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Hair Removal and Hair Dyeing: Cosmetics in the Medieval Middle East, between Pharmacy and Hadith

> I want it long, straight, curly, fuzzy
> Snaggy, shaggy, ratty, matty
> Oily, greasy, fleecy
> Shining, gleaming, streaming
> Flaxen, waxen
> Knotted, polka-dotted
> Twisted, beaded, braided
> Powdered, flowered, and confettied
> Bangled, tangled, spangled, and spaghettied!
>
> (*Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, Gerome Ragni and James Rado, 1967)

Hair, both on the head or face and on the rest of the body, has social significance. As such, the attitude to hair is dependent on a particular cultural context and varies from culture to culture. There is one constant: one needs to tend to one's hair. Sometimes it needs to be grown or colored, sometimes it needs to be trimmed or removed. It is no coincidence that the musical that expressed the spirit of the 1960s counterculture was called *Hair*—and there is no doubt that the hair styles described in the theme song above would have shocked the average medieval Muslim. In the Bible, hair is an expression of power (Samson being the *locus classicus;* Judges 13–16), while shaving usually expressed purification and submission to God, an idea found again in Islam.[1] In ancient Greece, women were depicted in art without body hair or pubic hair, and women themselves apparently plucked their body hair or removed it by singeing, especially pubic

Of the many recipes that appear in *Minhāj al-dukkān,* the thirteenth-century manual for pharmacists by Abū al-Muná al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār al-Isrāʾīlī, those that deal with cosmetics have so far escaped study. I take this opportunity to honor my *Doktorvater,* Prof. Reuven Amitai, and return to the book that formed the foundation of my dissertation to examine recipes for hair dyes and depilatories. An earlier version of this article was presented at a day-conference on "Leisure in Islamic Societies" held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 21–22 January 2009. I thank the participants for their comments. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Keren Abbou-Hershkovits and Dr. Or Amir, whose comments on later drafts helped me refine my ideas.

[1] Saul M. Olyan, "What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish and What Do They Signal in Biblical Ritual Contexts?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 619.

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hair.[2] In the Islamic world, both men and women are required to deal with their hair in specific ways. Of course, for women the most obvious issue is the requirement to cover their heads, thus also covering their hair (in contrast to the Jewish tradition, where what is important is the covering of the hair, not the head as such).[3]

This paper will not be dealing with the covering of the hair/head, nor with the appropriate way to cultivate facial hair,[4] but rather with two topics that appear not only in religious literature but also in pharmacological writings: the removal of body hair and the dyeing of the hair of one's head (including the beard). The sources I will use are hadith collections, principally compiled by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), and pharmacopoeias, in particular *Minhāj al-dukkān* (composed ca. 658/1260 in Cairo). Previous studies of hair and hair care in Islamic societies have largely focused on legal texts; the purpose of this paper is to add the recipes for hair dyes and depilatory pastes to the conversation, asking: how did people actually color or remove hair? The pharmacological material at my disposal is limited; given the later texts' extensive quotation of earlier ones, I will be moving back and forth between Abbasid Baghdad and Mamluk Cairo in my citation of hadith and recipes alike.

Before diving into the texts, I should mention that the relatively few studies I have found so far that theorize depilation have dealt exclusively with the modern period (from the nineteenth century onward) and, in fact, mainly with the Anglophone world, which some would say is particularly extreme in its distaste for a hairy female body.[5] However, such studies do exist. In contrast, the topic of dyeing the hair of the head and beards seems to have not yet received an actual academic discussion, at least not a historicizing one.[6]

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[2] Martin Kilmer, "Genital Phobia and Depilation," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 104–12; Elizabeth Bartmann, "Hair and the Artifice of Female Roman Adornment," *American Journal of Archeology* 105 (2001): 5; and see now the discussion in Noah Bickert, "He Found a Hair and It Bothered Him: Female Pubic Hair Removal in the Talmud," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 35 (2019): 139–41 and references there.

[3] See, e.g., Lynne Schreiber, ed., *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering* (New York, 2003).

[4] Facial hair has been an important marker of modernity in the Middle East. See Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women With Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, 2005); Avner Wishnitzer, "Beneath the Mustache: A Well-Trimmed History of Facial Hair in the Late Ottoman Era," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61 (2018): 289–326.

[5] See, e.g., Rebecca Herzig, *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal* (New York, 2015); Merran Toerien, Sue Wilkinsen, and Precilla Y. L. Choi, "Body Hair Removal: The 'Mundane' Production of Normative Femininity," *Sex Roles* 52, nos. 5–6 (2005): 399–406.

[6] See the recent issue of *Al-Masāq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* devoted to the social meaning of hair in the Islamic Middle Ages, which discusses "the many different meanings

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Removing Hair

It is narrated by Abū Hurayrah in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that the Prophet Muḥammad said: "Five are the acts of the *fitrah* (inborn human nature): circumcision, shaving the pubic hair, clipping the nails, cutting the mustaches short, and depilating the hair of the armpits."[7] Anas ibn Mālik adds that these acts should not be neglected for more than forty nights;[8] that is, they should be performed at least every forty days and preferably more often. From these hadith, the ulama concluded that these duties apply to women and men alike—perhaps even more so to men, since all Muslim men are circumcised.[9] The purpose of removing the hair, then, is not necessarily for external beauty but for beauty in the eyes of God: thus, a person becomes cleaner and purer spiritually and not only physically, similar to the attitude known from the Bible.

According to the above hadith, then, one may remove body hair either by means of shaving or by means of plucking. What of other means? It is said that the first to use *nūrah* (that is, depilatory paste containing unslaked lime) and enter the bathhouse was King Solomon, Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī ends his discussion of the permissibility of using depilatory paste with the following tale, according to which, when the Queen of Sheba, whose name was Balqīs, visited King Solomon and tested him with riddles, she was asked to enter the palace. The floor of the palace was covered with glass and when the queen saw this, she thought that the glass was a puddle of water and she raised the edge of her gown, so that it would not get wet. Thus, she exposed her legs and alas, her legs were hairy.

> Then Solomon asked: What will keep the hairs away? They told him: A razor will keep them away. He said: The razor leaves ugly marks. So then, the *shayāṭīn* prepared *nūrah* for him, and he was the first person for whom *nūrah* was made . . . the *nūrah* was made from seashells, smeared on the legs, and the hair went away.[10]

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inherent in the cutting and shaving, growing and braiding, displaying and concealing of hair in different socio-historical contexts" but does not mention dyeing. Petra Sijperstein, "Beards, Braids and Moustachios: Exploring the Social Meaning of Hair in the Mediaeval Muslim World," *Al-Masāq* 30, no. 1 (2018): 5.

[7] *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* no. 5891 (book 77 [*kitāb al-libās*], hadith 108. Online at Sunnah.com, https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5891.

[8] *Saḥīḥ Muslim,* no. 258 (book 2 [*kitāb al-ṭahārah*], hadith 66. Online at Sunnah.com, https://sunnah.com/muslim:258.

[9] A. J. Wensinck, "Khiṭān," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed.; Jon Hoover, "Fitra," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three.*

[10] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Akhbār al-maʾthūrah fī al-iṭṭilāʿ bi-al-nūrah* ("Epistle on the usage of depilatories"), in his *Al-Ḥāwī fī al-fatāwī* (Beirut, 1982), 1:343.

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From this story, indeed from the fact that al-Suyūṭī bothered to devote a treatise (however short) to the subject, we may conclude that removing body hair was an important issue for Mamluk-era Muslims, and this is in fact the case up to the present day. As we saw, while shaving and plucking are the alternatives that the hadith suggests, there is another method: depilatory pastes. The medical-cosmetic literature, which can be considered reflective of actual reality, provides recipes for depilatory creams, a method of hair removal that is much less painful than plucking and at least as effective as shaving (and unlike shaving, does not leave scars from nicks). An example of such a recipe can be found in the abovementioned thirteenth-century Egyptian pharmacopoeia, *Minhāj al-dukkān*, which reads:

> An oil for preventing hair: Take one part of yellow arsenic and one part of unslaked lime. Soak in very strong vinegar for three days. Filter and add sesame oil and cook over low heat until all the water disappears, and the oil remains. I made it and its texture became coarse like soap . . . I distilled this in an alembic, and it [the texture] was improved.[11]

Modern preparations for the same purpose still contain more or less the same active ingredients, under new names—calcium hydroxide instead of unslaked lime, stearic acid instead of sesame oil. Immediately after this recipe for a depilatory oil (or rather, paste, judging from the described texture), a recipe appears to prevent regrowth of hair:[12] after plucking out *(natf)* the hairs, the area of plucking (later in the recipe specified to be the pubic region, *al-ʿānah*) must be lubricated with oily extract of henbane *(duhn al-banj*; *Hyoscyamus niger)* distilled without (olive?) oil *(bi-lā zayt)*. This will prevent hair growth, or at least suppress its regrowth. The author of the book adds that this is a tested recipe. Henbane is a poisonous plant that has a local analgesic effect when used externally[13] and therefore might give a pleasant sensation after plucking, which traumatizes the hair follicles, or even after using depilatory paste, which changes the relative pH of skin and hair, causing the hairs to dissolve.

It was probably not by chance that this depilatory recipe is for *nūrah* paste and not for sugar syrup, despite the long tradition of the latter being used for hair removal. First of all, it is possible that sugar syrup (usually a simple mixture of water, sugar, and lemon juice) was prepared by laypeople at home and there was no need to go to a pharmacist. There is no recipe for a syrup, as such,

[11] Al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār, *Minhāj al-dukkān,* ed. Ḥasan al-Āṣī (Beirut, 1998), 170.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Anahita Alizadeh et al., "Black Henbane and Its Toxicity—a Descriptive Review," *Avicenna Journal of Phytomedicine* 4, no. 5 (2014): 297–311.

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for this purpose in *Minhāj al-dukkān,* although there are recipes for many and very varied syrups. A recipe for viscous lemon syrup[14] seems like it could be used for hair removal, but it appears without any indication of its use. Another possibility is that people preferred to use *nūrah*.

The collected *fatāwá* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī includes a composition, mentioned above, called *Al-Akhbār al-maʾthūrah fī al-iṭṭilāʿ bi-al-nūrah* ("The collected reports on the smearing of *nūrah*"), where al-Suyūṭī answers two related questions: is the removal of hair with depilatory paste really according to the Sunnah? and are the hadiths on the subject reliable or not, meaning that there are contradictions between the hadiths on this matter? Al-Suyūṭī answers this question at length, indicating that the use of depilatory paste was common (otherwise, the question regarding the Islamic validity of its use would not have arisen). He begins by explaining that there are many hadiths, with varying degrees of reliability, according to which the Prophet and the Ṣaḥābah used *nūrah*. However, it is not clear whether the use of depilatory paste is required, like the shaving of the pubic hair *(ḥalq al-ʿānah)* and the plucking of the armpits *(natf al-ibṭ)*. It can be said that this is a custom, and the Prophet's actions do not indicate *sunnah* in this case; it can be said that this is an act that is permitted, and Muḥammad performed it to clarify this; it can be said that the use of *nūrah* is *sunnah* because one should follow the custom of the Prophet. It seems that al-Suyūṭī favors the use of depilatory paste, because he later produces ten reliable hadiths, some with more than one chain of transmission, according to which Muḥammad used *nūrah*: "The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, used to enter the bathhouse and used to use depilatory paste *(kāna rasūl allāh, ṣ.l.ʿ.m., yadkhul al-ḥammām wa-kāna yatanawwir)*."[15] He cites additional hadiths according to which the Ṣaḥābah used *nūrah,* where the emphasis is on modesty laws: it is proper for a person to remove his pubic hair himself.[16] Al-Suyūṭī rejects as weak the only hadith he cites according to which the Prophet used to shave his pubic hair, but agrees that it is possible that Muḥammad sometimes shaved and sometimes used *nūrah,* thus settling the contradiction the questioner raised.[17]

Nūrah is further mentioned in Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿah's biography of the legendary Arab physician al-Ḥārith ibn Kalādah, as follows:

> Dāwūd ibn Rushayd tells us that according to ʿAmr ibn Maʿrūf, when al-Ḥārith ibn Kalādah lay dying, people came to his bedside and begged him to give them some words for their guidance

[14] Al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār, *Minhāj al-dukkān,* 19.

[15] Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Akhbār al-maʾthūrah fī al-iṭṭilāʿ bi-al-nūrah,* 1:340–41.

[16] Ibid., 1:341.

[17] Ibid., 1:342.

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> when he would no longer be with them. . . . He said, "... use the depilatory paste called *nūrah* every month, as it gets rid of phlegm, eliminates bile and causes flesh to grow. . . ."[18]

In this case, *nūrah* does not merely remove superfluous hair, it also removes superfluous humors, specifically phlegm (cold and moist) and bile (hot and dry). Al-Ḥārith's recommendation of using *nūrah* monthly fits the recommendation of the jurisprudents mentioned above to do so at least every forty days. The story is reminiscent of the genre of prophetic medicine *(al-ṭibb al-nabawī),* which flourished during the Mamluk period.[19] While in prophetic medicine, Galenic ideas were "Islamicized" by being put in the mouth of the Prophet Muḥammad, here we have what seems to be the reverse: a religious duty is made even more worthwhile by having a positive medical effect on the believer's body.

Is it possible that there was a difference between the sexes: perhaps women removed their hair with sugar syrup, as is customary to this day, while men preferred to use *nūrah*? Men apparently removed mainly or only pubic and armpit hair—small and sensitive areas—while women also removed hair from more extensive areas of the body such as the arms and legs (like the Queen of Sheba). Like today, there may have been a demand among women for a method that would keep the body smooth for a long time, and hence there would be a preference for sugar syrup and plucking over the use of *nūrah* or shaving.

Dyeing the Hair

If hair removal is mandatory (for the pubic area and armpits) or permitted (for the legs and arms), what about dyeing the hair? Here the Muslim tradition is less decisive. Already some forty years ago, Juynboll analyzed hadiths dealing with the dyeing of one's hair—sometimes on the head and sometimes the beard.[20] Hair dye is called *khaḍāb.* According to what he found, there are several groups of hadiths that deal with this issue. First, there are hadiths from the Hijaz, in which there is opposition to dyeing hair with a plant called *wasmah* (probably indigo, *Indigofera tinctoria*), and support for dyeing it with *ḥinnāʾ* (henna, *Lawsonia inermis*) and *katam* (probably dyer's woad, *Isatis tinctoria*), two plants of which the former is common in the Arabian Peninsula and the latter must be imported,

[18] *A Literary History of Medicine: The* ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ *of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿah Online,* ed. Emilie Savage-Smith, Simon Swain, Geert Jan van Gelder (Leiden, 2020), §7.1, https://doi.org/10.1163/37704_0668IbnAbiUsaibia.Tabaqatalatibba.lhom-tr-eng1.

[19] See Irmeli Perho, *The Prophet's Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars* (Helsinki, 1995).

[20] G. H. A. Juynboll, "Dyeing the Hair and Beard in Early Islam: A Ḥadīth-analytical Study," *Arabica* 33 (1986): 49–75.

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probably from the Levant.[21] The combination of the two yields a dark red-orange color, but not black. Second, there are hadiths from Syria that support dyeing the hair black. These also contain polemics against the Christians and the Jews, who did not dye their beards. Third, there are hadiths from Basrah, according to which Muḥammad himself did not dye his hair, but it is still permissible to dye the hair black. Finally, there are hadiths from Kūfah, according to which Muḥammad did dye his hair and recommended the use of henna combined with *katam*. According to Juynboll, hair dyeing was common in all the societies conquered by the Arabs and was known in the Arabian Peninsula. He suggests that before Islam the use of *khaḍāb* was not common due to a lack of raw materials. After the conquests, on the other hand, the use of hair dye continued to grow and a group of traditionists arose who were associated with the trade in henna and were called *ḥinnāʾīyūn*. Juynboll claims that the connection is not accidental and that these were precisely the people who spread hadiths in favor of dyeing one's hair.

A recent article by El Shamsy,[22] however, has deconstructed Juynboll's claims, arguing that "the key feature of Juynboll's article is that it takes as its starting point the hypothesis that the hadith on hair dyeing are later fabrications to justify a cultural adoption by Muslims from their non-Muslim subject populations, and it then interprets the evidence in light of this assumption."[23] El Shamsy considers additional hadiths, as well as contemporary Muslim practice, to conclude that rather than competing traditions for and against dyeing hair at all, the debate was against dyeing the hair black and in favor of dyeing it a reddish-brown or orange color.[24]

I thought that the desire to dye the hair to a dark red-orange shade might indicate continuity with the Hellenistic tradition. The Greeks and Romans preferred to dye their hair these colors over darker ones. There are even reports of Roman women who wore wigs made from the hair of blonde or red-haired German slave girls, earning thus the ridicule of the satirists.[25] In Islamicate culture, matters are more complex. In addition to the testimony of the hadith, which is not unequivocal in this matter, we may consider the testimony of poetry. In

[21] Woad is native to the Mediterranean basin, extending into temperate Europe, thus would need to be imported into the hotter and drier Arabian Peninsula. See Daniel Zohary, Maria Hopf, and Ehud Weiss, *Domestication of Plants in the Old Word* (Oxford, 2012), 166–67.

[22] Ahmad El Shamsy, "The Curious Case of Early Muslim Hair Dyeing," in *Islam at 250: Studies in Memory of G. H. A. Juynboll,* ed. Petra Sijperstein and Camilla Adang (Leiden, 2020), 187–206.

[23] Ibid., 189.

[24] Ibid., 191.

[25] E.g., Juvenal, *The Satires,* trans. A. S. Kline, Satire 6, line 120: https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/JuvenalSatires6.php.

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the descriptions of the beloved in Arabic and Persian poetry, the beloved is always described as having black hair, preferably black hair that flows over the shoulders. This is how ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿah is quoted in the tenth-century anthology *Kitāb al-aghānī,* comparing the gazelle to a girl with the words "and that you [i.e., the gazelle] have no hair, whilst hers/is blackest flood upon her shoulders clothing her."[26] Sometimes the poet also dyes his hair, like Rudākī (d. circa 328/940), who says:

> I do not dye my hair black so as to be young again and sin again,
> but because people dye their clothes black in mourning,
> so I have dyed my hair black, mourning my old age.[27]

What do we find in pharmacological writings? Islamicate medicine is generally seen as continuing and developing Greek medicine. We would expect, therefore, to find in Arabic pharmacopoeias recipes for dyeing the hair that originate from the Hellenistic tradition, that is, for lightening the hair. However, this is not the case: recipes for hair dyes actually support the testimony of poetry according to which black hair is considered the most beautiful. So far, in this genre I have found only one recipe for lightening the hair, which does not necessarily mean dyeing it blond:[28] "for bleaching the hair: Grind mung beans in vinegar, smear that (on the hair), and (then) anoint it with jasmine oil."[29] This recipe appears in the pharmacopoeia of Sābūr ibn Sahl (d. 255/869), who, although he lived in Baghdad, represents a Syrian-Nestorian tradition. Compared to this single recipe, there are several recipes for dyeing the hair black, both in books from Baghdad and in books from Cairo. These recipes are usually also intended to strengthen the hair. The following recipe appears in *Minhāj al-dukkān:*

> Oil that blackens the hair and strengthens it, known as myrtle oil or emblic oil. Take three *ūqīyah*s [about 90 grams] of emblic

[26] Cited in Johann C. Bürgel, "The Lady Gazelle and Her Murderous Glances," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 20 (1989): 2.

[27] Translation from Bernard Lewis, *Music of a Distant Drum: Classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew Poems* (Princeton, 2001), 99.

[28] For recipes from a different genre, that of the tricks of various kinds of conmen, compare the chapter on dyeing humans in al-Jawbarī's thirteenth-century *Book of Charlatans,* which contains both a recipe for bleaching the beard and one for dyeing it blond. The latter is a very simple combination of henna and crushed madder, whose result, "a very intense reddish blond," fits well with the preferences of the hadith discussed above. See Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Jawbarī, *The Book of Charlatans,* trans. Humphrey Davis (New York 2020), 294–303. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this reference.

[29] Recipe 222 in *Sābūr ibn Sahl's Dispensatory in the Recension of the ʿAḍudī Hospital,* ed. and trans. Oliver Kahl (Leiden, 2009), 96 (Arabic), 203 (English).

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> myrobalan cleaned of seeds, cook in three *raṭl*s [about 900 ml] of water until half remains, and if it was [cooked in] wine, that would be better. Filter and add one *raṭl* of fresh myrtle-water and one *raṭl* of oil of violets. Cook until the watery part evaporates, and the oil remains. After removing from the fire, add five dirhams [about 16 grams] of frankincense, and use.[30]

Please note that there are no instructions whatsoever as to how this oil should be applied. Note, also, the comment of the Jewish author that it is better to use wine rather than water as a base in which the other ingredients are cooked. This is interesting, given that most schools of law permit the use in medicine of wine that has been reduced by two-thirds. Yet even though this is a preparation for external use, a Muslim consumer may prefer to avoid wine regardless; is it perhaps more acceptable here because this is not strictly a medicine?

An expanded version of this recipe appears in the *Aqrābādhīn* of Ibn al-Tilmīdh (d. 549/1154 or 560/1165), another Baghdadi Nestorian physician. His pharmacopoeia replaced that of Sābūr ibn Sahl in the hospitals of the Islamic East, and he was well-known also to al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār, who quotes him extensively (but not in this case). Ibn al-Tilmīdh adds that according to some versions, the myrtle water is cooked together with sesame oil.[31] This oil apparently gives the hair a black appearance, but the color does not remain over time and therefore it is not called *khaḍāb*. Recipes that receive this title contain the distinct coloring agents oak galls *(ʿafṣ)* and *nīl* (synonymous with *wasmah*), for example in the following recipe in Ibn al-Tilmīdh's compilation, which also describes the lengthy dyeing process:

> A dye *(khaḍāb)* which darkens the hair
>
> Take barley meal, let it properly ferment so that it becomes sour, add to one handful of it one *ūqīyah* (of) *rūsakhtaj* which is oxidized copper, pound (this), strain it through a cloth of silk, and liquefy it little by little with acid wine vinegar until that mixture of fermented dough and oxidized copper gains the consistency of pulped lote (fruits); then wrap it around the hair and stuff into it beet leaves or lettuce (leaves) or vine leaves or gourd leaves in order to prevent the dye from drying out (too soon); leave it (like this) for twelve hours, then take away (the leaves) and shake off (the dye) from the hair. Meanwhile you should have prepared twenty unpierced oak galls by burning them almost to the point

[30] Al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār, *Minhāj al-dukkān,* 162.

[31] Recipe 280 in *The Dispensatory of Ibn al-Tilmīd,* ed. and trans. Oliver Kahl (Leiden, 2007), 133 (Arabic), 266–67 (English).

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> of complete combustion, (then) by quenching them so that they can (easily) be crushed whilst some of their faculty is (still left), and (finally) by grinding them, straining them through a cloth of silk, and wetting them with water; (now) wrap (this dye) around the hair, put leaves into it, and let it alone for twelve hours as (you did) before; then take away (the leaves) and wash off (the dye). This will bring out a long-lasting beautiful black colour.[32]

This is an example of a two-step dyeing process, which probably begins with lightening the hair before dyeing it the desired color. Of course, similar processes also exist today, including the same technique of applying the dye to the hair, and covering it for a certain period of time—although today the hair is usually covered with a plastic bath cap for a period of up to half an hour. Moreover, this Baghdadi recipe is very different from the later Cairene one: where *Minhāj al-dukkān* makes use of myrobalans imported from India, myrtle-water, oil of violets, and finally frankincense, Ibn al-Tilmīdh's recipe begins with a mineral-based preparation, and then continues to using burnt oak galls. It is difficult to say how much each hair dye might have cost, and whether this affected who might have used it. At first glance, myrobalans and frankincense—imported to Egypt from India and Arabia, respectively—would appear to be more expensive ingredients, but oxidized copper and oak galls, too, may have been imported to Baghdad.

All the pharmacopoeias I have cited (which I believe to have been the most popular ones in use in the medieval Arabophone world, given their extensive use in hospitals or in the community)[33] were composed by Jews or Christians, not by Muslims. Might this have affected their contents? It is usually assumed that medicine in general was largely a tolerant interfaith matter for most of the pre-modern Islamic world, with a permanent decline in the status of *dhimmī* physicians and pharmacists occurring only in the Mamluk period.[34] To return to El Shamsy's paper, he makes use of Christian and Jewish sources to demonstrate that dyeing the beard unnatural colors was a custom used to differentiate Muslims from non-Muslims from early on. Indeed, he claims that it is possible

[32] Recipe 334 in ibid., 149 (Arabic), 282–83 (English).

[33] Ibid., 5, on Sābūr and Ibn al-Tilmīdh in hospitals; Leigh Chipman, *The World of Pharmacy and Pharmacists in Mamlūk Cairo* (Leiden, 2010), 1–3, on *Minhāj al-dukkān* in the community.

[34] There is an extensive bibliography on the place of *dhimmī*s in the medical profession and the changes therein over time. See, e.g., Paulina Lewicka, "Medicine for Muslims? Islamic Theologians, Non-Muslim Physicians and the Medical Culture of the Mamluk Near East," in *History and Society during the Mamluk Period (1250–1517),* ed. Stephan Conermann (Bonn, 2014), 83–106; and most recently, Efraim Lev, *Jewish Medical Practitioners in the Medieval Muslim World: A Collective Biography* (Edinburgh, 2021).

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that the hair-dyeing hadiths aimed to place the Muslims within the community of monotheists generally (the Torah and Talmud, like the hadith, object to the plucking of gray hairs and to dyeing the beard black) but at the same time clearly differentiating them from non-Muslims.[35] Over time, as Muslims became the majority rather than a ruling minority, the task of differentiation fell upon the *dhimmī*s, who were required to wear special markers of their status, and the objection to dyeing the hair black faded away.[36]

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can be drawn from everything I have said so far? Is all this nothing more than a curio? The anthropologist Christian Bromberger points out that "the strictly codified wearing of the beard and the mustache, as well as the practice of corporal hair removal, are among the strongest and most nuanced markers of adherence to the Islamic community."[37] It is interesting that there are significantly more recipes for hair dyes than for hair removal pastes in the pharmacological literature, a ratio of about three to one. In the context of the medieval Middle East, I suggest we should consider that these are treatments that were mostly done in the *ḥammām,* where other medical treatments were also performed (for skin diseases, for example).[38] The ḥammām is a kind of no man's land, both public and private, or neither public nor private. The discussions in the hadiths I cited on hair removal and dyeing concern the boundaries between the public and the private, the modest and the obscene. A possible direction for further research is the legal and medical-theoretical literature about the ḥammām and hair care. Within the scope of this article, I can only touch the tip of the iceberg that is the history and practice of cosmetics, but, apparently, there were no real differences between men and women in terms of hair care, and thus there is evidence of an ideal of beauty common to men and women: a

[35] El Shamsy, "Curious Case," 192–97.

[36] Ibid., 202–3.

[37] Christian Bromberger, "Hair: From the West to the Middle East through the Mediterranean (The 2007 AFS Mediterranean Studies Section Address)," *Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 482 (2008): 385.

[38] See, e.g., Pauline Koetschet, "Quelques aspects du bain dans la médecine arabe médievale," in *25 siècles de bain collectif en Orient: Proche-Orient, Égypte et péninsule Arabique: balaneia = thermae = hammāmāt: Actes du 3e Colloque International Balnéorient, organisé par l'Institut Français du Proche-Orient et la Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées de Syrie (Damas-Syrie, 2–6 nov. 2009),* ed. Marie-Françoise Boussac et al. (Cairo, 2014), 1011–24.

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smooth and fair body, often placed in contrast to long black hair.[39] This ideal of beauty can be found, for example, in descriptions of the Prophet Muḥammad.[40] A common beauty ideal for men and women is an expression of the concept that men and women do not form a binary but are on a continuum. Most recently, Zayde Antrim has shown that in the *Thousand and One Nights,* an exemplar of Mamluk-era popular literature, the bodies of men and women are described in strikingly similar terms,[41] suggesting ungendered beauty standards rather than the woman being a defective version of the man (what Dror Ze'evi calls the woman-as-imperfect-man model)[42] that would appear to be a step on the way to a sex binary. If there is no essential difference between the sexes, there is no need to create the sharp distinctions between the hirsute man and the smooth woman that exist in modern society, which advocates a binary model. (Postmodern society has begun to challenge these sharp distinctions, and as evidence we find in recent decades the rise of a new male beauty model that advocates a smooth body for men as well.) On the other hand, even if traditional Muslim societies did not make distinctions between the sexes, they did make distinctions between genders, which manifested in all areas of life. In the context of hair removal, it can be seen that women remove hair from the entire body, while men remove it only from specific areas, and as such this is a gender distinction. If we return for a moment to the Queen of Sheba, her hairy legs are only one expression of her deviation from accepted norms. Is she hairy because she is descended from jinn? Or maybe she is hairy because she succeeded her father, killed her first husband, and continues to dominate men? In any case, she goes beyond the boundaries of her gender. Thus, it seems to me that the lens of gender and sex contributes to understanding the attitude toward hair but is not enough to explain it completely.

Another lens, which I alluded to above, is that of religion; more precisely, of distinction between male members of various religions. While removing body hair remained a private matter, since medieval adults would seldom have exposed their unclothed bodies, a man with a beard in his natural color—black, brown, gray, white—may belong to any religion. But a man whose beard is dyed reddish-

[39] This ideal seems to have lasted up to the nineteenth century in Iran. See Najmabadi, *Women With Mustaches,* 25: "Ideas of beauty were ungendered."

[40] Hadas Hirsch, "Personal Grooming and Outward Appearance in Early Muslim Societies," *Al-Masāq* 23, no. 2 (2011): 107.

[41] Zayde Antrim, "*Qamarayn:* The Erotics of Sameness in the 1001 Nights," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 28, no. 1 (2020): 1–44, esp. 5.

[42] Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley, 2006), 22–23.

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brown with henna is most certainly a Muslim, and likely one deeply invested in the Sunnah of the Prophet.

A final lens through which to understand hair dyeing and hair removal, one that I do not think has yet been considered in depth, is that of ethnic difference.[43] The Mamluk period is one in which there was a distinct ethnic difference between the ruling class ("Turks") and the ruled populace (Arabs).[44] Throughout the pre-modern and early modern periods, Arabs, Iranians, and Turks alike admitted to physical differences among the stereotypical members of each ethnic group.[45] At the same time, the Mamluks specifically regarded themselves as Muslim warriors—perhaps the greater number of recipes for hair dyeing in the pharmacopoeias of this period is a reflection of this?

[43] I thank Dr. Or Amir for this suggestion.

[44] Ulrich W. Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the Abbasids to Modern Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 2 (1988): 175–96.

[45] See, *inter alia,* John P. Turner, "Al-Jāḥiẓ and Identity," in *Islam on the Margins: Studies in Memory of Michael Bonner, ed. Robert Haug and Steven Judd (Leiden,* 2023), 201–19. For ethnic differences among the Mamluks themselves, see the works of Koby Yosef.

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