Consorts of the Caliphs
Women and the Court of Baghdad

Ibn al-Sāʿī

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Maḥbūbah

“Beloved”

Slave of the caliph al-Mutawakkil

The author of The Book of Songs mentions her.

‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Sa’d Allāh al-Daqqīqi72 informed me—citing Abū l-Qāsim ibn al-Samarqandi with permission, who cites Abū Maṣūr al-‘Ukbārī, citing Abū l-Hasan ibn al-Ṣalt—that Abū l-Faraj al-Isfahānī said:

Maḥbūbah, the slave of al-Mutawakkil, was of mixed parentage. She was foremost of her generation both as a poet and as a singer. She had a beautiful face and voice.

‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Tāhir gave her to al-Mutawakkil when he became caliph, as one of a group of four hundred slaves, some of them musically trained, others not. In his eyes, she surpassed them all.

Via the same transmitters, Abū l-Faraj al-Isfahānī relates that Ja’far ibn Qudāmah reported that Ibn Khurramādhibh reported that ‘Ali ibn al-Jāhm said:

I was once in the presence of al-Mutawakkil when he was drinking.73 He handed Maḥbūbah an apple perfumed with a scented musk blend.74 She kissed it75 and took her leave. Then one of her slaves appeared with a piece of paper which she handed to al-Mutawakkil. He read it, laughed, and tossed the paper to me to read.

This is what it said:
You—fragrance of an apple I had to myself—
you ignite in me the fire of ecstasy.
I weep and complain of my malady,
and of my grief’s intensity.
If an apple could weep, then the one I hold
would shed such tears of pity.
If you do not know what my soul has suffered
look, the proof is my body.
If you gaze upon it, you will see
one unable to suffer patiently.

Every single person present found these verses utterly delightful.
Al-Mutawakkil ordered both 'Arib and Shāriyah to set the verses to music, and those were the only songs sung the rest of the day.

Via the same transmitters, Abū ʿI-Faraj al-Isfahānī relates that Jaʿfar ibn Qutāmah reported that 'Ali ibn Yāḥyā the astrologer of the day said:

Al-Mutawakkil confided as follows to 'Ali ibn al-Jahm, his close friend and confidant:

“I paid Qabībah the Poetess a visit and found that she had written my name on her cheek using a scented musk blend. I swear, ‘Ali, I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than that streak of black against her white cheek. Go ahead and compose a poem for me about that!”

Jaʿfar ibn Qutāmah was sitting behind the curtain, listening to us talk, and in the time it took for an inkstand and scroll of paper to be brought and for ‘Ali to formulate his thoughts, she had already improvised the following verses:

She wrote “Jaʿfar” in musk on her cheek.
how lovely that streak where the musk left its mark!
On her face she wrote just one line,
but she etched many more on my heart.
Who can help a master in thrall to his slave,
subservient in his heart, but plain to see,
Or one whose secret desire is Jaʿfar—
may he drink his fill from your lips!”
'Ali ibn al-Jahm was dumbfounded at being upstaged like this. Al-Mutawakkil commanded 'Arib to set the poem to music.

Via the same transmitters, I cite Abū I-Faraj al-İşfahānī, who relates that Ja'far ibn Qudāmah reported that 'Ali ibn Yahyā the astromancer reported the following to him, via 'Ali ibn al-Jahm:

Al-Mutawakkil had a falling-out with Mabbūbah and found it very hard to be apart from her. In the end, the pair made up. Meanwhile I went to see him. He told me he'd had a dream that they had been reconciled, so he called a servant and said to him, "Go find out how she is and see what she's doing."

The servant returned and told him that she was just singing.

"Can that woman really be singing when I'm so angry with her?" he said to me. "Come on, let's find out what she's crooning about."

We headed to her room, and this is what she was singing:

I wander the palace, but I see no one,
no one will answer my plaint, it would seem.
I feel as though I’ve committed a sin,
one I can repent of but can never redeem.
Will someone plead my case to a king
who ended our quarrel when he came in a dream?
Yet when the dawn broke and the sun shone,
he forsook me again and left me alone.

Al-Mutawakkil was visibly moved. Realizing he was there, she came out of her room, and I made myself scarce.

She told him that she'd had a dream in which he'd come to her and they'd made up. That was why she had composed the poem, put it to music, and sung it. Al-Mutawakkil was so touched that he decided to stay and drink with her. She made sure I was well rewarded.

Via the same transmitters, Abū I-Faraj al-İşfahānī relates that 'Ali ibn Yahyā the astromancer had reported to him that the slaves of al-Mutawakkil were divided up after his death. Several of them, including Mabbūbah, ended up going to Waṣíf.
One day, as he was having his morning drink of wine, Waṣif ordered that all Murawakkil’s slaves be brought before him. They arrived in all their splendor, adorned, perfumed, and dressed in brightly colored clothes bedecked with jewels, except for Mabhūbah, who came dressed in plain mourning white and not wearing any makeup.

The slaves sang, drank, and made merry, as did Waṣif. Carried away by it all, he commanded Mabhūbah to sing. She picked up the lute and sobbed as she sang:

What sweetness does life hold for me
when I cannot see Ja’far?
A king I saw with my own eyes
murdered, rolled in the dust.
The sick and the sorrowful,
they can all heal;
But not Mabhūbah—
if she saw death for sale,
She would give everything she has to buy it
and join him in the grave.
For the bereaved,
death is sweeter than life.

The song struck home. Enraged, Waṣif was on the point of having her killed, when Bughā, who happened to be present, said, “Give her to me!”

Bughā took her, gave her her freedom, and allowed her to live wherever she pleased. She left Samarra for Baghdad where she lived in obscurity and died of grief.

May God have mercy on her and reward her for her devotion to the memory of her beloved master!
Shāhān

“Regina”

Dependent in the household of the caliph al-Mustanṣir of sacred memory

She was a Byzantine slave belonging to Khatā Khātūn. Khatā Khātūn was the daughter of the commander Sunqur al-Nāṣirī the Tall and the wife of the commander Jamāl al-Dīn Baklak al-Nāṣirī. Khatā Khātūn took such care of Shāhān’s instruction and training, and showered her with so much attention, that everything about her suggested that she was destined for great things. When the caliph al-Mustanṣir was given the oath of allegiance, Khatā Khātūn presented Shāhān to him as a gift, as part of a group of slaves. Shāhān alone among them became his concubine and achieved a level of favor and intimacy that no one else could attain.

Shāhān went on to hold her own independent court and had a fiscal office, agents, functionaries, servants, and a splendid retinue. She spent liberally from her funds just as she pleased, and her authority on all matters was unquestioned.

I was informed by one of her fiscal officials that she made a monthly account of what was paid out to the smiths, the weavers of embroidered cloth, the goldsmiths, the general merchants, the cloth merchants, the jewelers, and the craftsmen of various types. The disbursement came to some one hundred and five thousand three hundred and sixty dinars.

She performed many pious acts of charity and was known for her attention to widows, orphans, and the poor, to whom she always gave alms. She was good, sought the good, and loved those who did good.