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Waste, Excess, and Obsession in the Mamluk Harem

Royal women, in spite of the restrictions of seclusion, engaged with the urban space of the Mamluk Sultanate at its capital in Cairo in a variety of ways. Modern scholarship has focused primarily on their pilgrimage processions and building projects, the most "visible" manifestations of their influence on Mamluk society and governance.[1] Less studied has been *how* medieval Islamic scholars constructed their narratives about royal women. What kind of categories and assumptions were in use? What choices did they make in depicting these women? How were accounts of royal women similar or different across different texts, and what can that tell us about Mamluk chronicle-writing more broadly? Using the descriptions of royal women written by three prominent Mamluk chroniclers—al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Iyās, and Ibn Taghrībirdī—I emphasize the differences in chronicles in terms of the value judgments that the authors made about royal women and events in their lives and what they chose to emphasize and neglect in weaving together an account of Mamluk reigns. In doing so, I argue that motifs of waste, excess, and obsession are frequently used: waste of precious resources by sultans or the members of their harem, excessive displays of wealth, and sultans' distracting obsession with wives and mothers. Through these themes this article explores broader issues of how chroniclers depict royal women and the variation in such narratives.

The chronicles illuminate a complex negotiation between the urban populace, the state, and their own record of events. When sultans are long lasting, strong, or otherwise stable, chroniclers often praise prominent royal women for their

[1] For instance, see Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "The Mahmal Legend and the Pilgrimage of the Ladies of the Mamluk Court," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997); Howayda Al-Harithy, "Female Patronage of Mamluk Architecture in Cairo," in *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies,* ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY, 2005); Kathryn Johnson, "Royal Pilgrims: Mamlūk Accounts of the Pilgrimages to Mecca of the Khawand al-Kubrā (Senior Wife of the Sultan)," *Studia Islamica* 91 (2000); Carl Petry, "The Estate of al-Khuwand Fāṭima al-Khaṣṣbakiyya: Royal Spouse, Autonomous Investor," in *Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society,* ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden, 2004); idem, "Class Solidarity versus Gender Gain: Women as Custodians of Property in Later Medieval Egypt," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender,* ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Cumberland, RI, 2008); Susan Staffa, "Dimensions of Women's Power in Historic Cairo," in *Islamic and Middle Eastern Societies: A Festchrift in Honor of Professor Wadie Jwaideh,* ed. Robert Olson (Brattleboro, VT, 1987); Caroline Williams, "The Mosque of Sitt Hadaq," *Muqarnas* 11 (1994).

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elaborate processions, pious giving, and political savvy. In prolonged periods of ineffective rulers, political turmoil, or other issues, however, the chroniclers tend to emphasize motifs of greed, ostentation, and misrule that implicate women's activities in urban space or the preoccupation of a reigning sultan with his harem. At these times, the chroniclers make it a point to mention how the populace reacted, usually with rumors or expressions of distaste. As a result, royal women are even more "visible" than the women on the streets of the city because their actions are recorded in the chronicles as representative of a ruling husband or son, or even the state of the sultanate as a whole. One of the moments in which the themes of waste and excess are most prominent in the chronicles is the public parading of the pilgrimage caravan to Mecca, which was one of the duties of royal women. The chroniclers also use these themes when describing what occurred in the harem. Before discussing the themes in both locations, general differences between the three chroniclers are elucidated as well as some remarks about the representations of class and gender in chronicle writing. What follows is an analysis of the themes of waste, excess, and obsession in the contexts of the harem and the pilgrimage parade, after which the theme of obsession is analyzed more fully with some examples of prominent royal women's public excursions.

Chronicling Royal Women

This study focuses on three Mamluk chroniclers: al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874–75/1470), and Ibn Iyās (d. ca. 930/1524), as well as al-Sakhāwī's biographical dictionary for the ninth/fifteenth century. In some cases, al-Maqrīzī is clearly a source for Ibn Taghrībirdī. In other cases, Ibn Taghrībirdī edits out information and includes different anecdotes than al-Maqrīzī. This revision is clearly seen in the discussion of the pilgrimage parade, the descriptions of which sometimes include themes of waste and excess, discussed below. Al-Maqrīzī discusses pilgrimages of royal women with detail, while Ibn Taghrībirdī typically does not. For al-Maqrīzī, the parades, including the participation of royal women in them, were an important state function, while Ibn Taghrībirdī sometimes highlights the role of royal men rather than the role of women. In most instances, the latter's descriptions tend to be formulaic.

Ibn Iyās is quite specific in describing the pilgrimages, especially those that occurred during the middle and end of the sultanate; clearly for this scholar these were important markers of Mamluk power. Ibn Iyās tends to revel in the pageantry of royal women's parades and provides the most detail when they were present. However, he chooses not to include many accounts that both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī relish about the reigns of the sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (d. 742/1341) and their obsession with the women of the harem, also discussed

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at length below. While Ibn Iyās is less explicit with the motif of waste and excess that the other two chroniclers frequently use, he does use this motif when describing the ostentation of the pilgrimage parade of one of the last Mamluk rulers, Qānṣūḥ al-Ghawrī (d. 922/1516). Thus, while each chronicler has different perspectives on the events that are most pertinent to various sultans' rule, they still represent royal women using similar themes, descriptions, and motifs.

Chroniclers and biographers typically describe royal women with the same or similar terminology used to discuss their male counterparts: amirs and sultans. As Julie Scott Meisami has asserted, "If the outcome of a woman's actions was positive, the woman might be praised for her wisdom, perspicacity, determination and so on; if it was negative, the old saw about women's malign influence might be trotted out..."[2] In the descriptions in the texts under study here, royal women and royal men have much more in common than, say, royal women and women of the urban populace. For instance, when the chroniclers write that "women" were banned from the streets of Cairo at a certain time, women of the royal household were certainly not included in that category. Thus, it is common for accusations of greed and wastefulness also to be leveled against sultans and amirs. However, I contend that these themes of waste, excess, and obsession are often interrelated in the chronicles and that depictions of royal women as being wasteful, excessive in their decorations or behavior, or the object of obsession are frequently used by chroniclers to make implicit claims about the economic and political state of the sultanate or to criticize sultans in a more covert fashion.

In the Harem

The mid-eighth/fourteenth century ushered in a period of crisis, both politically and economically. The Black Death, whose initial outbreak occurred approximately 747–50/1347–50 and then recurred periodically for the next 150 years, caused demographic decline, which led to a decrease in agriculture.[3] Furthermore, the state was facing increasing competition from European kingdoms.[4] At the same time, years of expenditures exceeding revenues and poor attempts at increasing the state treasury—such as confiscating land and wealth—had already

[2]Julie Scott Meisami, "Writing Medieval Women: Representations and Misrepresentations," in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons,* ed. Julia Bray (New York, 2006), 64.

[3]For a study on the plague in the Middle East, see Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ, 1977). He comments that the plague caused severe depopulation, a decline in the Mamluk army, changing prices and salaries, and the abandonment of some agricultural centers. Dols also notes that after the initial outbreak, the plague recurred in cycles of 9–12 years.

[4]Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310–1341)* (Leiden, 1995), 133–40.

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planted seeds of incoming economic trouble.[5] The state experienced monetary crisis with an influx of copper coinage into the market and a decrease in silver and gold coins. The recurring problems of the plague, poor agricultural revenues, environmental disasters, and famine contributed to economic decline into the ninth/fifteenth century.[6]

While these economic problems were emerging, the chroniclers accuse a series of sultans of spending lavishly on their own households and harems. The sultans were said to give the women of their harems extravagant gifts of gold and jewelry and to grant them more access than before to economic benefits outside their allowances. The chroniclers cast the wealth and power that the women of the harem wielded in this period in a negative light, although for other women, like Zaynab, the wife of Īnāl (d. 865/1461), in later years, and Ṭughāy, the wife of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (d. 741/1341), a few decades earlier, these same traits were portrayed positively. However, the period of the mid-eighth/fourteenth century saw a series of abortive reigns that the chroniclers sought to criticize, and the themes of excess expenditures and greedy women of the harem gave them a narrative around which to shape that criticism.

Sultans who had grown up in the harem were often characterized as being strongly influenced by their wives, mothers, and concubines, as well as by the powerful commanders who helped put them on the throne. Several of the sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad attempted to retain control of the sultanate after his death, although prominent amirs largely controlled the government.[7] It is in this period where al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī rely on motifs of waste and obsession in order to criticize rulers that they considered weak by pointing to their concern with women and sport instead of rule.

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[5]Ibid., 148, 151.

[6]For a succinct discussion of Mamluk political and economic history see Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and its Culture* (London and New York, 2007), 1–6.

[7]After al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death, his son, Abū Bakr, was put on the throne for only a few months before another faction of amirs made another son, Kujuk, sultan. A third son, Aḥmad, also gained the support of a Mamluk faction and reigned for four months before the first of the sons discussed here, Ismāʿīl, was raised to the throne. These reigns are discussed in Jo van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos: Patronage, Conflict and Mamluk Socio-Political Culture, 1341–1382* (Leiden, 2006). He brings to light the roles of patronage and conflict and the varying networks that vied for dominance. For an analysis of Aḥmad's infatuation with a beautiful young man, see Everett Rowson, "Homoerotic Liaisons among the Mamluk Elite in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire,* ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA, 2008). As Rowson points out, the chroniclers are not concerned with Aḥmad's love of the young man but rather with his "obsessiveness." Furthermore, Rowson speculates that his class may have also been a factor in his unsuitableness. (207–8).

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One ambitious amir, Arghūn al-ʿAlāʾī, wed the mother of Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʾīl (d. 745/1345) and, as al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī note, became the de facto leader of the state.[8] To further cement the two households, the sultan also married the daughter of Arghūn al-ʿAlāʾī.[9] The young sultan, however, had little interest in rule because of his preoccupation with the concubines of the harem. Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī state that he was fond of a slave girl named Ittifāq, and Ibn Taghrībirdī says that his love for her exceeded proper bounds.[10] He comments, "He [Ismāʾīl] shirked ruling the kingdom out of his devotion to women and singers."[11] Furthermore, according to the chronicler, he was constantly in the company of his mother and women of the harem, even on trips outside the citadel. Al-Maqrīzī relates an anecdote in which Ismāʾīl was afraid of retrieving items from the treasury to gift to Ittifāq because his stepfather would not approve. Consequently, he had another official retrieve jewelry and other goods from the treasury in secret, an account that illustrates the sultan's timidity.[12] Interestingly, Ibn Iyās does not provide these provocative and detailed anecdotes about al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʾīl. Instead, he simply says that the sultan was inclined to the love of slave girls of various ethnicities.[13] Al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʾīl eventually married Ittifāq, although his time with her would not last long. When he became ill and died, his stepfather managed to place his brother, Shaʿbān, on the throne, in an attempt to continue the line of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons and also his own power as a relative to the reigning sultan.[14]

[8] Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk* (Cairo, 1934–73), 2:620. See also Abū al-Maḥāsin Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1963), 10:79, 90. Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʿ al-duhūr* (Wiesbaden and Cairo, 1960–92, repr. Mecca), 1:1:509. Ibn Iyās mentions Arghūn al-ʿAlāʾī as the stepfather for Ismāʾīl and his brother Shaʿbān later than al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, during Shaʿbān's reign. See also this discussion in Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History,* 186–90. She analyzes several of the events mentioned here with al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons. However, she also asserts that the harem had little government influence after these sons were ousted from the throne, which seems dubious considering the powerful and influential royal women in the following century. A council of nine amirs was appointed for economic matters by the late eighth/fourteenth century, and it gave the sultan an allowance to keep him from overspending (194).

[9] Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:90.

[10] Ibid., 10:96.

[11] Ibid., 10:96–97.

[12] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:662–63.

[13] Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 1:1:505.

[14] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:680. Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:95, 117.

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Shaʿbān (d. 747/1346) proceeded to marry his brother's wife, Ittifāq; she bore him a son in 747/1346.[15] During one incident, she, along with his mother and the other women of the harem, convinced him to travel to the Ḥijāz for pilgrimage at a time when the state was unstable. Against the wishes of the amirs he went, only to have to come back once the situation had worsened. Al-Maqrīzī writes that "demands had increased upon the people," in regard to grain prices and yields; the economy was in such dire straits that two officials begged him to cancel his trip.[16] The amirs eventually agreed that he must be removed from the sultanate in light of his desire to leave the capital when the economy was in such disarray. The chroniclers imply that the women of his harem had offered him unwise advice and, due to his preoccupation with them, he chose to listen to them instead of his officials.

Shaʿbān's stepfather, Arghūn al-ʿAlāʾī, did not agree with his stepson's removal from power, and as a result he was beaten with clubs "until he collapsed."[17] Upon hearing this news and being told he would be removed from the sultanate, Shaʿbān fled to the citadel to his mother's side.[18] Later, he was killed and his brother put on the throne. Al-Maqrīzī sums up his reign by saying that he enabled the servants and women of the harem and allowed them to engage in poor behavior. One such instance is an excursion in which the women drank wine in public.[19] Furthermore, as will be discussed, the women are described as being greedy and extorting property from the populace. Shaʿbān also spent an excessive amount of time with his pleasures: hunting, playing games, and riding horses, with a "lack of shame from evil deeds."[20] Ibn Taghrībirdī specifically mentions his preoccupation with polo.[21]

His half brother, the next sultan—al-Muẓaffar Ḥājjī (d. 748/1347)—was not immune to the charms of the harem, particularly Ittifāq; he also married her, albeit

[15] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:707. Ibn Taghrībirdī discusses Shaʿbān's extraordinary love for Ittifāq at Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:119.

[16] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:708.

[17] Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 1:1:510. He was not beaten to death, but in 748/1348 the sultan al-Muẓaffar Ḥājjī imprisoned him in Alexandria, where he was later killed. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:735, 756. Al-Muẓaffar Ḥājjī had a different mother than Ismāʾīl and Shaʿbān and thus Arghūn al-ʿAlāʾī lost the power he had as a relative of the sultan when al-Muẓaffar Ḥājjī ascended to the throne.

[18] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:712; Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 1:1:511. While Ibn Iyās does mention the role of Shaʿbān's stepfather and the sultan being overthrown, the chronicler does not discuss Ittifāq in accounts of either Shaʿbān or his brother Ismāʾīl.

[19] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:713; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:141.

[20] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:713.

[21] Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:128, 132.

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in secret.[22] He was also enamored with sport and engaged in different activities on different days of the week, like riding near the Nile or playing polo in the square. Sometimes he would have gatherings of people in the square to view sports and other entertainments; his mother and some of the wives of the commanders would attend.[23] Al-Maqrīzī writes that he even would play with the common people, sometimes stripping off his clothing to wrestle with them, as well as playing other games—behavior inappropriate for a ruler.[24] With many of these depictions, obsession with the women of the harem and obsession with play instead of rule work in tandem. The sultans are shown to be young, irresponsible, and as a result the state of the sultanate suffers.

In 755/1354, another son of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, al-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ (d. 755/1354), also exhibited excessive deference to women of the harem, particularly his mother. In one account, he traveled with his harem and prominent officials to Siryāqūs, a summer resort for the Mamluk elite outside Cairo.[25] There, he met with artisans, such as cooks and silk weavers, and prepared a magnificent feast "by his own hand." He also arranged for a procession for his mother that mimicked that of the sultan. The slave girls and servants carried the royal Mamluk symbols of *al-qubbah wa-al-ṭayr* (the parasol and the bird) over her head, and she was "dressed like a king and in the form of a female sultan."[26] After the "procession," the sultan gave out robes of honor and gifts of money, and everyone ate the food he had prepared. He assisted his mother while she ate. This event seems to perplex al-Maqrīzī in its extravagance as well as the overly deferential way that the sultan treated his mother. The "procession" seemed to make a mockery of sultanic rituals. Here, at a private, lavish party, the same symbols bestowed upon the sultan's mother and the mimicking of a public procession seemed garish and excessive.

The unwise influence that the harem held over the sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is a constant theme in the chronicles; several incidents are given in which they give poor advice, such as the aforementioned account of encouraging the sultan to go on pilgrimage during an economically turbulent period. In another account,

[22] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:720; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:153.

[23] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:735; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:155.

[24] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:740; Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 1:1:518.

[25] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:929. For a brief discussion of Siryāqūs, see Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History,* 160. She comments that it was built in 723–35/1323–25 and contained "magnificent palaces for the sultan and his amirs, and a *khānaqā* [Sufi institution], large enough to house one hundred Sufis who were maintained and supported by the treasury." It had gardens with "fruit trees brought from Damascus." Sultans would regularly go there to hunt, play polo, and attend banquets, as Levanoni notes. Ibn Iyās describes the building of the *khānqāh* there in 723/1323 under al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 1:1:454–55. He furthermore notes that the sultan went and stayed the night at the *khānqāh* when it was finished.

[26] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:929.

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Ibn Iyās describes how another son, the sultan al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (d. 762/1361), received word in 762/1361 that the commander Yalbughā plotted to kill him. He brought him into the palace, and one of his concubines interceded on the commander's behalf. Instead of being killed for his insubordination, the amir was awarded a robe of honor and let go.[27] This move, however, turned out to be unwise, as Yalbughā returned to his camp and predictably began plotting against the sultan again. Sultan Ḥasan eventually had to gather his troops and try to defeat the errant amir to solve the plot against his life.

Thus, the chroniclers clearly see these women as a distraction from the reigning sultans at best. The advice they offer—such as going on the pilgrimage or releasing a captive—is described as foolish, and the money spent on gifts and parties for them is seen as extravagant. Furthermore, the chroniclers characterize several of the sultans as more concerned with play than with rule. This period of abortive reigns by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons was politically turbulent, and the poor decisions made by the sultans are exemplified by their fixation on the harem and close connection to their mothers. Other women, who lived in more stable times, were able to advise the sultan and throw even more lavish events during their reign without the condemnation and condescension present in the way the royal women are portrayed in these episodes.

The gifts and allowances the women of the harem received during the reigns of the sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad were also excessive, according to the chroniclers. Ibn Taghrībirdī notes disproportionate giving in the case of Ismāʿīl toward Ittifāq.[28] Al-Maqrīzī comments that Shaʿbān's gifts to Ittifāq and the favor bestowed upon her were like those to "no other women in her time." Both chroniclers record that the sultan built her a house and gave her several pieces of expensive clothing; she had forty dresses inlaid with jewels, sixteen that were embroidered, and eighty veils of enormous value.[29] She also had her own retinue of slave girls and servants. Shaʿbān's brother, al-Muẓaffar Ḥājjī, upon consummating his marriage with her, gave her sixty satin cloths and literally showered her in gold. He also gifted her jewels, including four stones for a ring and six pearls, the cost of which was four hundred thousand dinars.[30]

Not only were the women given material items, but they also used their position to take property from other prominent members of society. Shaʿbān's mother extorted five hundred acres of land and its waterwheel from the sons of an amir

[27] Ibid., 3:60–61. See the discussion of Ḥasan's loss of power to his mamluks in Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos,* 157–58.

[28] Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:96.

[29] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:715; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:150.

[30] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:721; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:154.

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named Tuquzdamar.[31] She also took property from the vizier of Baghdad, including land at Birkat al-Fīl as well as a location with an oil press.[32] Ittifāq, the beloved concubine, obtained four grain mills. Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī bluntly say that the women of the harem were greedy and that they took what was "in the hands of the people": water wheels, grain mills, gardens, and buildings belonging to elites, such as the amir Tuquzdamar and the vizier of Baghdad. Al-Maqrīzī explicitly states that the sultan enabled the women in their poor behavior.[33] There is no mention of any charitable giving on the part of these women, which likely also incited the people against them. If they gave charitably, the chroniclers chose to neglect it in favor of reflecting more selfish attitudes.

Themes of waste, greed, and excess follow royal women in times of political turbulence, as seen in the case of this mid-eighth/fourteenth-century era of short reigns and—for the chroniclers—excess waste in the face of economic difficulties. As Jo van Steenbergen has noted, the "volatile political climate" of these sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad led to a sultanate that "never fully managed to regain the stability it had known."[34] Trips outside the citadel and the confiscations of material goods were visible to the public, fueling rumors that appear in the chronicles about the extravagance and waste at the citadel. Ibn Iyās, unlike al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, tends to not focus on the role of women of the harem during this period and instead makes indirect comments about their influence. He places the blame on the ineffective rule of the sultans themselves and on Mamluk factionalism, while al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, who clearly uses al-Maqrīzī as a source, emphasize anecdotes that implicate the greed of the women of the harem and the sultans' obsession with these women, sport, and pleasure during a time of political disruption.

The Pilgrimage Parade

In addition to these rumors and accusations of conduct inside the harem, chroniclers also used royal women's public presence to level criticism against the state. Mentioned above was one incident of royal women supposedly drinking wine on an excursion outside the harem and another in which women jointed the sultan at Siryāqūs. Excursions like these were relatively rare, however. The main event for which royal women could leave the citadel was to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. While sultans rarely went, the chronicles indicate that the pilgrimage parade was

[31] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:692; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:141.

[32] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:713. See also his brother al-Muẓaffar Ḥājjī giving away property to the women at ibid., 2:740.

[33] Ibid., 2:713.

[34] Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos,* 169.

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a significant part of royal women's responsibilities. Ibn Iyās and al-Maqrīzī certainly give this impression, while Ibn Taghrībirdī tends to focus more on women's activities inside the harem.

Many of the pilgrimages discussed in the chronicles are mentioned with little note, especially those without any royal attendees. Those that are described, however, typically laud the extravagance of the royal women's processions because they were manifestations of the sultanate's piety, grandeur, and strength. The visible representation of the sultanate through these processions, on the other hand, also allowed chroniclers to point out improper rule, excess spending, and impiety by criticizing the behavior of royal women. Furthermore, the processions were closely connected with charity and pious bestowal, as the royal women frequently endowed *waqf*s (charitable endowments), had members of their processions toss coins or sweets, and provided food, water, and other goods to pilgrims along the journey. As Amy Singer notes, women's giving was a part of a "larger beneficent calculus on behalf of the family," not just a reflection of their own piety or wealth.[35] Therefore, emphasizing stinginess or selfishness during the pilgrimage was a way to point to the sultanate's improper use of resources.

The royal family's charitable giving is an example of a transactional kind of piety, as described by Marion Katz.[36] Sultans wanted to gain divine favor through performing recommended actions like almsgiving and *waqf*s, as well as the favor of the religious elites for their devotion to the religion and the favor of the populace for their generosity and assistance. As Adam Sabra points out in his discussion of poverty and charity, in times of trouble the state would engage in extravagant acts of charity in hope of God's help. On several occasions of plague outbreak, the sultan would lead people in mass prayers for repentance, make sacrifices, and give food to the poor. Sultans would also give alms to nearby shrines in "fear of impeding war" or if they or a member of the family were taken ill.[37] The establishment of charitable endowments likewise was transactional in the sense that the elite engaged in an "act pleasing to God" *(qurbah)* while also benefiting themselves and their descendants through the receipt of revenues and prayers said on their behalf if the building endowed was a tomb complex.[38]

Thus, the pilgrimage procession was an avenue of charitable giving that was expected. When this expectation was not met, the chroniclers emphasize this

[35] Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, 2008), 128.

[36] Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (Oxford, 2007), 66–67.

[37] Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517* (Cambridge, 2000), 55–58.

[38] Ibid., 72–73. For a discussion of women's role in founding *waqf,* see Petry, "Class Solidarity versus Gender Gain."

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lack of giving and extrapolate from the actions of the uncharitable a statement about the misrule of the sultan of the time. Furthermore, the ostentation of the parade could just as easily be turned against royal women with accusations of vanity and pettiness. These accounts tend to arise during times of turbulent rule, successive short reigns, or general economic and political uncertainty. The chroniclers, then, use the parade in these instances to criticize the actions of the sultan and his officials in an indirect way, by instead attacking the behavior of the royal women in public.

During the years of al-Ashraf Qānṣūḥ al-Ghawrī's reign (906–22/1501–16), several royal women went on the pilgrimage. However, it was the pilgrimage of al-Ghawrī's wife that was particularly notable and drew the criticism of Ibn Iyās. Qānṣūḥ al-Ghawrī was the last reigning sultan before the empire fell to the Ottomans, and thus the political and economic uncertainty of the time is reflected in chronicles like that of Ibn Iyās, which look back on the fall of the sultanate and attempt to find someone or a set of circumstances to blame.

Ibn Iyās tells us that the *maḥmal* (a ceremonial litter sent out during the pilgrimage) left Cairo in 920/1514 along with Sultan al-Ghawrī's wife, Umm Sīdī Muḥammad, and their son, Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad, who was the *amīr al-ḥajj* (head of the caravan).[39] It was a particularly grand affair, as there were four armed detachments, each sponsored by an amir who was making the pilgrimage.[40] The sultan's son sponsored one, which was accompanied by men in their battle attire and musicians with drums and flutes. The banners of the sultanate flew. Two rows of camels with gold Venetian tassels were in the parade, as were horses with yellow silk blankets atop them. The chronicler even goes into detail about the luggage: an excessive amount of kitchenware, porcelain vases from China, ewers, basins, and other objects of great beauty. The excess seems to bewilder even Ibn Iyās. He says that the sultan's wife's palanquin was "the most beautiful in the world." The palanquin was made of red velvet fabric and decorated with gold embroidery with wide bands at the bottom stitched with Venetian gold. Five plumes topped it adorned with pearls and gold rings fitted with ruby and turquoise. It alone cost more than twenty thousand dinars. Her family and her personal guests traveled in twenty litters of colored velvet. It took about a thousand camels to carry the baggage of the royal family and those accompanying them. Perhaps this extravagance was meant to impress the Ottoman ambassador, because he is said to have been in attendance. Or, perhaps, it was also meant to instill confidence in

[39]Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 4:409–12. For a discussion of the *maḥmal,* see Jacques Jormier, *Le Maḥmal et la Caravane Égyptienne des Pèlerins de la Mecque (XIII–XX Siecles)* (Cairo, 1953). See also Behrens-Abouseif, "The Mahmal Legend."

[40]Johnson, "Royal Pilgrims," 124.

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the people, that the sultanate was still as powerful and magnificent as it had been in previous days.

If the latter was the intention, it backfired spectacularly. According to the chroniclers, the people were aghast at the display of luxury, considering the turbulent political environment, and considered it an inauspicious omen, one that might mark the end of the sultan's reign. Rumors swirled about Umm Sīdī Muḥammad, alleging that when she went by the city, on the typical routes that avoided the city center, her palanquin was in fact empty. It was then brought back to the citadel by way of the roads near the cemeteries to return to fetch her. The image of the empty palanquin, surrounded by luxury, seemed to be a metaphor for the reign of al-Ghawrī: an excessive display that, if one looked closer, lacked any real substance. Furthermore, Ibn Iyās makes direct comparison between al-Ghawrī and the previous sultan, Qāytbāy (d. 901/1496), using the pilgrimages of their wives as examples.

Fāṭimah al-Khāṣṣbakīyah, wife of Qāytbāy, was generous during her pilgrimage, giving charitably when the caravan stopped for water. Perhaps her generous giving early on was the cause for the lack of water at the end of the trip; the reason for this lack is unclear from the chronicles, but she is not blamed for it. In contrast, al-Ghawrī's wife did not offer the customary sweets or boxes of pastries, and Ibn Iyās comments that many of her entourage complained of hunger.[41] Instead of blaming her alone, however, he implicates the sultan, calling him foolish and miserly. He also notes that the sultan's son, who was the *amīr al-ḥajj,* was old enough to know the proper protocol. Ibn Iyās writes that no one commented on the good deeds of the princess and her son; as seen in other cases, commonly the generosity of the royal family was part of what made the event special for the people of Cairo. Not only were the wives and mothers of the sultans allowed to be in their midst, but they also benefitted the people, even if it was only by raising morale through the giving of sweets. Often these deeds included bringing extra camels and water, setting up *waqf*s in commemoration of their pilgrimage, and giving various gifts.[42] Furthermore, the denial of charitable giving could be read as Umm Sīdī Muḥammad and her son rejecting an opportunity for cultivating religious merit and blessings, for themselves, the other travelers, and the sultanate as a whole by refusing (intentionally, at least in the way Ibn Iyās paints the account) to engage in the transactional piety typical of these events. The pilgrims were accustomed to generosity from the family members to make their journey more bearable. Ibn Iyās notes that the custom was that part of the supplies for the royal family was set aside for distribution. Yet, on this occasion, much of the

[41] Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 4:441.

[42] Marina Tolmacheva, "Female Piety and Patronage in the Medieval Hajj," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety,* ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York, 1998), 164.

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royal supplies still remained when they arrived back in Cairo.[43] The complaints of hunger, then, seem especially poignant in contrast with the wealth of food that remained.

When the royal caravans and the rest of the pilgrims arrived back in Egypt in Muḥarram of 921/1515, all the notables of Cairo went to greet them, including the four major qadis.[44] Afterward, the sultan's son, Muḥammad, went to Cairo and spent the night with the commanders who had been on the pilgrimage. Umm Sīdī Muḥammad, however, went overnight into the citadel. Ibn Iyās paints the scene of her palanquin going through the streets of Cairo in secret, the way "lit by torches and lanterns."[45] The populace had no idea that she had already ascended to the citadel. They missed the typical parade that occurred when members of the royal household returned from pilgrimage, which often included sweets or small coins thrown to the crowds.[46] Not only, then, did Umm Sīdī Muḥammad neglect her fellow pilgrims, she also neglected the people of Cairo, who had witnessed her (or rather, what was suspected to be her empty palanquin) just months before in what was probably the most lavish pilgrimage procession they had ever seen. The irony was not lost on them. They satirized her and her son's stingy nature and lack of hospitality in poetry, some parts of which Ibn Iyās recounts in his chronicle.

Al-Ghawrī's wife was not the only royal woman to be criticized for her activities during the pilgrimage. Occasionally the lavishness of the royal pilgrimage could be considered a detriment instead of a point of pride. In some cases, the royal ladies may have been overly extravagant in their caravans in contrast to how generous they were with giving gifts to pilgrims along the way or charitable giving during and after the hajj. Al-Maqrīzī mentions some amirs' wives who were criticized for their behavior on their pilgrimages.[47] These women, who went on the pilgrimage in 746/1346, were accused of excess in the decorations of their litters and caravans. They dressed elaborately in silk and inlaid necklaces and traveled with an air of pride. The women even began to compete with one another, quarreling and trying to surpass their companions in extravagance and beauty. The women bestowed upon the camel riders and water carriers robes of honor *(aqbiyah)* to wear, a mockery of the sultanic practice of bestowing robes on important officials or guests. Al-Maqrīzī writes in shock at the display, saying that there had not been seen anything like that before, and that the people renounced their deeds on the pilgrimage. The outrage was such that the chief qadi

[43] Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 4:438–39.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Johnson, "Royal Pilgrims," 127.

[47] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:693.

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mentioned it during his holiday sermon at the citadel, admonishing these commanders' wives and repudiating their behavior.

Examining the incident in the greater context of the problems during Sultan al-Shaʿbān's reign, described above, it seems as if either the women were indeed spending excessively and bragging because of the sultan's generosity with gifts and money, or perhaps the chroniclers and the populace read the incident as ostentatious at a time when the sultanate was not politically stable. Perhaps rumors had even begun to circulate in Cairo during his reign about the influence his wives and mother had on him, leading to a negative reaction by the people upon seeing their palanquins and parade in public in all their finery.

Clearly some criticisms about the hajj caravan had to do with popular reception of the sultan and the general consensus about his effectiveness as a ruler, as in the case of the blatant comparison made between the wives of Qāytbāy and al-Ghawrī. As noted by Petry in his analysis of the two monarchs, Qāytbāy sought to restore the empire to what it once was while al-Ghawrī made innovations to keep the government afloat.[48] Qāytbāy was seen as preserving their heritage, while al-Ghawrī attempted new ways of accumulating money, and acquiring troops, military techniques, and weaponry. Chroniclers and biographers, their contemporaries, largely celebrated the former while denigrating the latter. As for the mid-eighth/fourteenth-century pilgrimage with the vain princesses, this period was one of young sultans, as described above, who the chroniclers describe as foolish and more occupied with the harem than with rule.

The hajj procession during the Mamluk period offered a wealth of opportunities for the sultanate to position itself as the leading Muslim empire, with its role in sending the Kaʿbah covering to Mecca, and to make a statement to Cairo about both the grandeur of the sultanate and its commitment to piety. The royal women were a crucial part of this image making, as their deeds on the pilgrimage and after were considered representative of that of the empire as a whole. Furthermore, even in times of social unrest, with warring factions, plague, and other disturbances, royal women usually went on the pilgrimage. At these times, their public presence was valuable as a way to demonstrate the strength of the sultanate and its commitment to Islamic values. However, if the public—or at least the chroniclers recording their reactions—were not pleased with the performance, they had the chance to respond through rumors and satirizing poetry.

[48] Carl Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashrāf Qāytbāy and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle, 1993). For more detailed background on the political and economic circumstances of the final decades of the sultanate, see idem, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany, NY, 1994).

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Love or Obsession?

Chroniclers wove narratives about sultans' relationships with their mothers, wives, and concubines to explain why certain women were favored or lost favor. For favored wives—and, indeed, favored sultans—chroniclers often looked positively on what they perceived as expressions of love, unless those expressions exceeded the appropriate bounds. For the women of the harems of the sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, the chroniclers tend to describe the sultans' love as excessive, obsequious. At one point in his chronicle, Ibn Taghrībirdī plainly states, "These three sultans of the sons of Ibn Qalāwūn [al-Nāṣir Muḥammad] married this black slave girl [Ittifāq] and favored her. This is a strange thing."[49] He goes on to allege that the sultans' preoccupation with her was due to her *ʿūd* playing and singing. While these women were largely criticized in the sources, it is illustrative to compare their accounts with women the chroniclers portray positively, for instance, Ṭughāy, wife of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, and Zaynab, wife of Īnāl. Both of these women, according to the chroniclers, were influential wives, and both were given special permission to go on excursions outside the citadel, incidents through which we can examine chroniclers' usage of the themes of love and obsession.

Ṭughāy, along with the rest of the harem, joined al-Nāṣir Muḥammad on a trip to Giza in the winter of 723/1323. The sultan decreed that all the shops were to be closed the day of her travel and that people were to be driven off the streets to keep even her palanquin hidden.[50] It is unclear exactly why this strict measure was taken in this case because there are several other instances of royal women traveling the streets of Cairo, albeit covered, without such disturbance. However, she was the sultan's favorite and, according to the chroniclers, much beloved; perhaps this display was a way of demonstrating her importance. Protecting her honor and seclusion was of such value that extraordinary measures were taken.[51]

Zaynab bint Badr al-Dīn ibn Khāṣṣbak (known as Zaynab al-Khāṣṣbakīyah), wife of the sultan al-Ashraf Īnāl, went to down to Būlāq on the Nile River in 859/1455.[52] Her husband did not accompany her, as he was occupied in Cairo with

[49] Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-nujūm al-zāhirah,* 10:154.

[50] Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk,* 2:240. Al-Maqrīzī seems to be the only one of the three chroniclers discussed here to recount Ṭughāy's trip. Ibn Iyās only mentions her pilgrimage two years before, while Ibn Taghrībirdī has relatively little to say about her and instead focuses on al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.

[51] Al-Maqrīzī remarks on the favored position of Ṭughāy when discussing her endowment of a Sufi institution in idem, *Kitāb al-mawāʿiẓ wa-al-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-āthār* (Bulaq, 1853), 4:245–46.

[52] Al-Sakhāwī gives her biography at Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-ḍawʾ al-lāmīʿ li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsiʿ* (Beirut, 1992), 12:44–45.

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appointing individuals to governmental positions.[53] The chroniclers agree that she made the trip to see the Nile because of an illness or indisposition *(tawaʿʿuk).*[54] Presumably it was thought that being in the "purer" air near the water would be beneficial for her recovery; it was assumed the illness was brought on by impure air.[55] Her son and daughters also accompanied her on her trip to the riverside, and Ibn Iyās mentions that some of the other royal ladies were in attendance. When she felt better, she went into the *ḥammām,* the bathhouse, of the residence in which she was staying while in Būlāq. Afterward, the notables of the state—amirs, judges, and others—came to visit her.[56] The sultan joined her there to accompany her back to the citadel when she felt cured. When she was better, drums and horns were sounded, and on the night of 28 Rabīʿ II, there was a great spectacle of fireworks.

During the celebration of her recovery, the streets and the shore were crowded with people; Ibn Taghrībirdī says it resembled occasions when the ceremonial pilgrimage palanquin made its rounds about Cairo or the Nile celebrations.[57] It was a spectacle and a memorable day, according to the chronicler, indicating the rarity of such an excursion. Another rarity was the unusually large number of women at this event; there were twice as many women in the street as men, and they were out from dawn until dusk. Unlike Ibn Iyās, Ibn Taghrībirdī ends on a critical note, saying that a variety of abominations and scandalous deeds happened during this celebration, making it a disgrace.[58] He also comments on the uncommonness of such an occasion, of the wife of the sultan going out like this and the celebrations surrounding it. He mentions that Sultan Īnāl was enamored with her, taking no other wife or concubine during their marriage, which was unusual, alluding to the fact that it was this preoccupation with her that perhaps led to his allowing her this excursion to the river in her time of illness.[59] While Ibn Iyās remarks on the love that Īnāl had for Zaynab, Ibn Taghrībirdī instead alludes to obsession, or at least a love that made him act inappropriately, by approving of such a trip for his ill wife.

Comparing the trips of Ṭughāy and Zaynab, both of which involved women who were the favorite wives of their husbands, suggests that on one hand, the

[53] Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr,* 2:324.

[54] Abū al-Maḥāsin Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Ḥawādith al-duhūr fī madá al-ayyām wa-al-shuhūr* (Beirut, 1990), 2:522. Al-Maqrīzī is not a source for this event due to his death in 845/1442.

[55] See also the discussion of this incident in Yehoshua Frenkel, "Popular Culture (Islam, Early and Middle Periods)," *Religion Compass* 2 (2008): 13.

[56] Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Ḥawādith,* 2:523.

[57] Ibid., 2:524.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., 2:525. See also her biography in al-Sakhāwī, *Al-ḍawʾ,* 12:44–45.

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sultan showed favor to Ṭughāy by more strictly enforcing her seclusion—she was in public, yet no one else was there to see her—while on the other, the sultan indulged Zaynab by allowing her to make a trip to the Nile when she was ill, even if he could not go with her right away. The former was largely seen as praiseworthy on the part of the sultan, while the latter, at least for one chronicler, drew criticism for the increased mixing of men and women that resulted during the celebrations for the recovery of her health. Thus, even for beloved wives, the actions of the sultans toward them could sometimes be criticized if they were seen to be excessive. However, this criticism is minor compared to the stories told by the chroniclers, especially Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Maqrīzī, about the sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and their love for the women of their harem. Such love, as the chroniclers describe it, led to obsession rather than indulgence.

Conclusion

In recent decades, scholars have made great strides in illuminating royal women's presence in the chronicles and other Mamluk works, revealing the ways in which they were an integral part of the economic, social, and political spheres. At the same time, as I demonstrate here, the depictions of royal women are not monolithic, even though chroniclers tend to use the same themes and motifs in their writing. First, I argue that the themes of waste, excess, and obsession are frequently used by chroniclers when narrating events of the lives of royal women, and then, second, I contend that examination of these themes reveals the variation in the chronicles in terms of when these motifs were utilized and what kinds of narratives and rhetoric Mamluk scholars chose to employ in light of their particular depiction of different reigns and, more broadly, the history of the sultanate as a cohesive whole.

These themes are most prominent when describing events that took place in the harem and during the pilgrimage procession to Mecca, the former consisting of speculation and rumor about what went on behind closed doors and the latter being the relatively rare public appearance, albeit in a covered litter, of these royal women. In enumerating on the theme of obsession, however, it is clear that trips could be gifts that provoked chroniclers' criticism because of the presence of these royal women in public and the nuisance that crowds in the street could cause, in addition to the ever-present specter of potential immoral behavior between men and women in large crowds. While some chroniclers see indulgence of sultans toward beloved wives and concubines, others see obsessive behavior to the detriment of Mamluk society. Royal women's presence in public was an easy way to level criticism or praise at certain rulers, while their gifts in private and

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the display of wealth in public allowed chroniclers to critique the sultans' rule and the state of the Mamluk economy in general.

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