Purchasing a Slave in Fourteenth-Century Cairo: Ibn al-Akfānī’s Book of Observation and Inspection in the Examination of Slaves

How were slaves bought and sold in Mamluk Cairo? The answer depends to a surprising degree on which genre of Mamluk texts we consult. This article is based on the genre of slave-buying advice, particularly the fourteenth-century treatise of Ibn al-Akfānī which is published here for the first time. However, a contradiction becomes apparent when Ibn al-Akfānī’s medical perspective on the slave market is compared with the legal perspective adopted by the genre of hisbah manuals. The medically-oriented slave-buying advice manuals considered it essential for a prospective slave buyer to inspect the slave’s naked body before committing to purchase, while the legally-oriented hisbah manuals considered such an inspection inappropriate. To understand how such conflicting legal and medical norms were reconciled in practice, a third genre, the travel narrative, will be added to the analysis.

Most studies of slavery during the Mamluk period have focused on master-slave interactions and on the various types of service required of slaves.¹ Less scholarly

attention has been devoted to the purchase of slaves, the economic transaction and legal act that initiated a new master-slave relationship. Of course, in many ways the market for slaves was similar to markets for other goods: supply and demand, contracts and payments, all operated much the same whether the commodity being exchanged was human or non-human. The most notable difference between the sale of human and non-human goods lay in the inspection process conducted by the buyer.

Legally, every act of sale required the informed consent of all parties. For the buyer, informed consent meant an opportunity to inspect the goods before purchase in order to confirm that their content and quality were as advertised by the seller. Fulfillment of the requirement for informed consent was signaled in the sale contract by a clause stating that “viewing, cognizance, and agreement in a legal manner” had occurred. In the case of a slave sale, the prospective buyer would conduct a physical examination and interview in order to determine whether the slave’s physical and mental qualities matched the seller’s description. A thorough inspection demanded expert knowledge of the various qualities commonly found in human bodies and minds, with special emphasis on the qualities considered most and least desirable in slaves.

In addition to fulfilling the legal requirement of informed consent, inspection served a second function in the sale of slaves, one unique to slaves as human commodities. The physical inspection of slaves’ bodies was deeply humiliating. This humiliation was not incidental. It served to reinforce the powerlessness and

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dishonor of slaves through the profanation (ibtidāl) of their bodies in contrast to the inviolability (ḥurmah) of the free body.⁴ The humiliation was made especially acute by examining the naked bodies of slaves in public places. Thus by the time a slave changed hands from the old master to the new, a relationship of power and subjection, honor and dishonor, had already been established through the process of inspection.

Humiliating displays of power during the inspection also inhibited the slave’s unique ability as a human commodity to interfere with his or her own sale. Individual slaves could choose to cooperate with, acquiesce to, or resist the entire inspection process; confirm or deny the claims of sellers about their health and character; encourage or discourage particular buyers; and in some cases give or withhold consent in contracts for their own sale.⁵ Such maneuvering occurred within very narrow constraints and could be dangerous for the slave. Yet buyers and sellers could not afford to ignore the ability of slaves to exercise their own will in the midst of sale. Humiliating them helped to forestall and overcome their resistance.

For these reasons, inspecting a slave was a complex undertaking and difficult to carry out effectively. It is not surprising that some prospective slave owners sought advice before attempting to buy a new slave. Much of this advice was probably shared in person, but there was also a written genre of slave-buying advice. This genre, the evolution of which has been traced by Hans Müller, was derived from Greek models but took on its own distinctive form in the Islamic intellectual context.⁶ Texts in the slave-buying advice genre might appear as standalone manuals or as chapters within encyclopedic works. They were addressed to the prospective slave buyer, who was assumed to be a man buying slaves of either


gender. Their advice centered on the medical knowledge necessary to inspect a slave’s body for signs of poor health. Most were written by practicing doctors or scholars with medical expertise. The authors often supplemented their medical advice with ethnographic information (qualities associated with slaves from various places), ethical and political commentary (how to control the behavior of slaves and integrate them into the household), and general recommendations presented as common sense (shop around rather than buying the first available slave). The kinds of service required of these slaves were spelled out most clearly in the ethnographic chapters, which used stereotypes to classify slaves for domestic work, military service, sexual exploitation, hard labor, household or business management, and creative endeavors such as music.

Within these genre conventions, no two slave-buying advice texts are exactly alike. This article focuses on the distinctive features of one Mamluk-era slave-buying advice manual, *The Book of Observation and Inspection in the Examination of Slaves* by Ibn al-Akfānī. *The Book of Observation* survives today in a single manuscript fragment apparently copied in the fifteenth century.7 It was acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale Française in 1833 as part of the collection of Jean-Louis Asselin de Cherville, a French consular agent in Cairo from 1806 to 1822.8 At that time it had already been bound into a volume with several other texts relating to Mamluk Syria and Egypt.

7 “Kitāb al-naẓar wa-al-taḥqīq fī taqālīb al-raqīq,” Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Française MS arabe 2234, fols. 148r–151r. The entire volume and its contents are described in W. M. G. de Slane, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, 1883), 392, accessed online March 17, 2015 at http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ead.html?id=FRBNFEAD000030154. Although the catalog lists *The Book of Observation* as folios 148r–157v of the volume, in fact it takes up only folios 148r–151r. Fols. 148–155 form a gathering with two loose sheets, fols. 156 and 157, attached at the end. Ibn al-Akfānī’s treatise begins with a title page on fol. 148r. The text of his treatise runs from fol. 148v to fol. 151r but stops abruptly a few lines into fol. 151r. The next line is the beginning of a second, unrelated text which fills the rest of fol. 151r and its margins. The remainder of the gathering consists of an assortment of unrelated texts. The first loose sheet, fol. 156r, is a second title page for Ibn al-Akfānī’s treatise using the same layout as the title page on fol. 148r. Perhaps the scribe was practicing. However, the margins of fol. 156r are filled with a continuation of the unrelated text from fol. 155v. The textual continuity from fol. 155v to fol. 156r, from the end of the gathering onto the loose leaf, is signaled with a guide word. The second loose leaf, fol. 157, is blank. Red ink is used to highlight certain letters in Ibn al-Akfānī’s treatise, but does not appear elsewhere except for a *bismillah* on fol. 156v. A German translation of Ibn al-Akfānī’s treatise is available in Müller, *Die Kunst des Sklavenkaufs*, 177–180, but the original Arabic text has not been published until now.

8 Marie-Geneviève Guesdon, e-mail message to author, March 31, 2015. The volume containing Ibn al-Akfānī’s treatise was number 497 in de Cherville’s collection.
The author of *The Book of Observation*, Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Sā‘īd ibn al-Akfānī al-Anṣārī, was born in Sinjār in northern Iraq in the 1280s. He moved to Syria and then to Cairo in the course of his studies, settling down as a physician at the Manṣūrī hospital in Cairo by the 1320s. He was also a prolific writer and composed dozens of treatises on a wide variety of topics from ophthalmology to astronomy. His most famous work was an encyclopedia that covered sixty branches of knowledge gathered under the headings of literature, logic, theology, physics, geometry, astronomy, mathematics, and the practical sciences (such as politics). He died in 1348 at the age of sixty, a casualty of the first outbreak of the Black Death in Cairo. Therefore, although the text of *The Book of Observation* is not dated, it was probably composed in Cairo in the second quarter of the fourteenth century.

Ibn al-Akfānī applied his medical knowledge to the purchase of slaves in practice as well as in theory. Slave traders and brokers frequently consulted him about the health of their slaves. According to his friend and biographer al-Ṣafadī, “as for knowledge about slaves, both male and female [al-raqiq min al-mamālik wa-al-jawārij], he had a wealth of it. I saw those enthusiastic about the trade come to him and talk about what problems had befallen them in the course of their work. He guided them to that which was right and led them to repair their faults.” Given Ibn al-Akfānī’s wide-ranging medical knowledge, his great activity as a writer, and his involvement with the local slave market, it is not surprising that he decided to write a treatise in the genre of slave-buying advice.

*The Book of Observation* is not, however, an entirely original work. Ibn al-Akfānī seems to have based it on an anonymous treatise entitled *Inspection in Slave-Buying* composed in early thirteenth-century Egypt or Syria. It is difficult to compare *The Book of Observation* and *Inspection in Slave-Buying* because both surviving texts are incomplete, but Ibn al-Akfānī’s version is far shorter and less detailed. It includes no ethnography and less common-sense advice, and it may have been intended to circulate as an introduction to *Inspection in Slave-Buying* rather than an independent treatise. Nevertheless, it was *The Book of Observation* that was named as a model for the third and final known slave-buying advice.

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11 “Al-Taḥqīq fī shirāʾ al-raqiq,” Cairo, Dār al-Kutub MS 48 Taymūriyyah, Faḍaʿīl wa-radhāʾīl. This is the sole surviving version of the text and it lacks the final chapter.
manual of the Mamluk era, *The Apt Statement on Choosing Female and Male Slaves*, composed by al-ʿAyntābī in the late fifteenth century. 12 Like Ibn al-Akfānī, al-ʿAyntābī was a physician at the Mansūrī hospital in Cairo. Unlike Ibn al-Akfānī, al-ʿAyntābī wrote a full slave-buying treatise with substantial sections on common-sense advice, ethnography, and physiognomy. The apparent mismatch between the content of al-ʿAyntābī’s treatise (which appears to follow *Inspection in Slave-Buying*) and its stated model (the abbreviated *Book of Observation*) supports the theory that the combined texts of both the anonymous *Inspection in Slave-Buying* and Ibn al-Akfānī’s *Book of Observation* were circulating together under the title *The Book of Observation*. 13

It is no coincidence that the two known authors of Mamluk-era slave-buying manuals, Ibn al-Akfānī and al-ʿAyntābī, were both physicians at the Mansūrī hospital. The district where the hospital is located, Khān al-Khalīlī, was also home to some of the larger and more famous slave markets in Cairo, enabling slave sellers, buyers, and brokers to consult the Mansūrī physicians with ease. 14 Mamluk slave markets appeared in three different physical forms: an open market located in a vacant lot or square; a street market in which the slaves stood or sat along the walls; or an enclosed market located within a building (a khān or funduq) consisting of a central courtyard surrounded by shops on the first floor and rooms for the slaves on the second floor. 15

In the early thirteenth century, two locations within Khān al-Khalīlī were designated as slave markets. One market was closed in 1225 so that al-Kāmil could use the site to build his madrasah. 16 It was replaced for a brief time by an open market located along the same street, Bayn al-Qasrayn, in a space (sāḥah) opposite

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14 Consulting with a physician was also common practice for slave buyers in contemporary Genoa and Valencia. Carmel Ferragud, "The Role of Doctors in the Slave Trade during the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries within the Kingdom of Valencia (Crown of Aragon)," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 87 (2013): 143–69; for Genoa, see Bartolomeo de Bosco, *Consilia* (Lodano, 1620), 493–95, consilium 301.


Bāb al-Zuhūmah, previously the gate of the old Fatimid palace and later the gate of the Hanbali hall of the madrassa of al-Ṣāliḥ. The market was moved again almost immediately when a retired palace eunuch named Masrūr purchased the site for a small khān, Khān Masrūr al-Ṣaghīr, sometime during the reign of al-Kāmil (1218–38).

The slave market did not move far, however, reappearing next door as part of Masrūr’s large khān, Khān Masrūr al-Kabīr. Masrūr’s large khān was built next to his small khān, still in the vicinity of Bāb al-Zuhūmah. In the thirteenth century, the large khān boasted ninety-nine rooms and a mosque. By the late fourteenth century it was one of the most important khāns in Cairo, notable for its many traders from Syria as well as a government office for the deposit of funds for orphans and travelers. It was also famous as a slave market. Either beside the khān or among its exterior shops were two rooms with a bench between them. Turkic and Anatolian mamlūks (al-mamālīk al-turuk wa-al-rūm) sat on the bench to be displayed for potential buyers.

The sultan al-Ẓāhir Barqūq closed this slave market in the 1380s, and Khān Masrūr went into decline shortly afterwards.

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18 Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, Al-Rawḍah al-bahīyah, 25. Some of the land in question belonged to the author’s father. The revenues of the khān were used to endow the school established in Masrūr’s house after his death. It was renewed in the fourteenth century, incorporated into a waqf by al-ʿĀdil Tūmānbāy in the early sixteenth century, then rebuilt as Khān al-Laban in the Ottoman era and as Wakālat Badawiyah bint Shahin today. Denoix, Depaule, and Tuchscherer, Le Khan al-Khalili, 2:30; André Raymond and Gaston Wiet, Les Marchés du Caire: Traduction annotée du texte de Maqrizi (Cairo, 1979), 133–35.

19 Al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-khiṭat, 3:304–5; Raymond and Wiet, Les Marchés du Caire, 133–35; Denoix, Depaule, and Tuchscherer, Le Khan al-Khalili, vol. 2 plate 7. The large khān was built on the site of the former Khazānat al-Daraq.


22 Bertrand de la Broquière, The Voyage d’Outremer, trans. Galen Kline (New York, 1988), 84. There is no evidence that the slaves displayed on the bench were auctioned, despite Ragib, "Les marchés aux esclaves," 756. There is also no evidence that the two benches were used to display male and female slaves separately, despite Raymond and Wiet, Les Marchés du Caire, 94–95, and Muhammad Mukhtar, Bughiyat al-murid fi shirāʾ al-jawārī wa-taqlīb al-ʿabīd (Cairo, 1996), 86. In fact, I have found no sign that female slaves were ever sold at Khān Masrūr.

23 Al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-khiṭat, 3:304–5, blamed Timur for this, since his devastation of Syria disrupted the activities of the Syrian merchants who normally used Khān Masrūr as their base in Cairo. The large khān was demolished in 1428 by al-Ashraf Barsbāy and rebuilt as a waqf for
ed to a new district, Khuṭṭ al-Miṣṭāḥ. This market, located near the Madrasah Ḥusāmiyāh, was referred to interchangeably as the slave market (ṣūq al-raqiq) and the female slave market (ṣūq al-jawārī). It was a street market on the Darb al-Mushtarak and remained at this location for almost a hundred years. The only hiatus occurred in 1418, when it was moved to an unnamed funduq opposite the shrine of al-Ḥusayn. This may have been Fundūq Bahādur, founded in 1258 and located across the street (Darb Jirjī) on the western side of the mosque of al-Ḥusayn. A second fifteenth-century street market was found in Khūkhah Sūq al-Jawār, near the madrasah of Sayf al-İslām and the Ḥammām al-Sūltān. It was referred to interchangeably as a market for slaves and female slaves (ṣūq al-raqiq and ṣūq al-jawārī) and was operational until at least 1471. There may also have been a third fifteenth-century slave market near Madrasah al-Fakhirīyah during the reign of al-Ẓāhir Jaqmaq.

Towards the end of the Mamluk period, the slave market moved yet again. In November 1514, al-Ashraf Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī closed the old slave market and founded a new one (ṣūq lil-raqiq) on the same street as the temporary slave market of 1418. This may have evolved into Wakālat al-Jallābah, an Ottoman-era street market specializing in black slaves which itself changed location several times.


24 Al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-khiṭat, 3:94. The Miṣṭāḥ quarter was located outside the Qanṭarah gate, near the Shaʿrīyah gate, between the Milḥīyīn quarter and the Sūwayqah al-Ṣāḥib quarter. Al-Maqrīzī’s description of this market was adopted almost word for word by Aḥqūfah al-Khāṣīki in his own description of Cairo during the reign of Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in the early 1500s. Al-Khāṣīki, "Al-Tufah al-fākirah," Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Française MS arabe 2265, fol. 40v.

25 Taqī al-Dīn Ahmad al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk, ed. M. M. Ziyadah and Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ ʿĀshūr (Cairo, 1934–73), 4:1:442. The shrine was in the same location as the present mosque of al-Ḥusayn. Warner, Monuments of Historic Cairo, no. 28.

26 Al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-khiṭat, 3:268. Al-Sakhāwī, Al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ, 3:72. The madrasah might have been located in the mosque of ʿAbd al-Ğanī al-Fakhirī built in 1418. Warner, Monuments of Historic Cairo, no.184. Today it is located on Shāriʿ Port Saʿīd, just south of its intersection with Shāriʿ al-Azhar and north of the Islamic Museum, on the east side of the street.

27 Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Īyās, Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʿ al-duhūr (Cairo, 1984), 4:404–5 and 5:94; Denoix, Depaule, and Tuchscherer, Le Khan al-Khalili, 52.
while keeping the same name.\textsuperscript{32} White slaves were sold in the Wakālat al-Kushuk and Khān Jaʿfar during the Ottoman era.\textsuperscript{33} Markets with these names have been attributed to the Mamluk era as well, but there is no mention of them in contemporary sources.\textsuperscript{34} The Ottoman pattern of separate markets for black and white slaves, or for male and female slaves, was not characteristic of the Mamluk era either.

However, not all slaves were sold in the context of an organized market. Some were displayed for sale in public places, such as the entrances of mosques and churches, or were led through the streets by criers.\textsuperscript{35} Others were sold in private spaces such as homes and shops. For example, when the young Ayyubid ruler of Aleppo, al-Manṣūr Muḥammad, wanted to buy a slave in the early thirteenth century, a merchant visited his house with a selection of slaves so that he and his mother could inspect them from behind a veil or screen.\textsuperscript{36} In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, al-Muʾayyad Shaykh was playing cards with a group of friends when a slave merchant appeared with a particularly fine mamlūk for sale.\textsuperscript{37} A private sale environment seems to have been the prerogative of wealthy buyers and a privilege granted to elite slaves, who thus avoided the humiliation of public display.\textsuperscript{38}

Nevertheless, the majority of slaves were sold in noisy, bustling public markets. In an environment full of distractions, how was an ordinary, non-expert slave buyer to take full advantage of his or her right to inspect the goods and avoid fraud? How was he or she to decide whether a slave was truly in good health and


\textsuperscript{33}Marcel Clerget, Le Caire, étude de géographie urbaine et d’histoire économique (Cairo, 1934), 2:343, citing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources. On Clerget’s map (2:145), the various locations of Wakālat al-Jallābah are numbers 36, 124, and 291; Khān Jaʿfar is number 52; and Wakālat al-Kushuk does not appear.

\textsuperscript{34}Mukhtar, Bughiyat al-murid, 85; Naʿim Zakki Fahmī, Ṭuruq al-tijārah al-dawlīyah wa-muḥaṭātuhā bayna al-sharq wa-al-gharb (Cairo, 1973), 224.


able to provide whatever services the buyer had in mind? Ibn al-Akfānī’s response to this dilemma is given in Arabic in Appendix A and in English translation in Appendix B.

His advice can be summed up in six points. First, avoid inspecting slaves when in a state of need or desire, since buyers experiencing urgent need tend not to be concerned about quality.39 Second, avoid choosing a slave on the basis of first impressions, since they may be misleading. Third, disregard statements from the previous owner about the quality of the slave, but do ask about the reason for the sale. Fourth, avoid slaves who resist punishment and who may have been corrupted by a poor environment. Fifth, purchase slave women only during their menstrual period in order to ensure that they are not concealing a pregnancy, and do not forget after purchase that they might wish to become pregnant. This is a reference to *umm walad* status.40 A pregnant slave woman would become an *umm walad* if her master acknowledged paternity of her child. The child of an *umm walad* would enjoy free status from the moment of its birth and would be considered a legitimate heir of its father. The *umm walad* herself could not be sold and would be manumitted upon the death of her master.

Ibn al-Akfānī’s final piece of advice was a checklist for a thorough head-to-toe inspection of the slave’s body in order to detect any hint of injury or disease. Since the surviving manuscript copy is incomplete, the checklist covers only the area from the head to the arms. Nevertheless, a buyer who worked through Ibn al-Akfānī’s checklist would be well-informed about the slave’s physical state of health and thus well-equipped to avoid fraud, negotiate a fair price, and conclude a valid sale with respect to the requirement for viewing and cognizance of the goods.

Yet Ibn al-Akfānī’s manual cannot be taken at face value as a description of how prospective slave buyers acted in the marketplace. Slave-buying advice is a normative genre, telling slave buyers what they ought to do rather than describing what they actually did. To check the accuracy of Ibn al-Akfānī’s portrayal of the slave marketplace, his treatise should be compared with sources from two other genres, one normative and one descriptive. The normative genre of *ḥisbah* manuals, manuals for market inspectors, set forth guidelines for the sale of slaves based on legal rather than medical principles. *Ḥisbah* manuals were written by jurists to help the market inspector (*muḥtasib*), a state official, carry out his legal and moral duty “to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong” in the marketplace and other public spaces.41 In contrast, the descriptive genre of the travel

39 Al-ʿAyntābī, *Al-Qawl al-sadīd*, 38 specifies this desire as sexual, but Ibn al-Akfānī does not.
narrative recorded the observations of Mamluk society made by visitors from other parts of the world for the entertainment and edification of their readers.

The comparison between slave-buying advice manuals and ḥisbah manuals quickly reveals that although both were normative genres, they were not always in agreement about what the norms for slave-buying were. The two most important surviving Mamluk ḥisbah manuals, The Utmost Authority in the Pursuit of Hisbah by Ibn Bassām and The Guideposts of Piety in the Principles of Hisbah by Ibn al-Ukhūwah, date from the first half of the fourteenth century. Both were based on The Utmost Authority in the Pursuit of Hisbah by al-Shayzari, a Syrian market inspector with medical expertise who wrote during the twelfth century and whose treatise was still being copied in the fourteenth century.

Ḥisbah manuals tended to focus on different aspects of slave market procedure than slave-buying advice manuals. In keeping with their legal and moral aims, ḥisbah manuals emphasized the enforcement of the law governing slave sales. Muslims were not to be sold as slaves. Children and slave converts to Islam were not to be sold to non-Muslims. Young children were not to be separated from their mothers. Slave brokers were to check the terms of previous sale contracts for each slave in case any conditions had been placed on his or her resale. They were also to keep a register of their transactions in case of dispute. All of these areas were outside the purview of the slave-buying advice manuals, which tended to assume that the slaves available in the market were legal to buy. Likewise, ḥisbah manuals did not concern themselves with common sense advice, ethnography, or ethical and political commentary because choosing and training the right slave for the right purpose had no bearing on the legality of the sale.

The area where the two genres overlapped and contradicted one another was the physical inspection process. Ḥisbah manuals expected that brokers would assist the slave buyer in carrying out the physical inspection. Either the broker


45 No Mamluk registers have survived, but from the Fatimid era we have D. S. Richards, “Fragments of a Slave Dealer’s Day-Book from Fustat,” in Documents de l’Islam médiéval, ed. Yusuf Ragib (Cairo, 1991), 89–96.
himself “must be well acquainted with faults and experienced in incipient illnesses and diseases,” or else “let him turn concerning that to those who know about temperaments and constitutions.” According to the shurūṭ manuals which provided scribes with model documents and legal formulas, if a slave was sold with known faults, “it is important that he [the scribe drawing up the contract] enumerate [each] fault, and that the doctors testify concerning it that is a fault.” Inspection of the shame zones of male slaves—the area between the navel and the knees—was entirely forbidden. The shame zones of female slaves—the entire body except for the face, hands, and sometimes the feet and forearms—could not be inspected in public. However, because male ownership of a female slave included the right to have sex with her, the condition of her shame zones was considered relevant to the sale. Therefore a male buyer was permitted to inspect a female slave’s entire body in a private space and in the presence of other women. Doctors were allowed to examine the shame zones of men and women in private as part of their medical practice, and they may have done so on behalf of the slave buyer as well, although there is no definite evidence for this.

Slave-buying manuals contradicted ḥisbah manuals by advising slave buyers to inspect the shame zones of both male and female slaves publicly. The Book of Observation specifically recommended examining male slaves for hardness or roughness in the area between the navel and the penis, a direct violation of the ḥisbah guidelines. It also advised against buying a slave woman except during her menstrual period. Unfortunately, the surviving text ends before the section where one would expect details on inspecting the female body, including how to determine whether a woman was menstruating or pregnant. Inspection in Slave-buying and The Apt Statement both give instructions for inspecting the entire female body with respect to general health, menstruation, pregnancy, and wet nursing. This suggests that the missing portion of The Book of Observation would also have advocated for inspection of the entire female body, but it is impossible to be sure. In any case, the ḥisbah manuals indicate that doctors should not publicly examine the naked bodies of slaves or advise non-doctors on how to do so, while the slave-buying advice manuals recommend the opposite.

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46 Al-Shayzari, The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector, 103; “هُمْ كَانُوا عِينًا غَيْبًا وَتَشَهَّدُهُ بِالأَطْبَاطُ أَنَّهُ عِيبًا” Ibn Bassām, Nihāyat al-rutbah, 152.
47 Ibn Jarawānī, Al-Kawkab al-mushriq, 73.
50 See fol. 149v in the appendix to this article.
51 See fol. 149v in the appendix to this article.
In practice, did Mamluk slave buyers publicly inspect the shame zones of slaves (in accordance with slave-buying advice) or not (in accordance with the ḥisbah manuals)? Travel narratives indicate that the slave-buying advice prevailed. Detailed descriptions of slave inspections are rare in Arabic travel narratives, perhaps because they were too ordinary to be noted. The best description was composed by Ibn al-Mujāwir, who visited the slave market of Aden in the early thirteenth century, around the same time as the anonymous slave-buying advice manual Inspection in Slave-Buying was written. According to Ibn al-Mujāwir:

The slave girl is fumigated with an aromatic smoke, perfumed, adorned and a waist-wrapper fastened round her middle. The seller takes her by the hand and walks around the souk with her; he calls out that she is for sale. The wicked merchants appear, examining her hands, feet, calves, thighs, navel, chest and breasts. He examines her back and measures her buttocks in spans. He examines her tongue, teeth, hair and spares no effort. If she is wearing clothes, he takes them off; he examines and looks. Finally he casts a direct eye over her vagina and anus, without her having on any covering or veil.  

Ibn al-Mujāwir’s description suggests that the slave-buying manuals which advised public examination of the shame zones were closer to the reality of inspection than the ḥisbah manuals.

A second description of a slave inspection comes from a visitor to Alexandria in the late Mamluk period. Felix Fabri, born Felix Schmidt in Zurich in the 1430s, served for much of his life as prior of the Dominican convent of Ulm in Schwabia. His duties required frequent travel in Germany and Italy, but he also made time for two pilgrimages to Jerusalem, the first in 1480 and the second from April 52


1483 to January 1484. In the course of his second pilgrimage, Fabri visited Sinai, Cairo, and Alexandria as well as Jerusalem. He then wrote three narratives of his pilgrimage experiences (Das gereimte Pilgerbüchlein in rhyming German verse, Evagatorium in Latin, and an abridged version of Evagatorium in German) as well as a contemplative guidebook for nuns in his spiritual care who could not make the physical journey to Jerusalem, a treatise on the history of Ulm, and an assortment of sermons and theological treatises. Although he hoped to return to the Holy Land a third time, Fabri died and was buried in Ulm in 1502.

Evagatorium was the longest of Fabri’s travel narratives. He began writing immediately upon his return from Egypt in 1484 using notes which he had taken during his pilgrimage, and he was still revising it in 1488. This makes it roughly contemporary with The Apt Statement, al-ʿAyntābī’s fifteenth-century slave-buying advice manual. Fabri’s narrative was intended for a learned audience of fellow Dominicans who could appreciate its philosophical references as well as its dramatic anecdotes. He described the Tatar funduq in Alexandria as follows:

We stood for some time in this sorrowful market and saw the mournful, or rather terrifying, handling of people. For when a person wants to buy a person, male or female, he enters the building and considers those for sale, which [of them] pleases him. In that consideration are those with the best eyes and most expertise, for there is no doctor or physician who can be compared to them in recognizing the complexions and conditions of people; for immediately, as they look into the face of someone, they recognize of what value, skill, or fortune he may be. If it is a boy, he knows, as he looks at him, for what he may be suitable. Thus they also have such diligence in recognizing the natures and conditions of horses, so that they may seem to have attained all the skill of the medical art to the full, for they immediately discern in one single look all his flaws and achievements, and of what use, age, and value he may be. For they are entirely free from other speculative medical arts, nor is it a question with them of the soul or its capacities, passions, and habits, nor do they ask about its infusion or its union with the body. But, however, in the aforementioned [matter] they are skilled beyond all natural philosophers and physicians, as much in the inspection of animals as of humans. Therefore when anyone wanting to buy a person considers one pleasing to him, he extends a hand into the heap, and leads out a pleasing female or male and appraises [her or him] for buying in various ways, speak-

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54 Chareyron and Meyers, eds., Les errances de Frère Félix, xxx.
ing to him and hearing whether the answer is rational. He looks in his eyes, whether they are good and right; whether he hears well; he touches; and then he also strips [him] of his clothes, noting all the members. He considers how modest [he is], how timid, how happy, how sad, how healthy and whole. There, which is shameful to say, the genitals of males and females are handled and openly shown in the presence of all. Also, nude and cut by whips, they are compelled to march, run, walk, and jump in the presence of all, so that it becomes manifestly clear which are sick or healthy, male or female, virgin or corrupt. If they see them blush, they take up position around them striking more, cutting with sticks, buffeting with fists, so that he would do thus in a forced manner what he blushed to do voluntarily in the presence of all.\textsuperscript{55}

The stages of inspection observed by Fabri at the slave market in Alexandria correspond roughly to those recommended by Ibn al-Akfānī. The overall process, which Fabri referred to as handling (contractatio), began with a general survey of the slaves offered for sale. This survey, which Fabri called consideration (consideratio), was conducted at a distance and based on knowledge of physiognomy. Once the buyer had settled on a slave, he reached into the crowd and extracted the one he had selected for a second and more comprehensive appraisal (probando mendum, literally testing the thing to be bought). This stage included public viewing and touching of the slave’s naked body. If, having completed the second inspection, the buyer found the slave to be satisfactory, he met with the seller to discuss the price. This description makes clear that the slave-buying manuals’ advice to inspect the shame zones prevailed over the muḥtasib’s responsibility to prevent it. It also illustrates the dangers that threatened slaves who attempted to resist the slave-buying process: those who balked at the humiliating public inspection of their naked bodies were beaten until they complied.

A second anecdote from Felix Fabri’s narrative drives home the role of humiliation in the inspection process. Fabri’s guide in Cairo, a mamlūk of Hungarian origin, pretended to offer the travelers for sale in the slave market as a joke. Fabri describes the experience as follows:

We came into a market in which many people were held for sale, youths and children of both sexes, black and white, female and male. However, with us standing in that market with our mamlūk, many thought that our mamlūk had us for sale and that he was a merchant, whence many hurried to see us. Finally one came on a horse, a big man, and asked our mamlūk what price we four were. “I,” he said, “will buy those four, and I will give a sufficient price. Say how much seems just to you.” The mamlūk responded to him, “In this market no one will give me a sufficient price for these four slaves; for they are without flaw, whole and healthy. Therefore I will send them to Alexandria, and there they will be led to overseas parts, where the prices are higher.” The Saracen was not content with this response and produced ten ducats from his bag, obviously wanting to give ten for each without an appraisal so that he would sell them to him. During this a great rush was made towards us because, when anyone buys a person, many hurry in order to see the price and the appraisal. Thus with great delight we stood for sale;
and when the Saracen perceived us happy and laughing with the *mamlūk*, he understood that we were not for sale and went away.⁵⁶

The fact that Fabri and his traveling companions were identified as free because of their cheerful demeanor implies that the misery of genuine slaves in the market was evident to their buyers and sellers. It is also revealing that the *mamlūk* guide was willing to haggle with a prospective buyer as part of the joke, but that the mock sale stopped as soon as bystanders gathered to watch the appraisal. Apparently public physical inspection and not haggling was the aspect of sale that would have offended the honor of the travelers as free men. The Hungarian *mamlūk* guide, himself a slave or former slave from a Latin Christian background similar to that of the travelers, would have undergone the full sale process at least once and would have known where to draw the line.

This analysis of the slave-buying process as depicted in Mamluk-era slave-buying advice manuals, *ḥisbah* manuals, and travel narratives has shown that the advice of physicians carried more weight in Mamluk slave markets than the advice of jurists. The more intrusive inspection recommended by physicians such as Ibn al-Akfānī not only enabled buyers to carry out the legal requirement of viewing and cognizance with great thoroughness, but also humiliated slaves and made them more tractable by publicly displaying their powerlessness and dishonor. The less intrusive inspection advocated by jurists permitted the slave to retain some vestiges of honor, but it did not reinforce the extreme power differential on which the institution of slavery was based, nor did it fulfill the buyer’s desire to gather as much information about the goods as possible before committing to a purchase. The significance of the slave’s nakedness in the marketplace is not apparent, however, without this comparative perspective.


[fol. 148r]

كتب النظر والتحقيق في تقليب الرقيق لابن الأكفاني تغمده برحمته الله

[fol. 148v]

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. يقول العبد الفقير إلى الله تعالى الواحد البارئ، محمد ابن إبراهيم ابن ساعد الأنصاري رحمه الله: الحمد لله الذي حق حمده وصلواته على سيدنا محمد خير خلقه وعلى الله وصبه. هذه رسالة مختصرة في تقليب الرقيق وتأمل أجوه. وضعها امتناع الأمر من وجب طاعته على المشفى إحسانًا لله. قال يجب أن يكون المستعرض لصفن من الرقيق غير مضطر إليه، فإن الحاجان يستطبان كل طعام وشراب يستحق كل ثوب ولا تقطع بأول نظرة فإنها روعة ولا تشغل بتأمل ملبوس أو زينة، فإنه ربما يدهس ولا تعبر بأول حديث تسمع بهديه الأول أو ذمه إياه. وتسأل عن سبب بيعه، وتحذر شرى من تمرد على الضرب والخصومة. واعلم أن الرقيق بأول وهلة إن أطمع طمع وإن كفر انقمع، ومتى خالط فاسدا فأسد. والحذر

[fol. 149r]

من حمل الجواري، فإنه أحببته وحنى يمد كذب. كما أن من مكره بعد الملك في الحبل فإنها زم أنجح بعضها كراهة الحمل مع الرغبة فيه. ولا تؤمن لبائع جارية أنه أن تخرجها إلا في مثابها ما يستدعي عليها يعد. فأول أن تسعى النظر إليه من الرقيق القد والقوام وتناسب الأعضاء. ثم تنظر إلى اللون فإن الرقيق المائل إلى الصفرة دال على ضعف الكبد، إن قارنة غلظ أو حشة أو صلابة في الجانب الأيسر مما تحت الاضلاع أو على غلبة الصفراء، إن قارنة شقرة وختال إلى الكبد، دال على أن في النبل فإن قارنة غلظ أو حشة أو صلابة في الجانب الأيسر مما تحت الصدأ أو على غلبة السوداء، إن قارنة قطرب في الوجه. والعاجي دال على قلة الدم والروح وغلبة البلغم أو ضعف المعدة

[fol. 149v]

إن قارئة جزى البدين. وصلابة لما بين السرة والقضيب أو غلبة سوداء. وأفضل الألوان وأعدها الصافي في البياض المشرب بمصره. هذا في اللب. وأما السمر فالمصافي منها والسوداء الحالك الرقيق. ثم تنظر إلى خلو البشرة عن البهء والبرق والنشم والطيب والطيب والطيب والطيب وكح النار وأثار القروح في الوجه وسائر الجسد. واعلم أنه زم أن يضع البهء والبرق والطيب المشرب وتخي غلبة باللبع والعاجي والحبل وان أساطر المحمل يشفه. ثم تنظر إلى الرأس ومنبتة الصدر والطعف فإن عظمه مع دقة العبض وضيق الصدر ردي. وتحترش إلى شكله تفاذا لا يكون مشوها، وأن يكون الشعر رجلًا غير مصفوف ولا متراص ولا بهاء النعلب و[دا] الخيشة أو شبعه أو بعضه أبيض أو بين منبتة خلض كبير أو كثير قروح أو شعر كنخالة. ثم تنظر إلى ما عنو رميء من الفضول أو جاهظتين أو غازتين أو حركتهم مضطرية


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لا تكون معداتين السواح صافية البياض ملأئت عدلتين، وتفتقد أحجاماً لولا تكون غليظة أو خشنة أو مستوحيرة أو بابهما تنازل أو انقلاب إلى داخل أو بابهما بياض أو بحبو بونيع على المألق الأكبر. فإن ظهر [ت] من رطوبة، فيه ناصور. وتعتبر نظرها إلى الأشياء الدقيقة والبعيدة وحافها في الشمس، ثم نظر إلى الأدم في الضوء السوداد لولا يكون بحبو سادة أو ظفرة أو حم زائد أو سادة. وتعتبر بسمعهما في الصوت الحفي وسمعة الجواك، ثم نظر إلى الأنف كذلك لولا يكون به مقوح أو بوسائر أو حم زائد أو سادة. وتعتبر حالة بإدراك المشوقات الصعبة وحول الصوت عن الغبة. ثم نظر إلى اللسان لولا يكون عظىماً أو صغيرة جداً أو قد ذهب منه حزد بالغض في صدع. بل نختار المعتدل المقدار الرقيق الأخر الصافي.

[fol. 150v]


[fol. 151r]

وتم رقيق مستطيل كأنه تدبة فانه يدل على العروق المدهشة. ولتعتبر قوتها بالقيد الشديد. ثم نتفقد تحت الإطهين.
Appendix B: Ibn al-Akfānī, *The Book of Observation and Inspection in the Examination of Slaves*

[fol. 148r]

The book of observation and inspection in the examination of slaves by Ibn al-Akfānī, may God cover him with His grace.

[fol. 148v]

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. The humble servant, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Șāʿîd al-Anṣārī, may God have mercy upon him, says to God Almighty, the One, the Creator: praise be to God whose praise is true, and His blessings upon our lord Muḥammad, whose character is excellent, and upon his family and his companions. This is a brief treatise about the examination of the slave and the consideration of his conditions. I produced it, obeying the order from its compliance enjoined on me because of the past of his beneficence towards me.

[Ibn al-Akfānī] said that it is necessary for the [slave] inspected to be of a kind of slave which [the buyer] does not need, since the hungry person finds all food delicious and the naked person finds all clothing excellent. Do not decide at first glance, since there is confusion [in that]. Do not be preoccupied by consideration of clothing or adornment, since it may perplex [you]. Do not consider the first report that you hear from his first master, or any criticism of his. Ask about the reason for his sale. Beware of buying one who rebels against beating and argument. Know that if the slave is tempted, he becomes covetous at once, and if he is restrained, he becomes subdued, and when he associates with a corrupt [person], he becomes corrupt.

Beware

[fol. 149r]

of the pregnancy of slave women, since they may hide it and bring forth blood which deceives.\(^{57}\) Also beware of their cunning concerning pregnancy after taking possession [of them], since some of them may make themselves stubborn with hatred of pregnancy despite the desire for it. Do not be misled by the seller of his slave woman to take her away except during blood because of whatever pregnancies might befall her later on.\(^{58}\)

\(^{57}\) A pregnant slave woman might present the menstrual blood of another woman as her own in order to conceal her pregnancy.

\(^{58}\) The buyer should not take possession of a slave woman except during her menstrual period. This strategy ensured that she was not pregnant at the time of transfer and that any subsequent
Build, stature, and proportionality of the limbs are what the gaze proceeds to first in the slave. Then look at the color, since wanness inclining towards yellow shows weakness of the liver, if roughness or fullness or hardness on the left side under the ribs or a prevalence of yellow bile accompanies it. If paleness and the inclination towards dullness accompany [the wanness], it shows damage in the spleen, if roughness or fullness or hardness on the left side under the ribs or a prevalence of black bile accompany it, if lupus on the face accompanies it. [The color] ivory shows lack of blood and of spirit, and the prevalence of phlegm, or weakness of the stomach.

If leanness of the body accompanies it. Hardness or roughness of what is between the navel and the penis is black. The best and most balanced of the colors is pure white tinged with red. That is concerning white. As for brown, [the best] is pure [brown] and lustrous pitch black. Then look at the freedom of the skin from vitiligo, leprosy, freckles, brands, scabies, warts, burns from fire, and traces of sores on the face and the body in general. Know that vitiligo and leprosy are made to vanish with shīṭaraj and vinegar; washing it with vinegar and Meccan potash reveals it.

Then look at the head and its roots, the chest and neck, since its size in relation to the thinness of the neck and the narrowness of the chest may be distorted. Look at its form, lest it be deformed, and [that] the hair be straight, not dyed, not broken, and not falling out; without alopecia and ophiasis, or scalp ringworm, or some of it white, or many gaps among its roots, or traces of sores or scabs like bran.

Pregnancies would be the responsibility of the buyer and not the seller. Accurately determining the paternity of a slave woman’s child was important because if the father was her master, the slave mother gained umm walad status and could not be sold. Thus if it were discovered that a slave woman had been sold while pregnant with the seller’s child, the sale would become invalid. Another strategy recommended by jurists was for the buyer to observe a period of istibrāʾ, refraining from sexual intercourse with his newly purchased slave woman for one to three months in order to confirm that she was menstruating and not pregnant. Robert Brunschvig, “ʿAbd,” in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., 1:24–40.

59 Quṭrub can be translated in a number of ways, but a facial rash is one of the distinctive symptoms of lupus.

60 Black, i.e., bad.

61 Lentil-shaped spots of various colors on the skin.

62 Shīṭaraj is an herb.
Then look at what waste an eye expels; or [whether they are] protruding, or sunken, or their movement is agitated;

[fol. 150r]

and [whether] there is blueness in the pupil of one of them; or their white is cloudy, dry, inclined towards yellowness, or showing veins; or [whether] their eyelids are covering [them]. Rather they should be even of pupil, pure of white, almond-shaped, equal. Check their eyelids, lest they be rough, coarse, or drooping; or with dispersion in one of them; or turned inward; or with whiteness in one of them; or with a covering on them which extends over the larger corners of the eyes. If moisture arises from it, there is a fistula. Examine their vision on small and distant things, and [examine] their condition in the sun.

Then look at the ear in strong light, lest they have an obstruction, a wart, excessive flesh, or an obstruction [sic]. Examine their hearing in a lowered voice and [in] the quickness of the answer.

Then look at the nose, thus, lest it have sores, polyps, excessive flesh, or an obstruction. Examine its condition in perceiving weak scents, and [examine] the freedom of the voice from a nasal buzz.

Then look at the tongue, lest it be big or very small; or [lest there be] a piece which had gone from it with a bite in cracking. Choose rather the proportionate measure, slim, pure red,

[fol. 150v]

quick in movement. Leprousness, yellowness, blackness, and coarseness are repugnant because their indications are of a distorted mixture in the stomach.

Then look at the teeth, concerning their completeness and their health; the whiteness of their color; and their freedom from cavities, wear, and pus. Examine the color and the decay and what [teeth] were lost before, lest it change, since it reverts without what is after it. Then check the gums, lest they be hot or decayed or wrinkled.

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63 The paragraphs about the eyes and ears begin with singular forms (the eye, the ear) but quickly switch to dual forms (the two eyes, the two ears) in Arabic.
64 The inner corner of the eye next to the nose.
65 Bawāsīr, translated here as polyps, is more usually translated as hemorrhoids.
66 If slaves habitually used their teeth to crack nuts, for example, they might accidentally bite and injure their tongues in the process.
67 Al-ḥafr can be translated as cavities or as scurvy.
68 The buyer should check for color, decay, and missing teeth. If any of these qualities changed after sale, the seller might have used fraudulent means to conceal faults in the teeth. Once the fraud began to wear off, the teeth would revert to their actual state.
Look at the uvula, lest it be swollen or drooping. Then listen to its sound, lest it be hoarse or nasal. Then order him to exhale through his mouth in order to smell it, lest he be rotten or sharp of breath. [If] the reason for whatever change of odor there was is from the mouth, his recovery is expected. [If] whatever [change] there was is from the stomach, there is no recovery for him. Sniff the odor of the nose. Then consider the tonsils and the throat, lest there be scrofula or traces of it there. Then look at the chest, lest it be narrow or curved; or protruding from a heavy part; and nothing but meager of flesh. Then look at the shoulders, lest they be sloped or different in position.

Then look at the two hands, lest they have shortness or be different in measure. The elbows should not be curved, [they should] bend without twisting, and [without] swelling or spasms. If they have

[fol. 151r]
a thin, elongated swelling as if it were a worm, then it shows Medinan veins. Examine their strength with a firm grasp. Then check under the armpits.