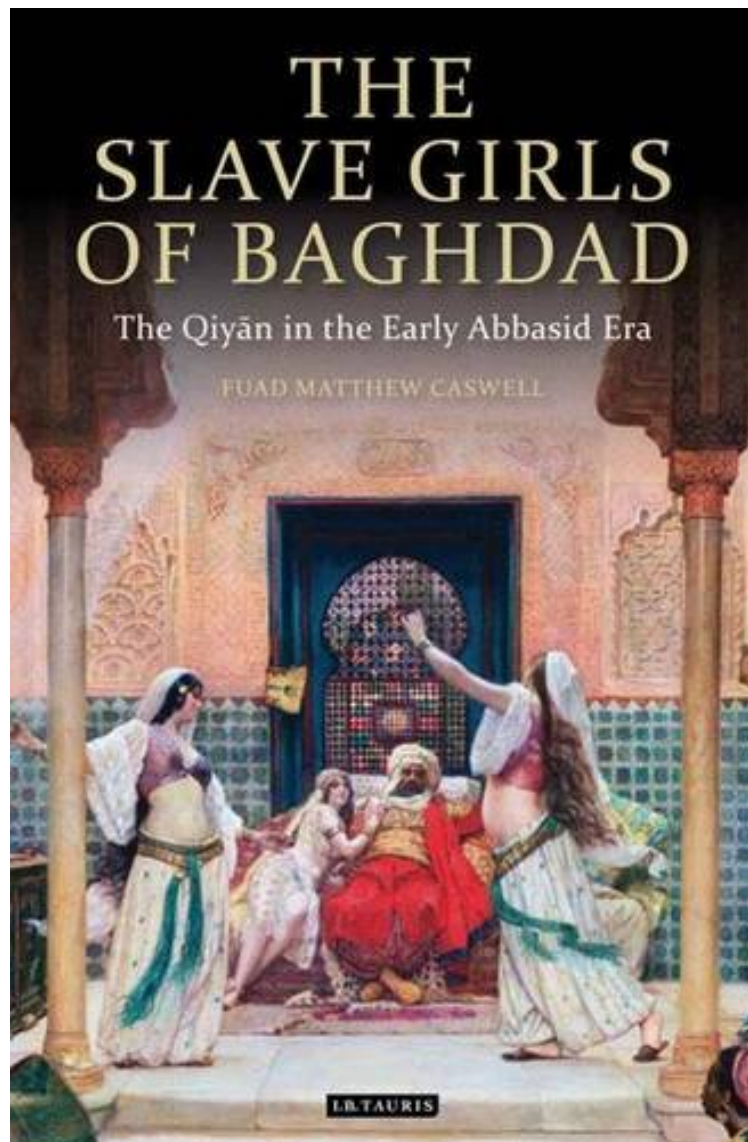


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The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era (Library of Middle East History)

F. Matthew Caswell

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F. Matthew Caswell : The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era (Library of Middle East History) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era (Library of Middle East History):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. *Slave Girls of Baghdad* By Jana Richardson A qayna is a slave girl coveted for her beauty, valued for her talent, and a part of the long history of women enslaved by patriarchal society. This woman is in some ways a respected professional, an entertainer, and in other ways a short-lived phenomenon, a powerless pet. The complex lives of the qiyān are mired in contradiction. Fuad Matthew Caswell's *The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era* covers the lives and writings of these singer slave women during the 75 years of the Abbasid Era in Baghdad with detail and poise. Caswell brings the lives of four specific women out of their murky, under-researched past and sheds an analytical yet very human light on them by translating and evaluating their poetry as well as their masters' writings in order to understand their craft as well as their circumstances. The author then continues into their world by introducing other individual qiyān followed by three chapters on different functions their poetry served in society, and how they fit into the decline of the Abbasid Era. The book is one of the only books written on the topic, and even rarer in Caswell's treatment of qiyān poetry. From the outset and with each new verse, Caswell treats the slave girls' poetry with respect, almost as an untapped genre of Middle Eastern art. He provides numerous examples of the qiyān's quips with men for the purposes of entertaining and impressing them with their wit, creating difficult rhymes on the spot to meet a man's challenge. Their poetry can be beautiful, mournful, imploring, or insulting depending on their purpose, but it always seems to be intelligent. The following poem, for example, is a searing comment by one slave-girl to another: "Fly with two wings, O Khansa, For now you have two base men as lovers ...who called on you one after the other You thrived on the one and on the other As the pig thrives on two privies." Caswell identifies this as a "satirical" poem, and categorizes other poems as eulogy, mourning, or amatory. Although there are dozens of colorful, sometimes shocking examples translated and commented on, many of Caswell's points prove to be redundant from one excerpt to the next. The information is valuable yet becomes repetitive quickly, and sometimes sacrifices quality of historical commentary for quantity of original poetry. The very first chapter of the book is a brief summary of "The Social Scene", which includes important information about slave trading and feminist perspective among other topics; further, Caswell is careful to point out the power and humanity accorded to the qiyān for their skills and training, their relationships with their masters, and their economic potential, without oversimplifying their status as slaves. While the author juggles these nuances with grace, he also neglects much historical background and slightly broader perspectives which could have taught the reader more about the qiyān. His scope is limited enough that more explanation about society at that time and in that setting would not have detracted from his use of the qiyān's works. The author also runs into an interesting situation in analyzing so much poetry in English, where so much meaning is skewed or lost. Some knowledge of the Arabic language is helpful to understand why many phrases are eloquent. For example, a slave owner writes that "the good life is a tender maiden, and my reclining in a tavern." These lines are at once lovely and clunky, a quality attributable their translation into English. This makes the book a little harder to read, but at no fault of the author and without unreasonable labor by the reader. *The Slave Girls of Baghdad* is an informative and important book, and one filled with useful if somewhat copious primary source examples. It is at once absolutely necessary and slightly inefficient, but overall extremely worth the read for anyone with an academic interest in the topic.

From the refined Geisha of the Imperial Court to the learned hetaerae of Ancient Greece, the captivating history of courtesans and slave girls transcends countless cultural boundaries and fields of academic study. *The Slave Girls of Baghdad* explores the origins, education and art of the "qiyān" -- indentured girls and women who entertained and entranced the caliphs and aristocrats who worked the labyrinths of power within ninth-century Baghdad and throughout the Abbasid Empire. Through a detailed analysis of Islamic law, historical sources and poetry, F. Matthew Caswell examines the qiyāns' unique place in Abbasid society and their contested moral standing, providing a comprehensive overview and cultural comparison of an elusive and alluring institution. This fascinating history will be essential reading for all interested in the story of slavery along with the rich world of the Abbasid Empire more widely.

'The merits of Caswell's study are several. He has taken the poetry of the women singers seriously, providing copious examples in accessible, often elegant translation. If, as he describes it, this material was not always 'high art' on a par with the best work of the great medieval poets, at the very least it casts invaluable light on early Abbasid culture. Caswell has done the field a service in bringing this material to light.' - Matthew Gordon, Miami University; 'The Slave Girls of Baghdad offers a rich picture of Baghdad in its early flourishing days, not dominated by sectarian violence and destruction, through a thorough, critical and often entertaining presentation of the world of the Arab geisha-like 'Slave Girls' - a somewhat understudied aspect of a great civilization. The book is both scholarly and popular: it will be fruitfully read by students of Arabic and specialists in Arab or Islamic cultural history, though it could also easily be read by non-specialists.' - Geert Jan van Gelder, FBA. Laudian Professor of Arabic, University of Oxford About the Author F. Matthew Caswell has a doctorate in Classical Arabic from the University of Oxford, and has had a long career as a barrister.