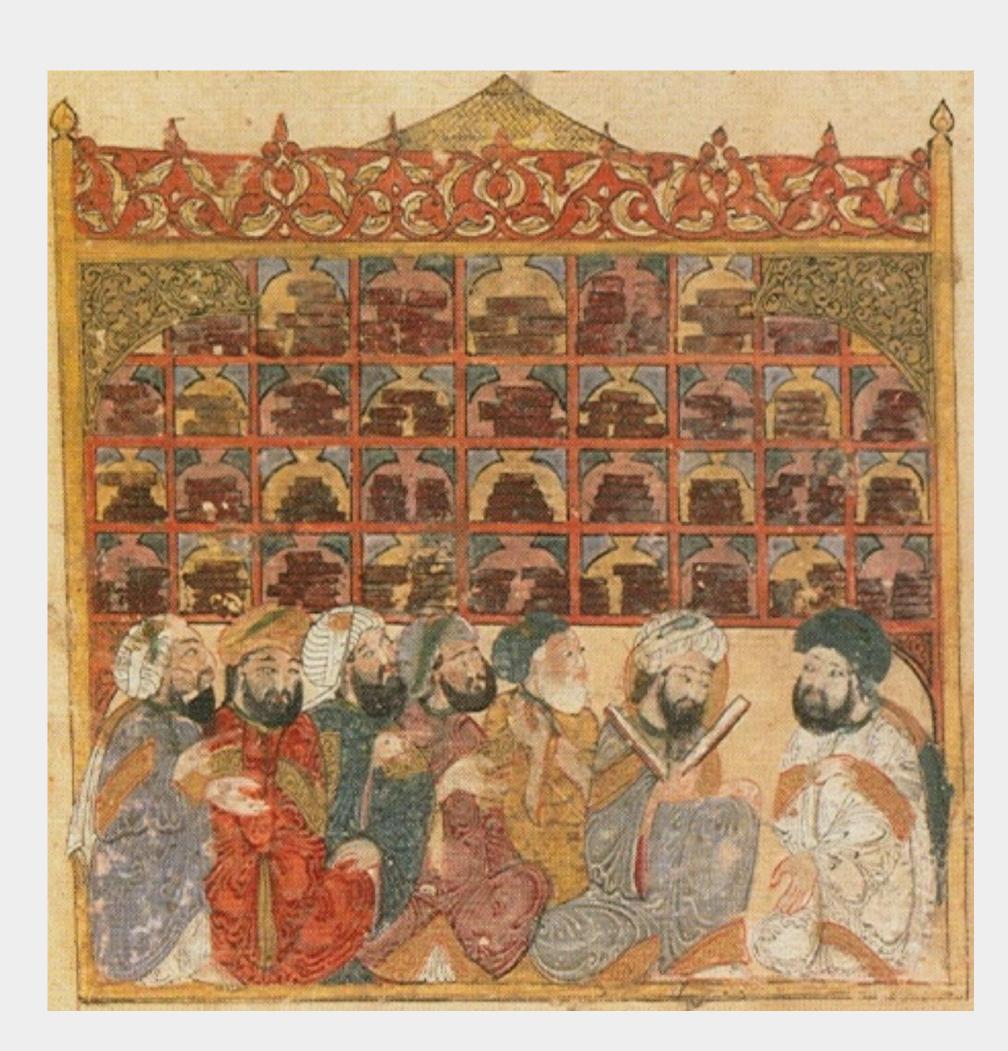






The presence of female saints in available recorded history of Medieval Arabia is limited. Though often outshone on paper by their male counterparts, the role of women Sufi saints in the Islamic Golden Age undeniably contributed to the development of the religious movement in conjunction with cultural advancements in linguistics, the arts, and politics. Sufism is a body of Islamic mysticism promoting ideas of personal interactions with God and manifesting in traditions of separating oneself from materialism and vanity. The work of Sufi saints in the 8th and 9th centuries was accompanied by a vibrant climate of literature and music. Work on this project involved performing research on the Sufi movement around this time as a whole with a concentration on the roles of brothel women. Women working in royal harems had close physical proximity to male elites of Muslim societies and as a result played an integral part in the interactions between politics, linguistics, art, and religion that are retrospectively observed as defining features of the time. The conjunction of these otherwise polarized demographics provides a unique point from which to observe the developments of early Islamdom, focusing on how women working as musicians and dancers (primarily in present-day Iraq) were able to develop intellectual movements at the forefront of the region's notability. In particular, this project's focus on Rabiaa Aladawiyya, a woman saint of Sufism and brothel musician often attributed to the ideology's foundation, effectively encapsulates this message.





FEMALE SUFISM IN THE MEDIEVAL ABBASID ERA

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FINDINGS & LIMITATIONS

My work on this project sought to uncover the details of the life of Sufi Saint Rabiaa Aladawiyya (718-801). Like many women of her time, Rabiaa spent time working in a harem as a singer. At the height of intellectual development in the region, Rabiaa was surrounded by advances in the arts and sciences, headed by women like herself. My research revealed that these women were an essential part of the sociological structure of the Islamic courts. High-ranking male scholars would tutor them with access to the finest literature and teachers, resulting in a collective of educated, talented women at the cultural heart of the Abbasid caliphate. Through historical analyses and primary sources like poetry from the time, I worked alongside Professor Alharthi to provide research on the topics she assigned to me biweekly, including historical context of the architecture and politics of Rabiaa's lifetime and more detail-oriented prompts like the attire, hobbies, food, and scholarship of the Medieval brothel women.

Besides an obvious language barrier preventing me from accessing some original texts on the life of Rabiaa, the most prominent limitation I faced in conducting research for this project is the lack of information on female saints in the Abbasid era. I had to perform extensive research to find reliable sources with information on the lives of these women, from their brothel work to their scholarship. Of course, these efforts were successful, as I was able to find plenty of informative and legitimate resources, but there is an undoubtable surplus of content following the lives of Sufi men as opposed to the women who, as my research revealed, played a key role in the advancement of the religion. As they brought academics to and beyond the high Islamic courts, brothel women like Rabiaa pent their lives breaking barriers of class and gender and in turn asserting Sufi ideals prioritizing love and the pursuit of a simplistic life.

CONCLUSIONS

The proximity of Umayyad- and Abbasid-era prostitutes to authority directly facilitated their advanced education primarily in Arabic and Persian, poetry, music, and Islam as they interacted with caliphate authority and other high-class men affiliated with the sectarian politics of the time.

* The capacity for education under patronage of Abbasid caliphs sponsored adjacent advancements in philosophy, mathematics, geography, debate, and various sciences.

Baghdad became known as the "City of Peace" in this golden age, characterized by an abundance of texts and arts furthered by interactions with nearby cultures, advanced within Iraq's center through the harem girls.

The often overlooked role of harem girls in a system of patronage for religious, scientific, and artistic developments is partially responsible for the lack of information on and representation of Rabiaa Aladawiyya in literature as a female Sufi saint as compared to her male counterparts.

Advancements in Sufism can be associated with this period of academic awakening due to commonalities in worldview coinciding with the alternate perception of Islam that Sufism offered, both pointing away from traditional views that, of Islam, promoted taboos and customs based around one's desire to reach Paradise, and of academia, integrating the views of neighboring cultures into Abbasid society, encouraging critical thought among the populace and scholars.

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EXCERPT: I CHOOSE TO BE A SUFI

One afternoon in eighth-century Basra, a crowd of men gathered around a woman running. They looked around to see if there was a wolf, a stray dog, or a beggar posing a harassment threat. The woman held a jug of water in one hand and a small fire in the other. The woman looked in her fifties, yet with a straight spine and a white face not altered by the scorching sun. No wrinkles appeared on her forehead, nor an arch forming on her back. From afar, she looked like a prim lady in her thirties.

"Where are you going?" asked one of the men, fearing that a spec of madness befell the good-looking woman that he had asked more than once to be his wife.

"I'm going to heaven," she said, "to put off hell fire and burn paradise, so people start doing good deeds for the sake of goodness, not for fear of hell or desire in paradise."

The woman was the eighth-century saint Rabiaa Aladawiyya.

Artist Safia Latif's "For the Love of God," **AN ILLUSTRATED INTERPRETATION OF RABIAA'S FABLED MISSION MENTIONED IN THE ABOVE EXCERPT.**

An intersection of anthropological examinations of culture and historical evaluation of events and documents, the work of uncovering the niche yet integral roles of female saints and harem girls in the Medieval Abbasid era is difficult to ever render 'complete.' However, in understanding the presence of limitations on this research, scholars who look to investigate the phenomenal lives of these women can begin by exploring works produced during the period they look to research, especially poetry, to find accurate accounts of life at the time. For this particular project, Professor Fatima Alharthi intends to continue the process of writing her memoir, paying homage to the Sufi tradition and honoring the path led by Rabiaa Aladawiyya as an example of what the faith teaches as she remains a guiding character in the novel.





(fig. 1)

FURTHER RESEARCH