# Co-Editor for Cambridge *Elements* Book Series on Premodern Women

RACA Proposal 2024 Elizabeth Urban Associate Professor History Department

# **Project Abstract**

I have been invited by <u>Dr. Danielle Clarke</u> (University College, Dublin) to serve as one of three co-editors for a new <u>Cambridge Elements</u> series on premodern women. Cambridge <u>Elements</u> is a recent academic initiative to publish short-form (approximately 40,000 word) books containing "original, succinct, authoritative, and peer-reviewed scholarly and scientific research, organised into focused series edited by leading scholars." These books are meant to provide useful introductions to topics for students and non-expert scholars, summarizing the state of the field while also presenting current research and offering new trajectories for future scholarship. Examples of current Cambridge <u>Elements</u> series include Cambridge <u>Elements</u> in The <u>Global Middle Ages</u>, Cambridge <u>Elements</u> in <u>Historical Theory and Practice</u>, and Cambridge <u>Elements</u> in <u>Women in the History of Philosophy</u>. However, there remains a gap in coverage on women and gender in premodern history, which our new series hopes to address.

I am requesting AWAs Summer 2024, Fall 2024, and/or Spring 2025, to support my work as a co-editor for this book series. If the budget permits, I also request \$1,653.00 to support my extra conference travel in Spring 2025, which I will use to network with prospective and current authors in this series. Realizing that the RACA committee may not be authorized to grant all these requests, I ask that the committee prioritize funding my project in the following order, from highest to lowest priority: 1. **Spring 2025 AWA**, 2. Spring 2025 conference travel, 3. Fall 2024 AWA, 4. Summer 2024 AWA.

## Purpose and Significance of the Project

Our team is organized by Dr. Danielle Clarke, a Full Professor in the English and Drama Department at University College Dublin, who focuses on early modern women's writing. The other member of our editorial team is <u>Michelle Sauer</u>, Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor in the English Department of the University of North Dakota, who specializes in Queer Theory. Our goal as an editorial team is to commission 20 books for this series over a 3-to-4-year period. In other words, as a team we will hope to commission about 6 books per year, and I will personally be in charge of commissioning about 2-3 books per year. (I am currently only requesting AWAs for AY 2024–2025, but my hope is to continue applying for AWAs from RACA

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> <u>Cambridge Elements</u> website. <u>https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/elements</u>. Last accessed March 26, 2024.

and/or the Dean's Office for the next several years to support this ongoing project). Our first task as an editorial team is to complete the proposal for the book series in Summer 2024. We will meet via Zoom to define key questions of scope and definition, as well as to come up with a list of topics/titles, divided into coherent sub-themes. For instance, we are currently brainstorming titles such as *Women's Botanical Knowledge: Food, Medicine & Magic; Women's Experiences of Time, Age & Season;* and *Digital Methods for the Study of Premodern Women.* In order to bring coherence to the project, we will organize these titles into sub-themes. I will likely be in charge of the sub-themes of "Global Connections," and "New Methodologies," though the editorial team still needs to hammer out these details over the summer. While we co-editors will be in charge of commissioning the books in this series, we will also receive guidance from an advisory board of other scholars in the field.

The books in this new Cambridge *Elements* series on premodern women aim to address "key questions...about period and disciplinary boundaries, genres, cultural forms and changing ideas of agency over the period broadly construed" (see attached correspondence with Danielle Clarke). During our initial editorial team meeting, we agreed that these books should be cutting-edge, even radical, interventions into the fields of Medieval and Early Modern studies. These fields tend to be conservative and slow to adopt new frameworks and methods current in other areas of study. We hope the books in our series will help steer our fields away from older frameworks of positivism, the case study model, and studies of individual women authors. Instead, the works we commission should challenge our fields to use newer methodologies—including digital methods such as stylometry and social network analysis—and newer frameworks, such as critical race theory, queer theory, and intersectionality. There are a few works of this type in our respective fields that we will build upon and amplify, such as Auslander 2014, Wright 2020, Demets 2021, McDonough 2022, and Negri 2023 (see bibliography below). Integrating these new perspectives will help us better understand how individual premodern women navigated broader social norms and material realities.

I am the only historian on the team (the other members are in English departments), and thus I will bring my expertise in both historical content and discipline-specific methodologies. I am also the only "global" historian on the team, as both Dr. Clarke and Dr. Sauer work on English-language sources and European history (while I focus on Arabic sources and the medieval Islamic world). I will add my specialized expertise in premodern Islamic history to this project. For instance, scholars in my field trace chains of oral knowledge transmission among Medieval women (Sayeed 2013); analyze how male jurists define and punish sexual violence against women in medieval Islamic law (Azam 2015); investigate how Muslim ethicists present a wife's duties in cooking, cleaning, and maintaining a household (Katz 2022); and parse literary texts to reveal the important roles enslaved women poets and musicians played in medieval Islamic high culture (El-Azhari 2019; Gordon and Hain 2017). I can thus help ensure that our series integrate the methods from Islamic history and not merely European history.

Additionally, we hope that the books in the series will bridge the Medieval (500–1500) and Early Modern (1500–1700) periods. These two periods are usually treated separately, and scholars tend to specialize in one period or the other. However, this disciplinary boundary is artificial; in the Islamic World, for instance, the Ottoman Empire spans across both periods. Such an arbitrary boundary obscures some of the shared realities of women living in the pre-

industrial world. Our series would thus highlight the connections (and the ruptures) between these two time periods, allowing scholars to see more clearly how premodern women's experiences changed over time.

Finally, we co-editors all agreed on the sad fact that in 2024 we still find ourselves having to advocate for women's history as broadly interesting to non-women audiences. We hope that this new book series will help make women's history seem more accessible, mainstream, and relevant to scholars and students of all genders.

### Methods and Procedures

Dr. Clarke has organized similar book series before, and based on her past experiences, she assures me that this project will be "quite a lot of work." As the junior member of the team, and someone who is new to book series editing, I would greatly benefit from institutional support. Given my current 4/4 teaching load, I have told Dr. Clarke that I can only commit to accepting this co-editor position if I am able to secure a course release while working on the project. A course release would give me time to devote myself seriously to this project, which would not only raise my own scholarly profile, but would also enhance WCU's reputation as a research institution.

We hope to recruit early career scholars to contribute to this series; not only will they be trained in the most up-to-date methodologies, but they should also be eager to complete a publication with as prestigious an institution as Cambridge. In order to identify these up-and-coming authors, I will need to stay aware of the newcomers in my field—advanced doctoral students, freshly minted PhDs, post-docs, new hires, and first-time authors. Thus, my most basic task will be to read widely in my field (including PhD dissertations), to keep up with the state of graduate studies, and to network with both established and new scholars. Moreover, our editorial team hopes to avoid replicating some of the biases and inequalities that beleaguer academia—I will therefore not merely follow new PhDs from Harvard, Yale, and similar institutions, but also from many other programs across the globe, including in the Middle East and North Africa.

After identifying potential authors, I will begin to solicit their participation via email. I envision holding many Zoom meetings with prospective authors, as well as informal in-person meetings at major conferences in my field. I will apply to organize panels and present my own original research at the International Congress of Medieval Studies (ICMES) and the Middle East Studies Association (MESA); my department should cover those costs. However, in Spring 2025 I would also attend major conferences in the fields of History and Medieval Studies—including meetings of the American Historical Association (AHA) in New York, and of the Medieval Academy of America (MAA) and American Oriental Society (AOS) in Cambridge/Boston—to identify and meet with potential authors.

After commissioning an author to work on a book in this series, it will be my responsibility to communicate with the author, to offer guidance, and to hold them to deadlines. I imagine that authors will submit their manuscript during the Summer of 2025 (beyond the scope of this RACA request). When an author submits a manuscript, I will be the first person to read their piece carefully and critically, offering them feedback and suggestions for revision. I have experience doing this kind of editing work as the current premodern book

review editor for the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Next, it will be my responsibility to locate two peer reviewers for each manuscript, to arrange for a timely peer review, and to communicate with the author about the results and recommendations of the peer reviews. Finally, I will be the one to read the final revised manuscript and revision report, to ensure the book has addressed the reviewers' comments. Once the manuscript is ready, I will submit it to Cambridge for copy-editing and further steps in the publication process.

In addition to my editorial duties, I will also be expected to write at least one book for the series myself. I have expertise in the field of early Islamic slavery studies, with a focus on women and gender. I would thus write a volume called Women in the Premodern World: Slavery, Unfreedom, & Agency. I am currently prepared to write the portions of this book about the premodern Islamic world (as I am working on a monograph called Slavery & Unfreedom in Early Islamic History, see attached proposal), but I need to do more research to integrate work done in other global contexts. My first steps will be to begin reading widely in the secondary literature on slavery and unfreedom, to identify major themes, trends, methodologies, and debates in these fields. I will begin this preliminary work in AY 2024-2025, with the hopes of continuing the research in the coming years and finishing the monograph by AY 2027–2028. The WCU library has ILL access to all the journals, articles, and books I will need, so I will not have to use outside resources to conduct this research.

# Scholarly/Creative Agenda

This project will advance my scholarly growth in many ways. My departmental teacher-scholar model explains, "Teaching involves sharing and extending knowledge, ideas, concepts, and skills not only to students, but also to individuals in our disciplines and beyond" (see attached History TSM.) I not only hope to share my knowledge in the form of a book in this series, but more importantly, to enable and amplify the work of others. In terms of scholarship, I am expected "to contribute to the intellectual life of the discipline." I hope to contribute to the intellectual life of several related academic fields by synthesizing and cross-pollinating multiple strands of scholarship; by attending conferences for both presentations and networking; and by actively guiding and mentoring new scholars. My teacher-scholar model also considers the "integration of knowledge" and the "application of knowledge" as valuable forms of scholarship; these include creating edited book series, working as a peer reviewer, and organizing panels for conferences. Finally, my work on this project will raise my visibility as a scholar and will thereby enhance the reputation of West Chester as a research institution. I am happy to share my experiences as a co-editor, as well as my increasing knowledge in global premodern women's history, with the broader West Chester community in workshops or presentations.

# **Outcomes/Deliverables**

- Proposal for book series on premodern women submitted to Cambridge Elements
- 2–3 books commissioned for publication for this series
- Literature review and preliminary chapter outline for my own book in this series

# Select Bibliography:

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- Negri, Silvia. "Revisiting Gendered Representations of Humility: An Examination of Sources from Late Medieval Italy." *Gender & History* 35.3 (2023): 881–97.
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# College of Arts Humanities Research and Creative Activities Grant (RACA)

#### **Cover Sheet**

Descriptive Title of Project: "A Social History of Early Islam Concubinage and Demographics of Concubines in Early Arabic (	
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Urban	
Department: History	
Rank: Assistant Professor	
Amount Requested (not to exceed \$6,000):	\$5,534
Semester and year of last RACA awarded (if applicable): Date the final report was submitted:	
Signature of Applicant	10 - Z - L 7 Date
Signature of Applicant's Department Chair*	10/2/17 Date
*Connection indicates limital adds of the project and that any departmental or	program recourses applied to carry out the project

#### **Chair or Program Director Support Statement**

In the space below or in an attachment, please indicate how the proposed project will support the faculty member's professional development and is consistent with his/her statement of expectations.

As our deportment's expert on Orlam & the Middle East, this work will greatly inform Dr. Urban's research & teaching, benefitting our undergraduate & graduate tudents while also contributing to our campus commitment to interduciplinary studies, sliverity & inclusivity

<sup>\*</sup>Signature indicates knowledge of the project and that any departmental or program resources needed to carry out the project are available.

A Social History of Early Islamic Sex Slavery: Analyzing Rates of Concubinage and Demographics of Concubines in Early Arabic Genealogical Literature

#### A. Purpose and Significance

This project investigates large-scale trends in the practice of sex slavery (concubinage) during the first two centuries of Islamic history (circa 630-830 CE). These two centuries are considered foundational by many Muslims even today—this was the age of revered caliphs and authoritative religious scholars. But it was also an age of tremendous change, as Muslims expanded their political hegemony throughout the Middle East and struggled to elaborate the institutions and ideologies of an increasingly complex empire. As a result of this rapid expansion, a great influx of female (and male) war captives entered the Islamic empire as slaves. Scholars of Islamic law have studied these female slaves from a legal perspective, tracing the development of a special, protected status for any concubine who bore her master a child (Brockopp 2000; Athamina 2007; Ali 2010; Hidayatullah 2010). Scholars of Islamic history have also noted that slave women could play surprisingly prominent roles in early Islamic politics and society—concubine-queens could practically rule the empire (Abbott 1946; Mernissi 1993; Peirce, 1993; El-Cheikh 2004), while enslaved courtesans could attain great wealth and fame (Gordon 2004; Bray 2004; Caswell 2011).

However, scholars have not thoroughly analyzed early Islamic concubines using large-scale, social history methodologies. The one limited exception is Robinson's unpublished dissertation (2014), which investigates the practice of concubinage in the single Arabian tribe of Quraysh. As there are dozens of Arabian tribes, more research is needed to understand how this practice evolved. At present, we know much about legal norms but little about actual onthe-ground practice of slave concubinage. We know much about famous individuals but little about the average slave woman's identity and experiences. As long as we remain in this state of ignorance, we can never appreciate how some slave women could attain power while others remained anonymous and subordinated, or how the legacy of concubinage continues to impact Islamic societies today.

To address this gap in our knowledge, I am applying for a RACA grant to support my research on early Islamic concubinage. I plan to amass information from several Arabic genealogies into a large data set, which I will then subject to multiple types of analysis (see details below). In addition to intervening in the fields of Islamic history, women's history, and the history of slavery, this project will recover the historical agency of countless slave women whose impact on Islamic society has too long been ignored.

#### **B. Methods and Procedures**

*Complementing previous research:* 

The proposed research will be part of a wider monograph called *Conquered Populations in Early Islam: Non-Arabs, Slaves and the Sons of Slave Mothers*. This monograph studies how Muslims of slave origins joined the early Islamic community and articulated their identities within it. One of the main contributions of this book is that it will combine a close reading of texts with the kind of large-scale social historical analysis described here. I have already completed research exploring how medieval Islamic authors present slave women as either promiscuous villains or romantic heroines. I read these texts "against the grain," using feminist analysis, to expose the

gendered assumptions underlying these portrayals, as well as to uncover the voices of the slave women themselves. I have also shown that slave-born men began justifying the practice of concubinage around the year 750 CE by invoking the biblical precedent of Abraham and Hagar. I suspect that broad-scale demographic changes propelled these cultural and ideological developments, but only by creating a large data set can I confirm or disconfirm this suspicion. This demographic analysis is an important piece of the puzzle that will help scholars understand more precisely how slave women drove social and political change in early Islamic history.

#### Applying established methodology:

Historians of early Islam have very few contemporary sources at our disposal—we lack government archives, legal records, and other important documents that modernists use to recover slaves' lives (Peirce 1993; Toledano 1998, 2010; Zilfi 2010). Instead, we rely on authored texts such as chronicles and biographies. Scholars must use these sources carefully, as their authors have particular agendas and fill their works with back-projections and morality tales. One well-tested method to overcome these authorial biases is to engage in prosopography—to trace trends in groups by amassing large data sets, rather than focusing on individuals. Prosopography can reveal historical trends that run deeper than the level of an individual text, author, or school of thought. Other scholars have used prosopographical analysis to investigate groups such as Muslim converts, Arabian tribesmen, soldiers, scholars, and elite families (Bulliet 1979; Crone 1980; Donner 1984; Bernards and Nawas 1998; Ahmed 2011). I propose to use this same methodology to analyze concubines.

#### The Arabic Sources

This project will mine Arabic genealogical texts, which contain enormous lists of "who begat whom" that can be fruitfully subjected to prosopographical analysis. While these works are organized by paternal descent, they also contain information on mothers, both slave and free. These texts provide scanty information on individual slave mothers—sometimes they do not even provide a name, but simply list "a concubine" or "several concubines"—but what they lack in detail they make up in sheer volume. I will focus on two lengthy Arabic genealogies dating to the 9th century CE, which are among the earliest extant works available for Islamic history. These texts, which are both held at the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library, are: 1) Ibn al-Kalbi, Jamharat al-Nasab, and 2) Baladhuri, Ansab al-Ashraf.

#### Data Analysis

I will comb through these texts, adding relevant information to a FileMakerPro database. The first objective is to investigate rates of concubinage across time and place, and to discern whether concubinage practice relates to variables such as occupation or tribe. Thus, for any given male master, I will calculate how many children he had with free wives, vs. how many children he had with concubines.

Master's	M's	M's	M's	M's	# of free	# of	# of slave	# of	ratio of	ratio of
(M's)	dates	place of	tribe	occu-	wives	children	con-	children	FWs/ SCs	children
name		resi-		pation	(FWs)	born to	cubines	born to		born to
		dence				FWs	(SCs)	SCs		FWs/ SCs
text	text	text	text	text	number	number	number	number	number	number

Fig. 1: Proposed data entry fields for rates of concubinage

The second objective is to understand the slave women themselves. I will therefore link this first data set to more specific information on the wives, concubines, and children of any given master.

Source of	Concubine's	C's	C's	C's	C's <b>skills</b>	C's <b>place</b>	C's place of	Other misc.
data	(C's) <b>name</b> (if unnamed, "n/a")	ethnicity (or n/a)	religion (or n/a)	physical attributes (or n/a)	(or n/a)	of origin (or n/a)	purchase (or n/a)	information (or n/a)
text	text	text	text	text	text	text	text	text

Fig. 2: Proposed data entry fields for demographics of concubines

For my current monograph project, I will only use the information on concubines (not free wives or children). However, the other fields will prove useful for future projects. This data will help scholars comprehend what we do and do not know (and probably cannot know) about early Islamic concubines. Out of the hundreds of concubines listed in the sources, how many are given some kind of identifying information, and how many are relegated to anonymity? This figure alone should prompt scholars to consider the anomalousness of famous slave women, for so many more concubines surely lived out their lives in obscurity and impacted Islamic society in more subtle, indirect ways. This data set will also provide substantial, if sporadic, demographic information on concubines—their places of origin, religions, physical attributes, and skills such as singing or embroidery. This information can then be cross-referenced with a well-known 11th-century slave manual, written by the Iraqi Christian author Ibn Butlan, who associates certain ethnicities of slave with particular skills and attributes. Do we find anything like these associations in the large data set, or do the data bear out other associations entirely?

The final goal of this project is to analyze how the practice of concubinage played out in three branches of the ruling Umayyad family. Starting with the roughly contemporaneous cousins Uthman (d. 656), Muawiya (d. 680), and Marwan (d. 685)—each of whom at one time ruled the empire as caliph—I will trace their descendants for five generations, noting which children are born of free wives and which are born of concubines. I will also create a graphic representation of this three-part family tree, to present the material in an accessible way. This family tree will give a human face to the wider demographic picture, allowing us to see how the society-wide trend of concubinage played out on the level of a single extended family. For this particular project, my analysis will be limited to one family; however, this data set will provide opportunities for future analyses of different families. The future project of mapping out of many "concubinage family trees" could easily become collaborative, as I envision working together with students and colleagues to create a comprehensive map of concubinage practices across the early Islamic empire.

#### **Projected Timeline:**

May 28–31: Create FileMaker Pro database with multiple, linked data entry fields

June 4-July 5: Mine two multi-volume primary sources, enter data

July 9–27: Analyze data in three ways (detailed above) and write up results

#### C. Dissemination of Results

I have a proven track record of presenting at major international conferences in my field, and I would do the same for this research. At the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) annual conference in November 2017, I will participate in a round table discussion of how "big data" and collaborative digital projects might prove useful for the study of medieval Islamic slavery. It would be fantastic if I could follow up at the 2018 MESA conference with a concrete example of such a project, and to invite colleagues to collaborate with me in future research on the subject. I would also apply to present this research at the American Historical Association (AHA) conference in January 2019, and the American Oriental Society (AOS) meeting in March 2019.

As for publications, I will include parts of this research in a chapter of my first monograph, currently under contract with Edinburgh University Press. This research would also propel future publications on the demographics of wives, children, and "family trees" from early Islamic history. I would submit these future findings to peer-reviewed journals, such as *The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (JESHO). This research will also be integral for my next book-length project, which will treat motherhood in early Islamic history.

#### D. Outcomes and Deliverables

#### Contributions to the Field

This project will contribute to the field of early Islamic history by providing a historical context against which to view the rise of powerful slave queens and courtesans. Given the positive reception of my previous work on slave women, I imagine this research will spark many productive conversations with leading scholars in my field such as M. Gordon and N.M. El-Cheikh. Additionally, it will provide an opportunity for comparative studies of concubinage in other pre-modern historical settings, such as Persia, Byzantium, and China. Finally, this project will help scholars, students, and the educated public engage more thoughtfully in modern political conversations. ISIS has recently made headlines for enslaving Iraqi women, a practice they justify by invoking early Islamic precedent. But from a critical historical perspective, this precedent is neither clear nor static—my research reveals early Islamic history to be a dynamic period in which Muslims creatively negotiated (and re-negotiated) their values and practices to fit changing circumstances.

#### Teaching & Learning Opportunities

A secondary outcome of this project will be to further my dedication to teaching and authentic assessment. I will present this research in my undergraduate and graduate courses on Islamic History (HIS 308, HIS 397, HIS 411, and HIS 603), and I will also use it as an example of social historical methodology in HIS 300, the history majors' methods course. Although most students will not know Arabic well enough to help me populate the database, after I have populated it they would be able to participate in its analysis, especially helping me map more "family trees" of the type I have suggested above.

#### **Future Grants**

Receiving a RACA grant would make this project an attractive candidate for future outside funding. As indicated above, there are many ways this project could be extended—such as mapping additional "family trees," and studying not just concubines but also free wives and children. Moreover, I am proposing here to analyze only two genealogies, but the medieval Arabic tradition contains dozens of such works. Finally, if this project proves fruitful, the same methodology could be applied to other groups, such as male slaves, freedmen, and converts. Because the potential scope of this project is so great, it would have fantastic potential as a collaborative Digital Humanities initiative, similar to the Netherlands Ulama Project (NUP) that amassed prosopographical data on medieval Islamic scholars. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) offers Collaborative Research Grants and Digital Humanities Startup Grants that would potentially support such a project. The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) also offers a number of collaborative, digital humanities, and area studies grants.

#### E. BUDGET

Project Budget	Proposed Grant Amount	Other Sources	Notes	
Salaries/stipends	\$4,937		3 summer credit PI E. Urban	
Student wages				
Consultants				
Supplies	\$197.00		File Maker Pro	
Equipment				
Operating expenses				
Travel				
Meals & Incidentals				
Room				
Other	\$400.00		Borrowing privileges at U	
			Penn library	
Totals	\$5,534			

#### **Budget Notes** -

The PI is requesting 3 summer credits to complete the data collection and analysis. As one of the proposed sources comprises 25 volumes, it will take many hours of work to complete the database. Working at the ambitious rate of five volumes per week, it will take five weeks to enter the data (plus a few days for the second, single-volume, source). The remaining weeks will be used to analyze the data. 3 summer credits at the CBA Summer schedule is \$4,937.

The PI will use FileMakerPro to organize and analyze her data; the cost of the software is \$197.

It is essential that the PI have full access and borrowing privileges at University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library. Borrowing privileges will allow the PI to work from home or her WCU office, as well as to work on Sundays when the library is closed. This flexibility and efficiency will ensure that the PI can complete her research in a timely manner. Penn charges \$400 for individual courtesy borrowing privileges.

#### **Appendix: References**

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