



CASTRATION

CASTRATION (of men; *kaṣī kardan*, *kāya kešīdan*, *ḵvāja kardan*). This article will focus on a discussion of castration in Islamic medical literature, on its legal status, and on its historical attestation in Islamic Persia (see also eunuchs and, for references to Arabic sources from the ‘Abbasid period, Brunschvig and Pellat).

In the first centuries of the Hegira Islamic society’s constant demand for eunuchs was met by a supply from outside the borders of Dār al-Eslām or at least from its religious and social as well as geographical fringes (in addition to Pellat see Verlinden, esp. I, pp. 212-14, 223, 224, 716-17, II, pp. 118, 127, 130, 981, 982, 987). Nevertheless, it is no more than a consequence of historical probability that unquestioned acceptance of the legality of possessing eunuchs and the constraints of the harem system and military slavery, which rendered their services ever more indispensable, eventually overrode the social and legal barriers that originally prevented the practice of castrating slaves within Muslim society itself (cf. Juynboll; Rotter, esp. pp. 33f.). The force of circumstance notwithstanding, those Arabic sources that do address the question testify to the fact that the legal prohibition of castration was never waived, however perfunctory its enforcement; a similar situation obtained in the Ottoman empire (see Orhonlu). As for the actual incidence of the practice or an awareness of the problem it posed, religious and legal sources—none earlier than the beginning of the 5th/11th century—provide quite uneven evidence; in Koranic exegesis, it was only Bayzāwī who deduced a categorical interdiction of castration, both of men and animals, from Sura 4:118 (*al-Nesā*),



although he conceded that the jurists permitted castration of animals in case of necessity (*le'l-hāja*; Bayzāwī, I, p. 231; cf., e.g., Ṭabarī, *Jāme'* V, pp. 281-86, and Rāzī, III, pp. 316-17). Among authors of *ḥesba* manuals, neither Ebn 'Abdūn, Saqaṭī, Šayzarī, nor Ebn Bassām address the subject; Māwardī, toward the end of his treatise, rather summarily mentions castration of men and beasts (*kašy al-ādamīyīn wa'l-bahā'im*) among various other transgressions that the *moḥtaseb* is required to suppress, such as old men dyeing their hair (pp. 258-59ff.; apud Ebn al-Oḳowwa, p. 197). Thus by the early 5th/11th century castration was regularly practiced in the caliphal capital (and, if Ebn al-Oḳowwa is taken at his word, also in 8th/14th century Cairo), even though the precise conditions that occasioned it—penal action or the consideration of profitability in the slave trade—are not specifically mentioned. In any case, to the jurist's mind there was no doubt about its illegality. It is treated analogously to other offences against life and body and could result in penalties of blood money or retaliation, which in uncontested cases the *moḥtaseb* was authorized to exact and to award to the respective claimant. Unfortunately the quoted texts do not distinguish between the injury represented by a so-called successful castration and, in the case of mortal consequences, homicide (cf. Abu'l-Faḏl Bayhaqī cited in Deḥḳodā, XIII, p. 604b). Since both men and animals are subsumed under the same rule, we may be justified in concluding that castration is also construed here as an infringement on property rights, for which compensation must be made. Ḥellī (IV, p. 269), who in this context may be called upon as an authority on Shi'ite law, includes injuries to the genitalia in his discussion of wrongful assault on life and limb and is in substantial agreement with Māwardī. Quite apart from the legal discussion, however, in social reality castration had been known from pre-Islamic times and was frequently inflicted as an extralegal punishment (see, e.g., Ṭabarī, III/3, sub anno 256, pp. 1817, 1833 [cf. *Mojmal al-tawārīk*, ed. Bahār, p. 365]; Elisséeff, p. 146, s.v. Mutilation d'un homme [éviration]; on 'Adelšāh's castration of Moḥammad Khan Qājār Āḡā Moḥammad).

For a variety of reasons, both circumcision and castration are not discussed as a matter of course in Islamic medical literature. With obvious exceptions soft tissue surgery as such was not a treatment of choice in Galenic medicine but was restricted to those conditions that had proved intractable to the physician's ministrations. Certainly, castration was practiced in Greco-Roman antiquity, at least from the Hellenistic period onward, and professional surgeons may have been involved more frequently than is mentioned in the



sources (see Guyot, esp. pp. 15-36, 45-51, and Corcoran, esp. p. 31, n. 143: ref. to St. Augustine, *De sancta virgine* 24.24, p. 259); yet in the Hippocratic tradition of *nil nocere*, discussion of the subject was limited to biological theory (see Galen, esp. 1.15, pp. 569-73; cf. Jorjānī, *Ḍakīra*, p. 58 = bk. 1, discourse 5, pt. 6, chap. 16). If Paul of Aegina (fl. a.d. 610-40) is to be believed, the increasing employment of eunuchs by his time had resulted in mounting pressures on physicians to perform castrations and thus, through the arbitrary infliction of mutilating injuries, to violate the fundamental medical principle of restoring nature to its proper function (II, pp. 111f. [= 6.68]; cf. Majūsī, II/2, p. 252 [= bk. 2, disc. 9, chap. 53]; Ebn al-Qoff, II, p. 207). However, within these constraints, the operations that Paul describes represent the standard of medical knowledge and surgical technique at his time, not mere butchery. The suppression and elimination of male sexual and procreative powers is achieved by removal of the testes, which can be effected in one of two ways. The first method, contusion, can only be applied to subjects under the age of six; moreover, it does not in all cases reliably suppress libido. Paul therefore gives preference to excision. Avicenna (Ebn Sīnā), on the other hand, and most medieval Arabic and Persian writers in the Galenic tradition of dietetic treatment limit the operative removal of the genitalia to cases of strictly therapeutic indication; in the *Qānūn* (II, pp. 550, 554), Avicenna prescribes ablation of gangrenous testes (*kaṣy*) and resection of the penis in cases of suppurating, generalized ulceration (II, pp. 550-54). Jorjānī reproduces Avicenna, except that in the *Ḍakīra*, he uses the formulation *majbūb yā mamsūḥ* (p. 531 line 15 = bk. 6, disc. 19, pt. 1, chap. 6; cf. idem, *Agrāz*, p. 500; on the Arabic terms see below). In contrast, those authors of medical encyclopedias who adhere more closely to Paul of Aegina's model borrow his section on surgery, including the chapter on castration, for their own works. Thus Majūsī (wrote 367-69/977-79) reproduces Paul, albeit with telling modifications (II/2, pp. 252-53), which are similarly encountered in the works of later authors; an awareness of the turpitude of the operation contrasts with the social reality that imposed its traditional, even if irrationally brutal customs on medical practitioners and authors alike. On one hand, Majūsī adds to Paul's apologetic remarks the statement that the operation is reprehensible from the point of view of religious learning (*makrūh 'end al-'elm*), and, on the other, he supplements Paul's two methods of contusion or evulsion of the testes with a description of the age-old practice of total removal of the genitalia (see, e.g., Ṭabarī, I, pp. 1781-82, presumably referring to the eunuch who was sent to the Prophet as guardian of Maria the Copt; cf. Pellat, esp. p. 108). The common Arabic term for this procedure, which necessitated the



permanent use of a metal cannula for passing water, was *jabb* or *jebāb*; *majbūb* or *ajabb* for the person who suffered it. A Persian equivalent is *aṭlas* (*kardan*), literally “(to make) smooth” (see, e.g., Abū Zayn Kaḥḥāl, *Šarāyeṭ-e jarrāḥī* ix 3, ms. University of California at Los Angeles, Pers. 61, fol. 155v12f.). Majūsī stipulates that after strangulating the organs at the base they are to be cut off with a sharp razor; he prescribes specific drugs for the dressing of the wound, but in contrast to his follower Ebn al-Qoff (II, p. 207), he does not refer to the subsequent use of a cannula for urination, nor to the high mortality rate of this particular operation (this may be due to unreliable transmission of Majūsī’s text—no critical edition having yet been made).

Majūsī’s younger contemporary Abu’l-Qāsem Ḳalaf Zahrāwī (Albucasis; d. 404/1013) replaced Paul’s introduction with his own thinly veiled justification (p. 45); while paying lip service to the prohibition of castration by Islamic law (*moḥram fī šarī’atenā*), which should have precluded discussion of the subject, he refers to its usefulness for the physician if he is asked about it and called upon to treat a victim of castration and also points to the frequent need of gelding domestic animals. Consequently, in his rendition of Paul’s text he substitutes “the animal” (*al-ḥayawān*) at every mention of the individual who is subjected to the procedure and, in notable distinction to Majūsī, does not discuss *jabb* at all.

In the course of the following centuries the normative power of the factual asserted itself ever more forcefully, witness the surgical treatises written during this period. The first that should be named is *Ketāb al-’omda* (esp. II, p. 207) by the Melkite Christian Abu’l-Faraj b. Ya’qūb, known as Ebn al-Qoff (d. 685/1285). He combined, as it were, his predecessors’ arguments by pointing to the prohibition of castration by religious law (*Šarī’a*) and its reprehensibility from the point of view of the art of medicine on one hand, while referring to the pressures that princes and other men in positions of command exert on physicians on the other. As a final excuse he added that there were also therapeutic uses of castration, for instance in certain extreme cases of leprosy. As mentioned, Ebn al-Qoff’s exposition of *jabb* has more details on postoperative care than his model Majūsī; the conflict between prevailing custom and medical considerations is mirrored in the ambivalent formulation that *jabb* was a better (*ajwad*) method than the other two but incurred the risk of high mortality.

Zahrāwī and Esmā’īl Jorjānī (q.v.) are said to be the main sources of the Ottoman Turkish treatise *Jarrāḥīya-ye ilkānīya*, which the Anatolian physician



Šaraf-al-Dīn (Şerefeddin) b. ‘Alī “Sabuncuoğlu” dedicated to Moḥammad Fāteḥ (Mehemmed Fatih) in 870/1465-66 (esp. pp. 33ff., 122, 125). Drawing on Zahrāwī, Sabuncuoğlu also incorporated Paul’s section on castration in his work; however, the miniature that serves to illustrate his text does not in fact represent the operation as he describes it, but shows the traditional method of removing the genitalia with one sweeping cut of the knife.

The first Persian author known to have discussed castration was Abū Zayn Kaḥḥāl. His treatise *Šarāyeṭ-e jarrāḥī* was presented to the Timurid Šāhroḡ (r. 807-50/1405-47). Of the twenty-four chapters in the discourse on surgery proper castration is the subject of the third, preceded only by a general introduction and a section on circumcision. The importance of these topics for the author appears obvious. No longer is there any reference to the problem of the licitness of castration. The author simply states that persons are made eunuchs (*k̄vāja-sarā*) for the purpose of privation (*maḥrūmī*). He draws the conventional distinction between *kaṣī* and *aṭlas* (*kardan*; fols. 155v5-156r4), that is, excision of the testes and “clean removal” of the genitalia (*har ḡe dārad pāk beborand*, fol. 155v13). However, Abū Zayn’s formulations are so imprecise that what he calls *kaṣī* might simply be meant to describe a complete removal of the organs step by step instead of the single sweep of *jabb*. Much stress is laid on procedural detail (such as keeping the victim motionless) and postoperative care, especially for the *aṭlas*—possibly also for Abū Zayn’s *kaṣī*—whose condition requires the use of a lead cannula for passing water. Yet Abū Zayn does not provide an assessment of the relative risks of the two methods he sets forth. The fact that he refers to a certain technique as “Indian” may testify to the frequency of the operation in India (cf. Krusinski, I, p. 77, and Aubin, p. 148, on India as the country of origin of eunuchs in Persia). Even though the author may have drawn on the same tradition that is attested in Ebn al-Qoff, if he did not rather depend on popular practice and non-medical authors (cf. Moḡaddasī, pp. 242-43), his formulations in either case do not bespeak direct borrowing.

The surgical performance of castration under the Safavids is well attested by Ḥakīm Moḡammad’s *Daḡīra-ye kāmela* (or *Daḡīra-ye jarrāḥī*), which was composed in the reign of Shah Šafī (1038-52/1629-42); it is amply supplemented by contemporary native as well as European accounts. As far as can be gathered from Elgood’s summary (1970, esp. pp. 180f.), Ḥakīm Moḡammad only described the method of *aṭlas kardan*, which may reflect the rarity, if not absence, of white eunuchs in the time before Shah ‘Abbās I



(*Taḍkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, fols. 30v3ff., 31v2ff.); Tavernier (p. 283), on the other hand, indicates that both black and white eunuchs were “coupés à net” (cf. Abū Zayn Kaḥḥāl and John Bulmer [1640] cited by Elgood, 1970, p. 180). If Tavernier’s testimony can be trusted, it was not because white slaves had merely been made to undergo evulsion of the testes that they served as eunuch-guards at the harem gates without entering it (see, e.g., Chardin, p. 85), but also because of the black eunuchs’ notorious ugliness (e.g., Tavernier, *ibid.*). Ḥakīm Moḥammad stresses the importance of proper dressing of the wound, but only if the slave so treated is considered valuable and if his survival is desirable. In cases of punishment no such caution is advised. With no apparent scruples the author accepts the surgeon’s employment as maimer and, as it were, executioner’s assistant (cf. Elgood, 1970, pp. 181-89).

Shah ‘Abbās I himself is said to have wielded the surgeon’s knife for diversion and to have castrated a certain number of slaves; the mortality rate in these cases was reportedly low (Elgood, 1951, p. 293; *idem*, 1970, p. 181). Of the many prisoners taken in the Caucasus during Safavid military campaigns (see [barda and bardadārī iv](#) and [čarkas](#)), a certain number were castrated and served as eunuchs at court (e.g., Mīrzā Beg b. Ḥasan Ḥasanī Jonābādī, *Rawzat al-Safawīya*, cited by Röhrborn, p. 321, etc.; Chardin, pp. 117f.). Krusinski (I, p. 78) even quotes Tavernier to the effect that the governor of Lār had the youngest of his four sons castrated in the hope of securing for him an important court office that was restricted to white eunuchs; however, the fatal outcome of the operation left the father embarrassed and ashamed.

During the Qajar period the declining availability of white male slaves led to a decrease in the practice of castration, as the black eunuchs who continued to be imported from Africa had been castrated there (Polak, I, pp. 255f.; cf., e.g., Meinardus). However, the Safavid practice of imposing castration as a punishment for certain transgressions (Elgood, 1970, pp. 181-89, with reference to Ḥakīm Moḥammad) remained in force during the 13th/19th century. Because only adults were subject to it, the death rate was horrendous, but those who did survive were much sought after as harem attendants (Polak, I, p. 256).

Whereas in the Arabic-speaking regions of Islam eunuchs were employed for centuries to maintain and police religious establishments, such as the Shrine at Mecca, no information as to similar customs in Shi‘ite sanctuaries in Persia has come to this writer’s attention; consequently, the question of whether castrations were performed there for this particular purpose has to remain



unanswered (see Burckhardt, 1829, I, pp. 288-91; idem, 1822, pp. 294-96, and cf. Roller, p. 56; Meinardus, p. 57).

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