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Mediality and Materiality in the History of Religions

A Medieval Case Study about Religion and Gender in In-Between Spaces

ABSTRACT

The article discusses possible terminologies for labelling historical materials. Drawing on the history of the city of Cairo around the 12th century – to the Fatimid era and to later Ayyubid times – it looks at the documents of three religions on religious infrastructure donated by women. This reveals women's ability to shape the public sphere. At least to a certain extent, the segregation of the sexes and the concept of the harem are questionable. This topic requires the reconstruction and re-reading of fragmental materials. Methodological reflections are helpful for dealing with different sources, mostly combinations of texts and archaeology, embedded in the current debate about material culture and media as well as materialization and mediation. It might seem anachronistic, but to specify these categories it is useful to compare this example with a contemporary study by Mia Lövheim on female Internet bloggers. In both cases we find women as self-confident agents in public spaces.

KEYWORDS

media, materiality, materials, sources, architecture, new media, Islam, Cairo, women, gender, Judaism, Christianity, public sphere, in-between-spaces

BIOGRAPHY

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MEDIA IN HISTORY OF RELIGIONS?

The following case study will shed light on methodological and theoretical questions about media in history – which were once spoken of as "sources"[1], such as textual or archaeological sources. In medieval Cairo, the female patronage of religious infrastructure grew significantly. But reconstructing the traces of these patrons in the city's public sphere is not easy and requires a combination of the study of texts and archaeology. Thus, questions arise about the heuristic quality of the term "media" when used as an umbrella term for all sorts of sources in pre-modern times as well. Might it be more useful, alternatively, to speak of "materials", considering the term's metaphorical link to materiality, especially when dealing with manuscripts and buildings as physical traces of commemorative cultures?

The historical case to be discussed has surprising parallels to Lövheim's empirical work on new media,[2] but no one would use the term "media" to characterise historical sources. My contribution here is a discussion of how historical and contemporary fields might be connected by the character of data that represents constructions of religion and gender. This is not an anachronistic approach. It tries to give different terms rights of their own, independent of metaphorical biases such as that media are dynamic and modern or that sources are a reliable basis for historical knowledge.

In the background of this discussion stands observation of in-between spaces:[3] religious as well as gender cultures are seen as not totally segregated; moreover, the modes of bridging religions, gender and public and private spheres come into view. Should historical sources be connected in a similar way?

SPACES AND AGENCIES OF WOMEN WITH DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS IN MEDIEVAL CAIRO

Around the 12th century, Cairo's inhabitants varied as much in ethnicity as in religion or denomination. That said, the whole of society practised one gender regime and it did not make a huge difference if one was a Jew, Christian or Muslim. Many people lived with close family or clan ties. To a certain extent, architecture suggests separate spheres for the sexes, but the norm of segregating and banning women in a harem

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1   The option to return to the term "sources", a term that was overthrown in debates on new cultural history, will not be reflected here. The term is only used here for pragmatic purposes. See Burke 2004.

2   Lövheim 2013, 153–168. She deals with female and female Muslim bloggers on the Internet. In her empirical study, the Internet and new media are seen as means of communication and social mediation: young women act as agents in new public spaces aside from traditional religion with fewer options to represent their religious identity. As in the following example, media, gender and religion are connected.

3   Wirth 2012, 7–34, 11, 18–19. Homi K. Babha's topos of a third space and Juri Lotman's semiosphere describe similar models of cultural fluidity.

seems more and more to be a stereotype – be it as a classical Islamic ideal or a 19th century scientific topos.[4]

And here we find the interesting parallels to Lövheim's observations. It must be asked, not only for contemporary but for historical research as well, how strict the separation of official and individual religion, or of a public sphere for men and a private sphere for women, ever was.[5] My studies have looked at the agency to finance buildings and modes of perception of written signs on architecture, as well as responsibilities in authorship and access to texts. In doing so, we find no female author, but women appeared in public – in person or via their donations.

BUILDINGS AS PART OF MATERIAL CULTURE[6]

Even if I can provide only some superficial insights here, women appear as sponsors of buildings in a broader multi-religious context. This contradicts every stereotype we know: women as passive members of families, as ruled by men, as living in the background in their harems, as not leaving their home and as not taking part in official affairs in public. In fact, the opposite was the case, especially among the wealthier and politically active families in all three religions. Jonathan Bloom has examined Cairo's graveyards – which are a most important field when we look at the spheres of male and female from antiquity to Islam – and found that women always played an important role in burial ceremonies as mourners and also as ritual specialists for remembering the deceased in their regular visits to the graveyards. Bloom's article "The Mosque of the Qarafa in Cairo" (1987)[7] deals with an important mosque complex at a central place in a huge cemetery. From around the year 1000, the women of the ruler's family acted there as patrons of buildings such as family tombs. Stephan Humphreys then widened the scope in his article "Women as Patrons of Religious Architecture in Ayyubid Damascus" (1994)[8]: When in the 13th century it became popular for the wealthy to act as patrons religious infrastructure in the Near East, women were well represented as sponsors of public buildings.

Even if the gender aspect was not part of her study, with *Writing Signs. The Fatimid Public Text* (1998) Irene Bierman opened our eyes to inscriptions on public buildings. She followed the signs of male politicians, califs, sultans and viziers who marked their terrain within the city.[9] In these cases, the media are connected: One could and

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4   Cortese/Calderini 2006, 41, 232–233. See also 64, 187–188 on interconfessional and interreligious marriages.
5   Lövheim 2013, 153–154.
6   Material culture found entry into the work of history and history of religions much later than texts. The material culture of the Fatimids is therefore well known mainly to art historians. There exist examples of tableware showing pictorial representations of humans and animals. Here we find female musicians, although the sex of many figures can hardly be identified with any certainty. Seipel 1998, 106.
7   Bloom 1987, 7–18.
8   Humphreys 1994, 35–54.
9   Bierman 1998.

sometimes still can read such texts on city gates and the walls of mosques – written information and architecture are linked. But in most cases of women's patronage of buildings, one element is lost. The buildings have long been destroyed; they can be reconstructed only from clues in historical texts.

TEXTS

It is common knowledge that the written imperial history was the work of male authors. These historians, like the influential Mamluk authors al-Maqrizi (–1442) and al-Qalqashandi (–1418) as well as their predecessors, like al-Qudaᶜi (–1062) mentioned below, dealt with the history of dynasties, had a background as state officials and wrote mainly about califs, sultans, viziers, Coptic patriarchs and Jewish representatives.[10] Here, women were rarely represented if they were not involved directly in state affairs. Even then, it is difficult to identify them, given that it was a matter of status for a woman's identity to be hidden. Even the most influential woman in Fatimid history, the sister and successor of al-Hakim (–1021), who reigned in the 1020s, is known only by her official title *sitt al-mulk* (–1023), "mistress regent". The note on the founder of an important building in Cairo's topography, the afore mentioned al-Qarafa-mosque, is similar:

> This is the mosque known today as the Jamiᶜ al-Uliya [the Congregational Mosque of the Friends of God]. It is in the Qarafa al-Kubra [...] Al-Qudaᶜi said: Qur'an recitators (qurrā) used to gather there. Then the new congregational mosque (al-masjid al-jāmiᶜ) was built there. Al-Sayyida al-Muᶜizziya built it in the year 366 [976]. She was the mother of al-ᶜAziz billah Nizar, the son of Muᶜizz li-Din Allah. She was an Arab slave called "Warbling" (taghrīd), but named Darzan.[11]

The patron's name is *sayyida al-al-Muᶜizziya*, i.e. the "Lady al-Muᶜizz", named after her husband, who reigned at the end of the 10th century. In this function, she has no name of her own. But apart from her name, the historians al-Qudaᶜi and al-Maqrizi gave as much information about her family relations as they could. She began her rise to power as a slave girl with different proper names. Sayyida al-al-Muᶜizziya herself thus represents a life in the in-between space both inside and outside the inner circle of power.

10   Taqī d-Dīn Abū l-ᶜAbbās Aḥmad ibn ᶜAlī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawāᶜiẓ wa-l-iᶜtibār fī-l-ḫiṭaṭ wa-l-āṯār*, 2 vol. (Beirut: Dār Sādir, new edition around 1992). Taqī d-Dīn Abū l-ᶜAbbās Aḥmad ibn ᶜAlī al-Maqrīzī, *al-Ittiᶜāẓ al-ḥunafā' bi-aḫbār al-a'imma al-Fāṭimiyīn al-ḫulafā'*, ed. Ǧamāl ad-Dīn aš-Šayyāl, 3 vol. (Cairo: al-Maǧlis al-aᶜlā li-š-šu'ūn al-Islāmīya, 1967–1973). Al-Qalqašandī, *Kitāb Ṣubḥ al-aᶜšā fi-ṣ-ṣināᶜat al-inšā'*, 14 vol. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīya 1913–1919). Both Mamluk authors use important Fatimid or Ayyubid sources, like al-Qudaᶜi (–1062) or Ibn at-Tuwair (1220), whose works can be reconstructed via these Mamluk texts.

11   Maqrizi quoted in Bloom 1987, 7.

Sponsoring religious buildings was not a privilege of the ruling elite. At least one Coptic woman supported the renovation of a church, wrote Abu Salih, a probably Coptic author of a history of the churches in Egypt up to the 12ᵗʰ century:

> In the Hamrâ also is the church of Saint Onuphrius, the holy man, the pilgrim, the contemplative, which was restored by a woman named Turfah, according to the testimony of an [inscribed] board which was put up at the door of it, near the well which is now filled up: and through this door the women entered.[12]

She must have been a wealthy woman if she had the funds to sponsor a renovation and to leave an epigraph. Her status did not prevent her name being mentioned. Her name could be seen by everyone, by men as well, even if the site of the inscription marked a door for women.

Another important genre of texts is formed by the contracts for selling and inheriting houses. The famous Geniza documents from the synagogue in the antique settlement of Fustat in southern Cairo refer to several women as owners, heirs and donors of buildings used for caritative purposes. Jewish women were explicitly allowed to possess wealth – like women in Islamic law. It is obvious to everybody who has seen photographs of these documents that we must speak of "materials" when we refer to the thousands of small papers stored for centuries in a closet. Solomon Goitein worked on the Geniza documents of a legal character concerning houses, some of them dedicated to the support of synagogues or the poor, probably from the profits made from renting apartments:

> This parceling of a house into some sections devoted to pious purposes and others given to various relatives or other persons is well illustrated by the deathbed declaration of a woman made in November 1006, in which she willed one-sixth of her house to each of the two synagogues of Fustat and another three-sixths to a brother, a niece, and a girl (in order to enable her to marry). The value of one-twelfth had already been spent for repairs, and the remaining twelfth was earmarked for the transportation of the testator's body to Palestine for interment in the Holy City.
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> In or around 1161 a woman donated one-quarter of a house, which she held in partnership with another proprietor, 'to the poor' and one-sixth to a person not described as her relative.[13]

MEDIALITY OR MATERIALITY?

How are we to deal with these written clues about buildings? Parallel to Lövheim's context of "new media", we can assume that the historical patronage of architecture

12   Ibn al-Mukaffaᶜ 1968, 111.
13   Goitein 1983, 89.

was a "medium":[14] it was a specific communication technique as well as a demon-stration of identity. It was important to set signs for the inner religious community as well as in the inter-religious context of the pluralist metropolis. The signs could be read as public statements of powerful women who wanted to demonstrate their agency within their families and left traces thereof outside their homes, sometimes even without being clearly identified by their names. Moreover, the signs must be read as signs of piety and praise to Allah. Charity work was well established in all three religions, and the donors were male and female.

Finally, patronage of religious institutions was by no means a way to draw lines between religions, within one religion or between the sexes. On the contrary, it was important for the communities to remember all these donations in their official histo-riographies, Muslim or Coptic,[15] shaping commemorative processes by means of cul-tural techniques of writing. In this sense, architecture and written texts both worked as media. This focus on the complex collective processes corresponds with the de-bate on practices of media as mediation.[16] Reflections on materialisation as describing communication processes and collective imaginaries within material cultures can be found pointing in the same direction.[17]

Apart from these analogies, it is still useful to separate media and materials in one aspect, namely that of mere materiality. The medieval Egyptian manuscripts cited above are available today in modern editions. This is a modern form of representation that is different from the original one. This shift has to be kept in mind, as the literary scholars Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Uwe Wirth have argued.[18] Gumbrecht reflects on the presence of texts in a physical haptic sense with impressions of immediacy in the process of reading. It makes an enormous difference whether one reads a line on a computer screen or a thousand-year-old paper manuscript. Wirth discusses the outer appearance of a text in columns with pre- and paratexts that influence the perception of readers and thus the understanding of the text. David Morgan and others have discussed visual cultures in the field of the study of religions. The most interesting conclusion is that many cultures do not distinguish between subject and object as modern science does.[19] This is similar to Gumbrecht's argument about the possible immediacy of perceiving a text.

The manuscripts mentioned here all had a small readerships, mainly within a class of state officials and politicians. Being handwritten, they possessed a certain value to their readers, who probably studied them very carefully. To a great extent, they

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14 Lövheim 2013, 154–155.
15 The Jews seem to have had a different historiography, storing legal documents not to remember their actors but as religious texts to praise God.
16 Lövheim 2013, 156.
17 Meyer/Morgan/Paine/Plate 2014, 105–110.
18 Gumbrecht 2004. Wirth 2012, 7–34, 19–30.
19 Morgan 2005, 33.

served political and juridical interests, presenting the property of different religious and ethnic groups with a sense of immediacy.

The term "material" points out the presence in those manuscripts. To speak of a "medium" would risk shrouding this aspect. While media are similar in their function as vehicles of ideas and signs of communication, some materials do not aim to mediate, but to materialise an idea immediately.

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