be taken, the Young Turk counter-revolution broke out and by April 24, 1909, they had taken the capital.

The CUP-dominated parliament voted to depose Sultan Abdul Hamid and send him into exile to Salonica with only part of his harem. The Young Turks sent the rest of the female harem slaves to the Topkapi Palace, the usual Ottoman palace retirement of the harems of deceased or deposed sultans. This time, however, the Young Turks broke tradition in their effort to end royal slavery. The Ottoman royal harem had typically acquired their female slaves from the frontiers of the empire, through war, kidnapping, or the slave market. At this point in history, however, the empire's frontiers had been shrinking for two centuries and the British shut down slave traders from Africa crossing the Mediterranean. The only source remaining for harem women in the early twentieth century were Circassians, sold by their impoverished families. The Young Turks sent telegrams to the Circassian settlements in Anatolia announcing that their relatives were free and they needed to come to the Topkapi Palace to identify and take their women. A contemporary observer to the Young Turks Revolution counted 213 women freed from Abdul Hamid's harem.<sup>1076</sup>

The almost two hundred eunuchs who served the sultan as powerful administrators did not fare as well. The eunuchs were imprisoned and the Young Turks

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<sup>1076</sup> F. McCullagh, *The Fall of Abd-ul-Hamid* (London, 1910), 276-78, The dates from Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and its Demise, 1800-1909* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 148. Thanks to Ramazan Otzan for this source. Penzer also claims that the Harem ceased to exist in 1909. N.M. Penzer, *The Harem*, (New York, 1937) 20-21.

publically executed the Chief Musahip (Companion). The treasury confiscated his fortune.<sup>1077</sup> The Young Turks abolished the institution of the state harem but, ironically, the next sultan, Sultan Resad, Adul Hamid's successor, and other members of the Ottoman family were not required to emancipate their personal slaves. Erdem did not address the question of what happened to the slaves of the other members of the Ottoman family. The slaves in the Arab sector of the Ottoman Empire, Syria, Jordan, the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia, were not emancipated until the 1960s.

The institution of the huge harem made up mostly of slave women and eunuchs disappeared 1100 years from the days when Harun al-Rashid and his mother, Khayruzan, built their splendid court on the banks of the Tigris and 1150 years after the death of Xuan Zong, the Tang emperor with the 40,000-member household. The number of European women over the centuries who were enslaved and transported as elite white slaves for these Muslim harems, or exported further east to Asian courts, remains uncounted. Robert C. Davis, scholar of Barbary slavery, estimates that 200,000-300,000 European women were enslaved in Muslim lands between 1500 and 1800.<sup>1078</sup> The many military defeats to the Muslims and the presence of Islamic silver in early medieval Europe from traders indicate that the numbers of captive women transported from Europe in earlier centuries could be much larger.

This examination of European slave trade viewed from the perspective of ancient and medieval Asian recipients of the western slaves ends. It has shown that traders and their slave cargos of Europeans traveling east had long been part of Mediterranean and Asian connections. Rather than a view that the Radhanites, the Rus, and their long-

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<sup>1077</sup> Erdem, *Slavery*, 148.

<sup>1078</sup> Davis, *Holy War*, 242.

distance trade were unique to the ninth century and unique to the Pax Islamica, this work shows that west to east Eurasian slave trade had a long tradition. Enough Greek and Roman slaves, especially women, had traveled the long roads or sea lanes to India and China to leave their marks in these destinations as concubines, courtesans, and armed female harem guards in India, and acrobats, trained entertainers, and sex workers in China.

In the early medieval period, during the early Abbasid/late Tang era, empire and wealth again allowed rulers, at least in Baghdad and Chang'an, to indulge their desires to have courts that would project their personal ambitions and grandeur. They followed the example of the rulers of antiquity in creating courts filled with hundreds of beautiful and talented slaves who came from all the realms of their empire, as tribute from their allies, and through traders bringing trade products from the distant frontiers. This "pull" factor from China, India, and Baghdad gives a strong reason to explain the mystery of why in the midst of the so-called Dark Ages, a surge of silks, spices, Islamic coinage, and shackles appears in late eighth and ninth century texts, museums, and archaeological digs in Europe. The economic decline and civil wars of the Tang and the Abbasid-Sammanid empires also could explain why the flood turned back to a trickle. These empires no longer drove the world economy. New, but weaker, poorer dynasties in China, North Africa, Central Asia, and the Italian Mediterranean rose to take their places.

The possibility and need for more research on the ninth century slave trade, however, remains. The role of the Radhanite traders and their place in the Abbasid empire and in Jewish history remains important to understand trade in this era. The discovery and study of the 300,000 texts from the Cairo Genizah upended views of

Mediterranean connections, trade, and the Jewish community and culture in the tenth to thirteenth centuries. The 2011 discovery of an Afghan Genizah could do the same thing for Silk Road trade and the Jewish traders in Central Asia.<sup>1079</sup> Further study of the Radhanites in the mid-ninth century provides the background for this trade and perhaps reveals other connections for them in the Mediterranean.

Cultural transmission in food, religion, language, dance, and music by slave migrations has been extensively studied to develop the African contributions to the Atlantic world. Very little work, however, has been done for the medieval Islamic world on the contributions of European slave women to Muslim culture.

The medieval dead in India, China, and Baghdad may also yield up information that fills in the gaps in the Ibn Khurdadhbih text. The stable isotopes preserved in their teeth will reveal long-distance origins and travel of the deceased. The DNA of their remains will teach us much about the racial mixing that comes with foreign sex workers. DNA sequencing may also identify the descendants of foreign slave women which now appears as the random blond or red-headed, blue-eyed child born into black-haired Arab or Persian families.<sup>1080</sup>

One reason that I chose slavery under Islam as a research topic was the fact that it was safely ensconced in the past. It appeared to be a topic safe from triggering my own posttrauma syndrome from the violence surrounding my family during and after the long Second Intifada (2000-2009). By the time this dissertation was underway, however,

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<sup>1079</sup> National Library of Israel, "Afghan Genizah," <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/collections/jewish-collection/Pages/afghan-genizah.aspx> Accessed April 25, 2016.

<sup>1080</sup>For example, Fadi Thabet, a Palestinian teacher created a photo essay of light eyed children in Gaza. Nourha Saadawi, "Palestinian Photographer Captured The Colors Of Children's Eyes In Gaza" [http://www.boredpanda.com/colorful-children-eyes-photography-fadi-thabet-gaza/?image\\_id=Colorful-Eyes-from-GazaA-collection-of-childrens-portraits-by-Fadi-Thabet-57212b19dd1e4\\_880.jpg](http://www.boredpanda.com/colorful-children-eyes-photography-fadi-thabet-gaza/?image_id=Colorful-Eyes-from-GazaA-collection-of-childrens-portraits-by-Fadi-Thabet-57212b19dd1e4_880.jpg) accessed May 13, 2016

Muslim slavery issues under ISIS-*Daesh*, Boko Haram, etc. appeared in the headlines almost weekly. For thousands of captive Christian and Yazidi women, there is nothing medieval about slavery except for the Islamic laws governing their existence. This work is dedicated to them with the hope that someday they can be freed in body, soul, and mind.

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