

BEYOND THE HAREM: CHALLENGING WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM

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Introduction

Women in Islam is a contentious topic. Western views of Islam tends to be coloured by a sense of superiority, especially where the treatment of women is involved. I wanted to look at Medieval Islam to try and disentangle what was presented by the religious authorities as appropriate behaviour and how women actually conducted themselves, in order to challenge this way of thinking.

I looked at 2 periods, the Abbasid 'Golden Age', c.750 – 850, and the Mamluk sultanate, 1250-1517. The reason behind this was there was more plentiful source material available in translation for the Mamluk period.

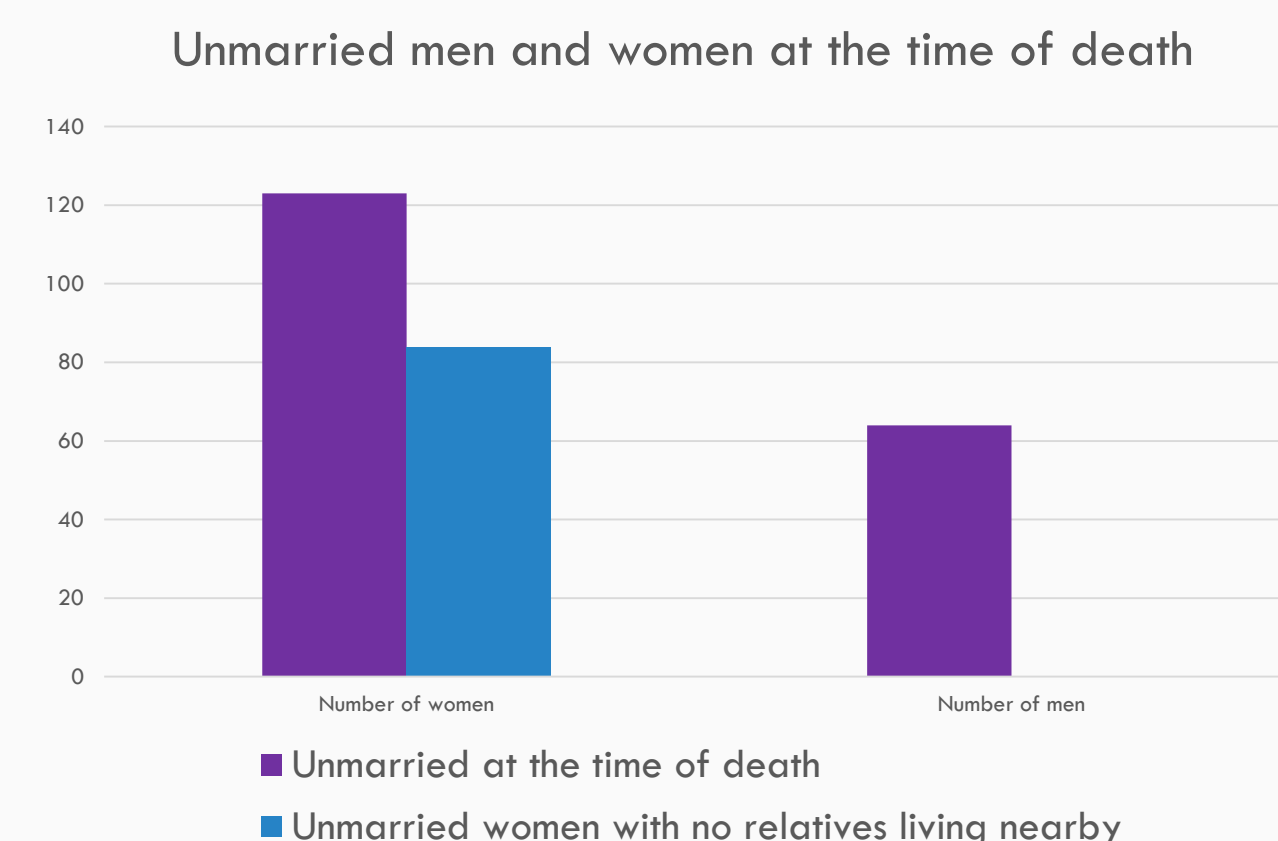
Method

I used Joan Scott's famous discourse on gender (1986) and Edward Said's 'Orientalism' (1978) as theoretical starting points, and then went on to use both primary and secondary sources. My primary sources included travellers' accounts, such as Ibn Battuta (d.1369) and Ibn Fadlan (10th Century), translations of legal discourses, the hadiths, the Qur'an, as well as smaller translated extracts, like Remke Kruk's excerpts from the Dhat al-Himma, and Arabic epic. In addition to written sources, I was also able to study architecture, especially the minarets and Ribats in Cairo.

Further Study

My research has illuminated a number of areas that deserve further research:

1. More scientific organisation of data.
2. A more organised and focused approach on the effect of Turkic heritage on Mamluk treatment of women.
3. A closer study of life in the Ribats, looking at who worked there.

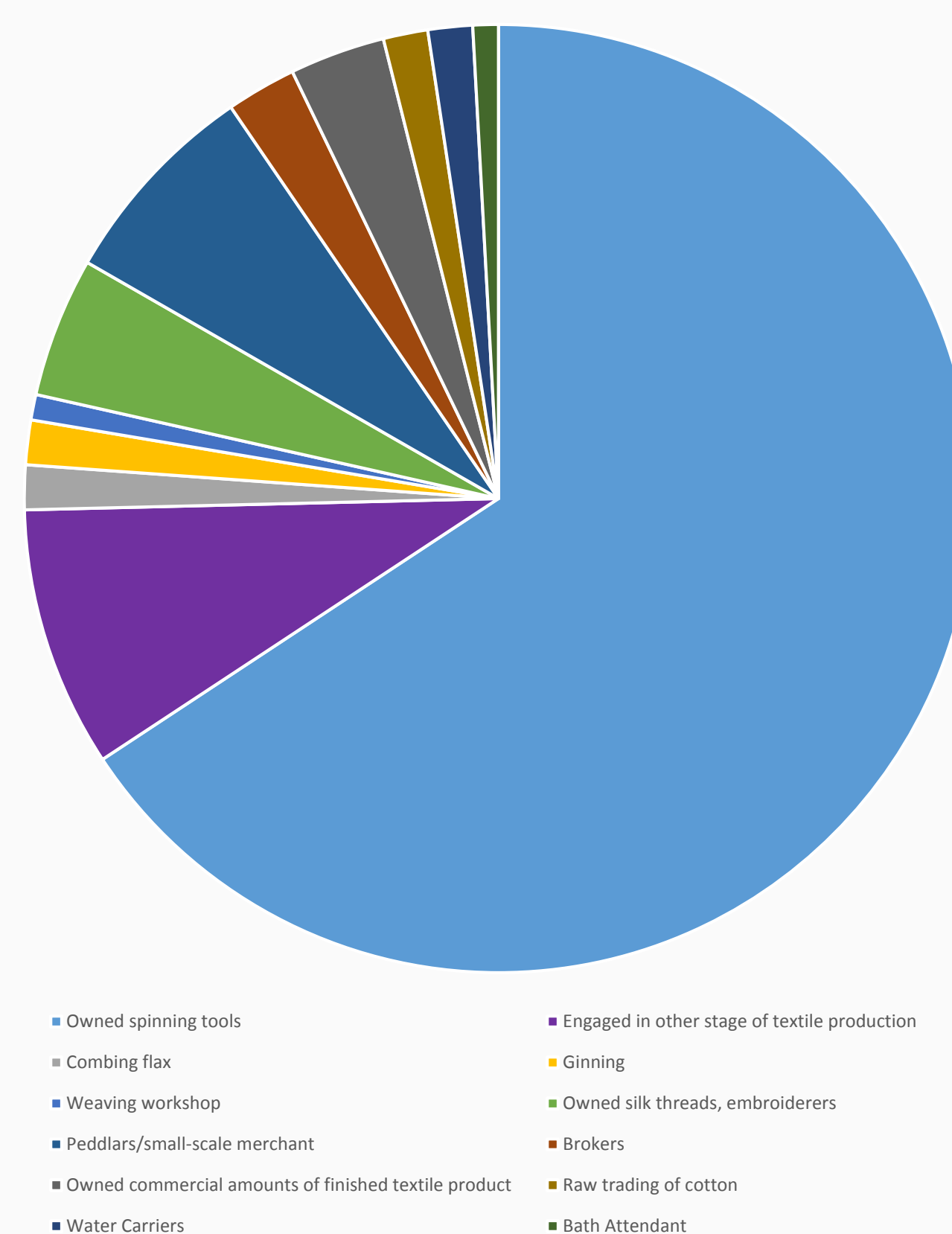


Aims

Challenge ideas that women in Islam were victims of repression.

Explore the relationship between the way women were presented in literature, and women in reality.

Women's Occupations in late 14th Century Jerusalem



Conclusions

My two graphs show that women were independent and able to provide for themselves. Both are made with data taken from the Haram documents from Jerusalem. The pie chart shows how female employment was much higher than what might be assumed. Whilst only 6 women are ascribed actual jobs, many others had items in their possession that hint at employment, and some had enough to suggest they themselves ran businesses. This chart shows that women were overwhelmingly involved in the textile industry, so there was still not really a space for them in the political sphere. However, they were able to bring their own income in. Additionally, this implies that women would have had to go and spend time in the markets to sell their wares. Market regulations forbidding women from being on their own, or interacting with men, are therefore the extreme and extremely unpractical.

It was also fairly common for women to be widowed, divorced, or unmarried at the time of their death. The bar chart shows how many women in Jerusalem were single at the time of death. It also appears that it was fairly common for single women to move to Jerusalem at the end of their lives, probably for religious reasons. These women either lived on their own, or in communities. These communities, or Ribats, were charitable institutions which in many cases were set up by wealthier women from the court. One question that arises about these is who maintained them? If they were a secluded space for women in the city, then the assumption is that women worked there. If this is the case, this is another sphere in which women were able to work and exercise 'independence'.

It seems women in the Mamluk period may have had greater freedom than in the Abbasid period. This could be a result of their Turkic Mongol heritage, as women in those societies were often expected to play a role in the political sphere. However, it also could just be a result of more source material being available.

Acknowledgements

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