

Book Review

Hans-Peter Pökel, *Der unmännliche Mann: Zur Figuration des Eunuchen im Werk von al-Ġāḥiẓ (gest. 869)*. *Mitteilungen zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der islamischen Welt*, 36 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2014). ISBN 978-3956500282. 390 pp. €48.

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There seems to be no end to the scholarly fascination with al-Jāḥiẓ. The book under review attests to that, as it is one of several recent studies devoted to this author.¹ Hans-Peter Pökel's 2014 monograph is centered on al-Jāḥiẓ's treatment of eunuchs, the "unmanly man" (*der unmännliche Mann*) to whom the title refers, paying special—though not exclusive—attention to al-Jāḥiẓ's magnum opus, the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (The book of living beings).

For an author captivated by the infinite wonders of God's creation, it does not come as a surprise that al-Jāḥiẓ, in addition to analyzing men and women, horses and donkeys, wolves, cocks, dogs, phoenixes, ants, flies, bees, and other creepy-crawlies, devoted many pages

of his *K. al-Ḥayawān* to the physical and ethical characteristics of eunuchs. Despite the Islamic condemnation of castration, eunuchs have always been present in premodern Islamic societies, most often as holders of important positions at the court. The historical and social relevance of eunuchs in Islam has been well known since Ayalon's pioneering research on the "eunuch institution,"² which paved the way for further studies, including this one. But this book is not only a work of social history. Pökel's main interest is to explore the relationship between body and sexual identity in the formative period of Islam in the light of al-Jāḥiẓ's understanding of animal and human nature; in this regard, this study is also an example of the intellectual history of gender.

1. At least two other monographs have been published recently: Thomas Hefter, *The Reader in al-Jāḥiẓ* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); and James E. Montgomery, *Al-Jāḥiẓ: In Praise of Books* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), which will be accompanied by a second volume entitled *Al-Jāḥiẓ: In Censure of Books*.

2. David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press/Hebrew University, 1999).



In the introductory first chapter, Pökel discusses the methodological principles that guide his analysis of al-Jāḥiẓ's texts and his research on eunuchs. For Pökel, a proper understanding of the relationship between gender and body should take into account, on the one hand, the Greek and late antique theories of humoral pathology that informed Abbasid notions of human nature and their discourses on the body (*Körperdiskurse*), and, on the other hand, the moral implications that result from this conceptualization, since these shape contemporary conceptions of love and sexuality and even core principles of Arab societies such as *murūʿa*.

In chapter 2, Pökel reviews the figure of al-Jāḥiẓ and surveys the corpus of Jāḥiẓian works on which he bases his study. The most important of them is, of course, the *K. al-Ḥayawān*, which is discussed vis-à-vis Aristotle's *Opus Animalium*. Pökel also lists other works that deal—sometimes only tangentially—with the nature of eunuchs, gender, humoral theory, or manly virtue, namely, *K. al-Bighāl*, *K. al-Muʿallimīn*, *K. al-Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, *K. al-Nisāʾ*, *Risālat al-qiyān*, *K. Fakhr al-sudān ʿalā al-biḍān*, *K. al-Ṭabaṣṣur bi-l-tijāra*, *Manāqib al-Turk*, *K. al-Ḥijāb*, *Risāla fī al-nābīta*, *Maqālat al-ʿUthmāniyya*, and *K. Kitmān al-sirr*.

Chapter 3, which opens with a general overview of slavery in Late Antiquity and early Islam, is centered on the eunuch body and its modification. Pökel provides here a detailed discussion of the castration techniques that al-Jāḥiẓ describes in intricate detail in his *K. al-Ḥayawān* and that might involve surgical excision (*khiṣāʾ*, gonadectomy, and *jibāb*, penectomy) or contusions that result in testicular atrophy (*wijāʾ*, the Latin *ablatio*). Chapter 4 is focused on the physical consequences of

castration as understood by al-Jāḥiẓ and his contemporaries. In this chapter, Pökel surveys the physiological principles that framed the Abbasid understanding of human nature, paying special attention to the Aristotelian tradition and the Galenic synthesis of humoral theory. Because of their relevance for the study of eunuchs, Greek theories on the production of semen are discussed at length. Al-Jāḥiẓ, who traces the origin of castration back to Byzantium (*Ḥayawān*, 1.125), denounces the practice in the context of his polemics against Christians.

Chapter 5 explores this accusation and the treatment of eunuchs in Islam vis-à-vis Roman, Byzantine, and early Christian attitudes toward castration, the loss of manliness, and the protection of the body's integrity. One of the examples treated in this section is that of the famous Origen of Alexandria, who allegedly castrated himself and whose legend seems to have been known to al-Jāḥiẓ. Chapter 6 continues this inquiry into the religious and moral implications of manhood and manliness by problematizing the relationship between emasculation and asceticism, but it soon evolves into a lengthy discussion of sexual preferences and gender identity. In this chapter, which contains the most theoretical sections of the book, Pökel discusses the emotions and “unmanly sexuality” of eunuchs, their contrasts with heterosexual and homosexual models, and the treatment of these problems in an Islamic context.

Chapter 7 centers on the ethnicity of the eunuchs, mostly Slavs (*ṣaqāliba*) and Black Africans (*sūdān*), and the implications that geographical determinism and ethnic stereotypes have for al-Jāḥiẓ's typologies. The eighth and final chapter deals only

occasionally with al-Jāḥiẓ's texts. In it Pökel discusses the liminality of the spaces occupied by eunuchs in Abbasid society and explores the role they played at the court, especially as holders of offices (such as that of the *ḥājib*) that gave them direct access to the rulers, as harem attendants, and within the armies of the caliphs. This chapter also contains a thoughtful critique of the conceptualization of harems in Orientalist scholarship and its reduction of the figure of the eunuch to a mere harem servant.

This brief summary has hopefully made clear the ambitious scope of Pökel's thorough and well-researched study. It embodies, without doubt, the most illuminating approach to the figure of the eunuch in the first centuries of Islam, and it also constitutes a valuable contribution to the study of al-Jāḥiẓ; in the latter regard, Pökel's research on the influence of humoral theory and dietetics in the Jāḥiẓian understanding of human nature is particularly insightful. The difficulties of al-Jāḥiẓ's meandering prose are also solved competently and, apart from minor mistakes, Pökel's translation is reliable.

The centrality of al-Jāḥiẓ in the study, however, is not always evident. The sources used in the book are reviewed in chapter 2, and Pökel devotes several pages to the most important of them, *K. al-Ḥayawān*, but he does not say much about how al-Jāḥiẓ conceived of the long section on eunuchs in his work (*K. al-Ḥayawān*, 1:106–181) or about how the section is connected with the rest of the chapters. Finding the underlying logic of the *K. al-Ḥayawān* is not an easy task, as James Montgomery's recent book on the work shows, and the section on eunuchs is a quintessentially Jāḥiẓian example of apparently digressive

prose. Pökel methodically discusses all the questions tackled by al-Jāḥiẓ, but it would have been useful for the reader to have a detailed inventory of the topics and themes that al-Jāḥiẓ addresses in these pages, which include, alongside the consequences of castration in humans and animals, digressions on horse-breeding, the differences between domestic and wild animals, and the nature of the giraffe. The relationship of this section with the rest of the *K. al-Ḥayawān* and with the *K. al-Bighāl* also deserves more attention, since the unnamed addressee lambasted by al-Jāḥiẓ in the introduction had critical opinions about hybrid categories and interbreeding (*Ḥayawān*, 1:102–106), which are the main topic of al-Jāḥiẓ's book on mules.

Pökel is, however, very careful when it comes to contextualizing the physiological notions that underlie al-Jāḥiẓ's discussion of human nature in the *K. al-Ḥayawān*. Al-Jāḥiẓ's acquaintance with Aristotle's *Opus Animalium* and Galen's humoral theories is addressed in various instances, and Pökel is right to stress the importance of understanding these influences in the context of the late antique tradition. But the way in which al-Jāḥiẓ has become familiar with this legacy is an entirely different matter. Al-Jāḥiẓ's elaborate paraphrases often render the exact identification of his sources a rather difficult—if not impossible—task. The Greek origin of the philosophical and medical ideas discussed in the *K. al-Ḥayawān* is evident, as is the weight of Aristotle's works on animals, but Pökel's insistence on the late antique context sometimes contributes to obscuring relevant aspects of the study of al-Jāḥiẓ's reception of the Greek tradition. If we look at the indexes of the Aristotelian and Galenic corpora, we

find, in fact, very few mentions of eunuchs in their works. By contrast, eunuchs seem to have held a particular fascination for Abbasid scholars, so much so that they made their way into Arabic translations of Aristotelian works that in their original versions made no mention of eunuchs at all. The Arabic translation/adaptation of the *Parva Naturalia* is a good example, for it includes discussions on eunuchs that are not present in the original Greek. Eunuchs are even more relevant in the *Problemata* tradition, which Pökel does not discuss. The *Problemata Physica Arabica* contain questions concerning eunuchs' sexual desire (v, 3), their change toward a female nature (xi, 34), the occurrence of gout (xi, 35) and sores (xi, 40) in eunuchs, and the tone of their voice (xii, 16);³ the *Problemata Arabica Inedita* include three

further questions on eunuchs, two of which address the differences between the *khaṣī* and the *khādim*.⁴ The reception of the Aristotelian *Problemata* by al-Jāḥiẓ and, in general, by the Basran Mu'tazila is a complicated matter that awaits further research, but I cannot help but wonder whether many of the notions and argumentations that we can read in the *K. al-Ḥayawān* might not have come, in fact, from this tradition.

These remarks, however, should not distract from the importance of Pökel's study. This book is a masterly contribution to the scholarship on al-Jāḥiẓ and on the history of sexuality that will be of interest not only to specialists on the Islamic world but also to scholars working on Late Antiquity, comparative history, and gender studies.

3. See Lou S. Filius (ed. and trans.), *The Problemata Physica Attributed to Aristotle: The Arabic Version of Ḥunain ibn Ishāq and the Hebrew Version of Moses ibn Tibbon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

4. Lou S. Filius, "The Genre *Problemata* in Arabic: Its Motions and Changes," in *Aristotle's Problemata in Different Times and Tongues*, ed. Pieter De Leemans and Michèle Goyens, 33–54 (Leuven: University Press, 2006), 46–47.