Tāj al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Anjab Ibn al-Sāʾi (593–674/1197–1276) was a Baghdadi man of letters and historian. As the librarian of two great law colleges, the Niẓāmiyyah and later the Munstanṣiriyyah, and a protégé of highly placed members of the regime, Ibn al-Sāʾi enjoyed privileged access to the ruling circles and official archives of the caliphate and contributed to the great cultural resurgence that took place under the last rulers of the Abbasid dynasty. This was an age of historians, and most of Ibn al-Sāʾi’s works were histories of one sort or another, but only fragments survive. The only one of his works that has come down to us complete is Consorts of the Caliphs. This too is a history insofar as it follows a rough chronological order, but in other respects it is more like a sub-genre of the biographical dictionary. It consists of brief life sketches, with no narrative interconnection, of concubines and wives of the Abbasid caliphs and, in an appendix, consorts of “viziers and military commanders.” This last section, however, is slightly muddled; it includes some concubines of caliphs and wives of two Saljūq sultans, as well as one woman who was neither; has a duplicate entry; and is not chronological, all of which suggests that it is a draft.

For the later Abbasid ladies of Consorts of the Caliphs, Ibn al-Sāʾi uses his own sources and insider knowledge, but for the earlier ones, he quotes well-known literary materials, drawing especially on the supreme historian of early Abbasid court literature, Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (284–ca. 363/897–ca. 972), author of the Book of Songs (Kitāb al-Aghānī). In this way, two quite different formats are juxtaposed in Consorts of the Caliphs: the later entries follow the obituary format of the chronicles of Ibn al-Sāʾi’s period; the earlier ones are adapted from the classical anecdote format of several centuries before, which combined narrative and verse in dramatic scenes. Many of the entries from both periods are framed by isnāds — the names of the people who originally recorded the anecdotes and of the people who then transmitted them, either by word of mouth or by reading from an authorized text. The names of Ibn al-Sāʾi’s own informants give an indication of what interested scholars and litterateurs in the Baghdad of his day. The meticulousness of the isnāds signals that Consorts of the Caliphs is a work
of serious scholarship, as does the fact that Ibn al-Sāʾī’s personal informants are men of considerable standing. Ibn al-Sāʾī survived the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 656/1258 and lived on unmolested under Ilkhanid rule. *Consorts of the Caliphs*, which was written shortly before 1258, survives in a single late-fifteenth-century manuscript. This one small work is unique in affording multiple perspectives on things that have, over the centuries, been felt to be fundamental and durable in the Arabic literary and cultural imagination: the poetry of the heroines of early Abbasid culture; the mid-Abbasid casting of their careers and love lives into legend; a reimagining of the court life of the Abbasid period, along with the idealization of the court life of their own times, by Ibn al-Sāʾī and his contemporaries; and finally, the perspective of some two hundred years later in which the stories retold by Ibn al-Sāʾī were still valued, but lumped together in a single manuscript with an unrelated and unaauthored miscellany of wit, wisdom, poems, and anecdotes.

**Ibn al-Sāʾī’s Life and Times: Post- and Pre-Mongol**

What is it like to live through a cataclysm? When Ibn al-Sāʾī finished writing his *Brief Lives of the Caliphs* (*Mukhtaṣar akhbār al-khulafā’*) in 666/1267–68 (as he notes on the last page), it was as a survivor of the Mongol sack of Baghdad ten years earlier, in which the thirty-seventh and last ruling Abbasid caliph, al-Mustaʿṣim, had been killed. With al-Mustaʿṣim’s death came the end of the caliphate, an institution that had lasted more than half a millennium. Although the caliphate had shrunk by the end from an empire to a rump, the Abbasid caliphs, as descendants of the Prophet’s uncle, still claimed to be the lawful rulers of all Muslims. The late Abbasids ruled as well as reigned, asserting their claim to universal leadership by propounding an all-inclusive Sunnism and bonding with the growing groundswell of Sufism. Baghdad remained the intellectual and cultural capital of Arabic speakers everywhere.

After the Mongols arrived, all this changed. Egypt’s Mamluk rulers—Turkic slave soldiers—became the new Sunni standard-bearers, and Baghdad lost its role as the seat of high courtly culture. Ibn al-Sāʾī wrote *Brief Lives* in full consciousness of the new world order. The work dwells on the zenith of the caliphate centuries before and tells stirring tales of the great, early Abbasids, underlined by poetry. This is legendary history, cultural memory. After noting how the streets of Baghdad ran with blood after the death of al-Mustaʿṣim, Ibn al-Sāʾī recites an elegiac tally of the genealogy, names, and regnal titles of the
whole fateful Abbasid dynasty, of whom every sixth caliph was to be murdered or deposed.\textsuperscript{14} The tailpiece of *Brief Lives*, by contrast, an enumeration of the world’s remaining Muslim rulers, is a prosaic political geography.\textsuperscript{15} Baghdad no longer rates a mention on the world stage. Culture is not evoked. The question that hangs unasked is: what was left to connect the past to the present? *Consorts of the Caliphs, Both Free and Slave*, to give it its full title, is a kind of anticipated answer to that question. It is an essay in cultural memory written in the reign of al-Mustaʿṣim,\textsuperscript{16} but it shows no premonition of danger, even though the Mongols were already on the march. It represents the last two hundred years—the reigns of al-Muqtadī (467–87/1075–94), al-Mustaẓhir (487–512/1094–1118), al-Mustaḍī’ (566–75/1170–80), al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (575–622/1180–1225), al-Zāhir (622–23/1225–26), al-Mustanṣir (623–40/1226–42), and the beginning of the reign of al-Mustaʿṣim (640–56/1242–58)—as a golden age for the lucky citizens of Baghdad, thanks to the public benefactions of the great ladies of the caliph’s household.\textsuperscript{17} It is a miniature collection of vignettes juxtaposed with no reference to the general fabric of events, designed as a twin to Ibn al-Sāʾī’s now lost *Lives of Those Gracious and Bounteous Consorts of Caliphs Who Lived to See Their Own Sons Become Caliph* (*Kitāb Akhbār man adrakat khilāfat waladihā min jihāt al-khulāfāʾ dhawāt al-maʿrūf wa-l-ʿaṭāʾ*). Using wives and concubines as the connecting thread, it yokes the current regime to the age of the early, legendary Abbasids.

Today most of Ibn al-Sāʾī’s prolific and varied output is lost, although much of it was extant as late as the eleventh/seventeenth century\textsuperscript{18} and scattered quotations survive in other authors. Scholars disagree whether *Brief Lives* is really by Ibn al-Sāʾī, probably because, unlike *Consorts of the Caliphs* and the *Concise Summation of Representative and Outstanding Historical and Biographical Events*, the only other surviving work indisputably attributed to him,\textsuperscript{19} it has no scholarly apparatus.\textsuperscript{20} But it is certainly the work of a Baghdadi survivor of the Mongol sack, typical of a period which produced quantities of histories of all kinds (as did Ibn al-Sāʾī himself).\textsuperscript{21} As for Ibn al-Sāʾī, he was sixty-three when Baghdad fell. Outwardly, little changed for him in the eighteen years he still had to live: his career as a librarian continued uninterrupted.\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps the real cultural rift had occurred before the arrival of the Mongols. The supposedly happy and glorious reign of al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh, “Champion of the Faith,” in which Ibn al-Sāʾī was born, was unprecedentedly totalitarian: according to one contemporary, the caliph’s spies were so efficient and the caliph himself so ruthless that a man
hardly dared speak to his own wife in the privacy of his home.23 Courtly life centered on al-Nāṣir as the teacher of true doctrine and keystone of social cohesion.24 The latter-day ladies of the caliph's household showcased by Ibn al-Sāʿī in Consorts of the Caliphs partake, in his eyes, of this godly ethos, and are public figures with political clout. On the face of it, they have nothing in common with the vulnerable aesthetes whose hothouse loves and whose music, poetry, and wit set their stamp on the early Abbasid court, and who are given far more space in Consorts of the Caliphs.25 These figures so fascinate Ibn al-Sāʿī that he stretches his book's brief to include a life sketch of one, the famous poet ʿInān, who may not have been a caliph's concubine.26

Consorts of the Caliphs as Abbasid Loyalism

Why was Ibn al-Sāʿī so interested in Abbasid caliphs' wives and lovers? Why was he equally committed to the aesthetes and to the doers of good works? There are two answers. The first is that he was a fervent loyalist. About one third of all the writings ascribed to him were devoted to the Abbasids. Of the nineteen such titles listed by Muṣṭafā Jawād in the introduction to his 1962 edition of Consorts of the Caliphs, under the title Jihāt al-aʾimmah al-khulafāʾ min al-ḥarāʾir wa-l-imāʿ, the following were clearly designed to please, and as propaganda for, current members of the ruling house: Cognizance of the Virtues of the Caliphs of the House of al-ʿAbbās (al-Inās bi-manāqib al-khulafāʾ min Banī l-ʿAbbās);27 The Flower-Filled Garden: Episodes from the Life of the Caliph al-Nāṣir (al-Rawḍ al-nāḍir fī akhbār al-imām al-Nāṣir),28 along with a life of a slave of al-Nāṣir, his commander-in-chief, Qushtimir (Nuzhat al-rāghib al-muʿtabir fī sīrat al-malik Qushtimir);29 a life of the caliph al-Mustanṣir (I ʿtibār al-mustabṣir fī sīrat al-Mustanṣir) and a collection of poems—“ropes of pearls”—in his praise, most likely composed by Ibn al-Sāʿī himself (al-Qalāʾid al-durriyyah fī l-madāʾiḥ al-Mustanṣirīyyah);30 a life of the caliph al-Mustaʿṣim (Sirat al-Mustaʿṣim bi-llāh); and a book “about the blessed al-Mustaʿṣim's two sons: how much was spent on them, details of their food and clothing, and the poems written in their praise” (Nuzhat al-abṣār fī akhbār ibnay al-Mustaʿṣim bi-llāh al-ʿAbbāsī).31

The caliphs were active in endowing libraries: al-Nāṣir that of the old Niğāmiyyah Law College as well as that of the Sufi convent (riḥāt) founded by his wife Saljūqī Khātūn,32 al-Mustanṣir that of the law college he had founded in 631/1233–34, the Mustanṣirīyyah. For grandees to add their own gifts of books was a way of ingratiating themselves with the ruler.33 Ibn al-Sāʿī was a
librarian in both colleges, before and after the Mongol invasion, as already men-
tioned, so the following titles should be counted as part of his loyalist output:  
The High Virtues of the Teachers of the Niẓāmiyyah Law College (al-Manāqib al-ʿaliyyah li-mudarrisī l-madrasah al-Niẓāmiyyah) and The Regulations of the Mustanṣiriyyah Law College (Sharṭ al-madrasah al-Mustanṣiriyyah).

How do the early Abbasid concubines of Consorts of the Caliphs fit into this 
program of glorifying the dynasty’s virtues? The first entries on them describe
only their subjects’ physical and intellectual qualities. But about halfway through
the book comes a pivotal entry, that on Ishāq al-Andalusiyah, concubine of al-
Mutawakkil and mother of his son, the great regent al-Muwaffaq. When she died
in 270/883, during the regency, a court poet composed a majestic elegy on her,
describing her public benefactions and her private, maternal virtues, which were
also public in that her son was the savior of the state. Ibn al-Sāʾī lets the poem
speak for itself, but the reader might be expected to know that al-Muwaffaq had
been engaged for years in putting down a rebellion of black plantation slaves in
lower Iraq, which had caused widespread damage and panic. He finally crushed
it in the year of his mother’s death. Contemporary loyalist readers would cer-
tainly have made a connection between this tribute to the virtuous mother of
a heroic son and the elegies collected by Ibn al-Sāʾī on “the blessed consort,
Lady Zumurrud,” mother of the caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (Marāthī al-jihah

As Consorts of the Caliphs progresses, the theme of feminine virtue becomes
more frequent. Thus Maḥbūbah, the slave of al-Mutawakkil, mourns him defi-
antly after his murder, at the risk of her life, and dies of grief for him. Dirār, con-
cubine of the regent al-Muwaffaq and mother of his son, the caliph al-Muʾtaḍid,
another great ruler, was “always mindful of her dependents.” The princess Qaṭr
al-Nadā, wife of al-Muʾtaḍid, was “one of the most intelligent and regal women
who ever lived”—sufficiently so to puncture the caliph’s arrogance. Khamrah,
slave of the murdered caliph al-Muqtadir (son of al-Muʾtaḍid) and mother of
al-Muqtadir’s son Prince ʿĪsā, “was always mindful of her obligations and per-
formed many pious deeds. She was generous to the poor, to the needy, to those
who petitioned her, and to noble families who had fallen on hard times”—the
kind of encomium that Ibn al-Sāʾī goes on to apply to late-Abbasid consorts.
Khamrah ends the sequence of early-Abbasid concubines; after her begins a
series of virtuous Saljūq princesses and late-Abbasid models of female virtue
whose merits clearly redound to the honor of the dynasty as a whole—merits
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which in Ibn al-Sāʾī’s time, at least before the Mongols, were highly visible in the streetscape of Baghdad, in the shape of the public works and mausolea ordered by these women. In this, important ladies of the caliph’s household were following the example of Zubaydah, the most famous of early-Abbasid princesses, well-known to every citizen of Baghdad and indeed to every pilgrim to Mecca, and Ibn al-Sāʾī, in recording their piety, good works, and burial places, is following the example of his older contemporary, Ibn al-Jawzī. According to Jawād, Ibn al-Sāʾī means “Son of the Runner” or merchant’s errand-man; if it is not a surname taken from a distant ancestor, but instead reflects a humble background—as Jawād argues, on the basis that Ibn al-Sāʾī’s father Anjab is unknown to biographers—then Ibn al-Sāʾī’s grateful descriptions of the later consorts’ public works may reflect the feelings of ordinary Baghbadis.

Virtue, however—loyalty or piety-based virtue that finds social expression—is not the whole reason why Ibn al-Sāʾī devotes so much space to the early-Abbasid concubines, since most of them are not virtuous at all by these standards.

The Early-Abbasid Consorts as Culture Heroines

The majority of the early-Abbasid consorts were professional poets and musicians. Ibn al-Sāʾī and his sources, which include nearly all the great names in mid-Abbasid cultural mythography, rate them very highly: ʿInān “was the first poet to become famous under the Abbasids and the most gifted poet of her generation”; the major (male) poets of her time came to her to be judged. No one “sang, played music, wrote poetry, or played chess so well” as ʿArīb. Faḍl al-Shāʾirah was not only one of the greatest wits of her time, but wrote better prose than any state secretary. Above all, they excel in the difficult art of capping verse and composing on the spur of the moment. Their accomplishments are essentially competitive, and it is usually men that they compete with. The competition is not only a salon game. For the male poets—free men who make their living by performing at court—losing poses a risk to their reputation and livelihood. The women who challenge them or respond to their challenge are all slaves (jāriyah is the term used for such highly trained slave women). Of the risks to a slave woman who fails to perform, or to best her challenger, only one is spelled out in Consorts of the Caliphs, in the case of ʿInān, whose owner whips her. On the other hand, the returns on talent and self-confidence can be great, as is seen in the case of ʿArīb, whose career continues into old age, when her verve and authority seem undiminished and she has apparently achieved a
wealthy independence.\textsuperscript{53} We are shown how, between poets, the fellowship of professionalism transcends differences between male and female, free and slave. But even in the battles of wits between a \textit{jāriyah} and her lover, where the stakes are very high—if she misses her step, the woman risks not just the loss of favor and position, but the loss of affection too, for many \textit{jāriyahs} are depicted as being truly in love with their owners—there is often, again, a touch of something like comradeship: a woman’s ability to rise to the occasion can compel her lover’s quasi-professional admiration. We should remember that nearly all the early-Abbasid caliphs composed poetry or music themselves, and they all considered themselves highly competent judges. Though the consorts’ beauty is routinely mentioned, when we are shown a cause of attraction, it is the cleverness, aptness, or pathos of their poetry that wins over the lover. The workings of attraction and esteem can be imagined and explored in the case of slaves as they rarely are in that of free women; and this, in addition to their talents and exquisite sensibility or dashing manners, is what makes the early-Abbasid \textit{jāriyahs} culture heroines, whose hold on the Arabic imagination persists through the ages.

\textbf{Ibn al-Sā‘ī’s Contribution}

Unlike Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, the authority most cited in \textit{ Consorts of the Caliphs},\textsuperscript{54} Ibn al-Sā‘ī seems far less interested in music than in poetry. He was a poet himself, as indeed was almost any contemporary Arabic speaker with any claim to literacy and social competence. He and all his readers knew the wide range of available poetic genres, both ceremonial and intimate. As children, they would have been taught the ancient and modern Arabic poetic classics, and as adults, they might have written verse on public occasions and would certainly have composed poems to entertain their friends, lampoon unpleasant colleagues, or give vent to their feelings about life. The poetry of the \textit{jāriyahs} has its own place in this spectrum. It is occasional poetry: even when they write accession panegyrics or congratulations on a successful military campaign, the \textit{jāriyahs} keep them short and light.\textsuperscript{55} What is poignant about their poetry is its ephemerality: it captures and belongs to the moment. And what is especially moving about it is that (in the eyes of Ibn al-Sā‘ī, who simplifies but does not traduce the complex vision of Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī) it is identical with the woman who composes it and her precarious situation. As Ibn al-Sā‘ī tells it, the poetry of the slave consorts is an act of personal daring and moral agency, which finds
its reward in the love of the caliph and sometimes even in marriage. This is something considerable, contained in the small compass of the anecdote format.

There have not been many attempts, in modern scholarship, to make distinctions between the jāriyahs as poets and cultural agents, on the one hand, and as romantic heroines and objects of erotic and ethical fantasy, on the other. There are basic surveys of the sources; there is a pioneering study of the world of Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s Book of Songs; and, most recently, there is an exploration of the values underlying the competition between jāriyahs and free male poets and musicians. Medieval contemporaries were alive to the social paradox of the woman slave performer as a leader of fashion but also a commodity, an extravagance but also an investment for her owners, able to some extent to turn her status as a chattel to her own profit by manipulating her clients—and they satirized it unsympathetically. By comparison, modern reflection on female slavery and its place in medieval Islamic societies is unsophisticated. The time span of Consorts of the Caliphs is wider than that of the mid-Abbasid classics which have been the focus of modern scholarship until now, and the life stories it presents of female slaves bring together a greater range of backgrounds and situations and open up more complex perspectives.

Ibn al-Sā‘ī’s special contribution to the subject is his seriousness and sympathy, the multiplicity of roles within the dynasty that he identifies for consorts, and his systematic, and challenging, idealization of the woman over the slave.

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