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Women at the Margins: Exploring Freed and Servile Women in Early Islamic History

Abstract:

This talk analyzes freed and servile women in elite Arab-Muslim households during the first two centuries of Islamic history (ca. 600–800 CE). While several studies have considered the role of enslaved women *per se*, this paper instead considers those unfree, freed, and servile women who were not technically enslaved (called in Arabic *mawlāh*, pl. *mawlayāt*). First, I use digital methods to show the relative scarcity of *mawlayāt* compared to other categories of women, and I explore the possible reasons for this minoritization/ marginalization. Next, I closely read passages from a variety of Arabic-Islamic sources (such as Quranic exegesis, law, biography, and *belles lettres*), which depict *mawlayāt* as performing domestic labor, connecting different elite households and forging multi-generational social networks. Finally, I caution readers not to read these sources uncritically, for they often present *mawlayāt* in ways that convey ideological or symbolic messages. For instance, many sources present unfree domestic laborers as old or matronly, rather than as objects of sexual desire—however, this depiction may not accurately capture these women's actual experience of sexual violence. Ultimately, *mawlayāt* inhabited an intermediate position between enslaved and free and, as such, they allow us to better understand how systems of power and dependency operated in early Islamic society.

Bio:

Elizabeth Urban is Associate Professor of History at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, where she specializes in the first two centuries of Islamic history. She is particularly interested in studying how Islam transformed from a small and relatively egalitarian Arabian piety movement into the official doctrine of a hierarchical Near Eastern empire. Her first book, *Conquered Populations in Early Islam* (Edinburgh UP, 2020) analyzes how Muslims of slave origins joined the Islamic community and articulated their identities within it. The book posits that enslaved and freed persons provide a fruitful window onto early Islamic history because, as liminal figures, they sparked debates about the political, social, and religious boundaries of the expanding Islamic community. Her current research continues to explore early Islamic history through the lens of unfreedom or asymmetrical dependency. She is currently studying the depiction of unfree women's bodies in early Islamic historical sources, including descriptions of physical labor, corporal punishment, hair, clothing, and piercing.