POLEMICIZING WOMEN’S BATHING AMONG MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS

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‘Abd al-Malik ibn Ḥabīb, a ninth-century writer from Muslim Spain, warned women: “Flee the hammām for it is one of the houses of heresy and one of the doors to fiery hell.”¹ This rather pointed remark simultaneously associates hammāmāt (public baths) with heresy, or ‘bad religion’, or immorality, and designates women as the primary perpetrators or ones to be ensnared by this ‘heresy’ and immorality located within the hammāmāt. Both Muslim and, later, Christian men made these connections. I argue that for Muslim men, the hammām was a place where foreign, non-Muslim women mingled with Muslim ones, or where Muslim women could socialize freely with one another without male company. Both situations sparked anxiety among the Muslim men who attempted to direct or describe women’s activities in the hammām. Early modern Christian travelers were similarly fascinated by the gyno- or andro-sociability of the hammām; however, they associated women’s and men’s desire for baths and sexual misbehavior in them with the climatological affects on Middle Eastern peoples’ physiology or with what was, in their eyes, ‘strange’ treatment of women by Muslims. This biologically oriented polemic was a new tactic rooted both in these older concerns extant in the Muslim world, and in the increased preoccupation with climate and sanitation in Early Modern Europe.

I—Muslim Men’s Imaginings/Fears of Women in the Ḥamām I—Nudity and Mixing of the Sexes

In early Muslim sources, hammāmāt were clearly viewed as foreign institutions. Both Ibn Ḥabīb and the ninth-century hadith collector, Abu

Dawud from Sijistan in Persia, note a hadith in which the Prophet Muḥammad warns: “When you conquer the land of the non-Arab and when you find in it houses called ḥammāmāt the man should not enter it except with an apron! And women are prohibited [from] it except one who is in childbed or sick.”² In another hadith cited by both of these men, Ā‘isha, one of the wives of the Prophet, is portrayed as asking women from Syria whether they come from a place with ḥammāmāt. When they answer in the affirmative, she cites a warning from the Prophet that a woman who undresses anywhere “other than the house of her people” (غير بيت اهلها) tears away the veil between herself and God, something anyone who fears Allah should not do.³ The primary concern is one of modesty; men should cover below their waist and women should not uncover themselves at all. However, by indicating that public baths are foreign and that undressing to use them is immodest, these traditions mark foreigners themselves as immodest and engaging in practices hateful to God. This condemnation even seems to hold true for those foreigners who are Muslim or at least interested in Islam, as the women from Syria in the second hadith presumably were.

Both the identification of the ḥammāmā as a foreign institution and the concern about nudity in these early Muslim sources reflect Muslim reactions to early Byzantine bathing culture that they encountered in the recently conquered areas such as Syria and al-Andalus. Archeological excavations indicate that Syria, the homeland of the women whom Ā‘isha questions about ḥammāmāt, had numerous bathhouses from the early Byzantine period (third-ninth centuries A.D.).⁴ Bathhouses in the Byzantine empire and in Latin Europe derived from Roman baths, both structurally and functionally. Functionally, bathhouses did not serve simply to provide a venue by which people could clean themselves; they were also sites of recreation, socializing, and even showing off status.⁵ During the early Byzantine period, bathing naked and/or in the

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⁴ Albrecht Berger, *Das Bad in der byzantinischen Zeit* (München, 1982), 33, 46, 49–50, 52. Berger indicates that Egypt and Palestine also had a substantial number.