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Marion Holmes Katz

Fattening Up in Fourteenth-Century Cairo. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ and the Many meanings of Overeating

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## Fattening Up in Fourteenth-Century Cairo

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### Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ and the Many meanings of Overeating

#### ♦ ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, the problem of obesity has attracted overwhelming attention in the popular and scholarly press. Partially in reaction to the medical conceptualisation of healthy body weight as a biological universal, scholars have directed increasing attention to the historical and cultural specificity of the social meanings of fat. This article focuses on an account by the Mamluk-era scholar Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ (d. 737/1336) of contemporary Egyptian women's systematic cultivation of ample bodies, which has until now received little scholarly attention. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's discussion places the issue of intentional over-eating within several different interpretive frames, including religious law, erotic ideals and medicine.

**Keywords:** women – fatness – Islamic law – erotica – medicine

#### ♦ RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des dernières décennies, l'obésité est devenue un problème. D'ailleurs, elle a suscité un immense intérêt dans la presse populaire et savante. En partie en réaction à la représentation médicale qui fait d'un poids corporel sain un universel biologique, certains spécialistes

\* Marion Holmes Katz, New York University, marion.katz@nyu.edu.

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ont accordé une attention grandissante aux spécificités historiques et culturelles des significations sociales de l'embonpoint. Cet article s'intéresse aux remarques du savant Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ (m. 737/1336) sur la volonté des femmes égyptiennes de son temps de rendre leur corps plus large. Ces remarques n'ont jusqu'à présent pas attiré l'attention des spécialistes. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ replace la suralimentation volontaire à l'intérieur de plusieurs cadres interprétatifs, qui relèvent de la loi religieuse, des idéaux érotiques, ou de la médecine.

**Mots-clés :** Femmes – embonpoint – droit musulman – érotisme – médecine

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OVER the past several decades, the problem of obesity has attracted overwhelming attention in the popular and scholarly press. Bio-medically defined in terms of a body weight significantly exceeding “normal” parameters, obesity is understood as a grave threat both to individual health and longevity and to social well-being and prosperity. Simultaneously, activists and scholars have criticized “fat panic” and the pathologization of the large body. Partially in reaction to the medical conceptualization of healthy body weight as a biological universal, scholars have directed increasing attention to the historical and cultural specificity of the social meanings of fat. Cultural anthropologists have explored the multiple valences of fat within different societies and sub-cultures, showing how fatness can be associated with a variety of values including prosperity, sexuality, and social connectedness. Historians have demonstrated that contemporary Western attitudes towards fat (which emphasize its incompatibility with the ideals of self-discipline, productivity and progress) are uniquely modern. They have also explored the evolving relationship between the cultural meanings of fatness and gender.<sup>1</sup>

Serious attention to the history of the image and techniques of the body in Islamic societies has been a more recent development.<sup>2</sup> Lavish interest in the history of Muslim women's dress and the regulation of their sexuality has cast much light on certain aspects of women's bodily practices (or at least on efforts to discipline and control them), yet the reticence of the sources has left many more quotidian aspects of bodily cultivation and care—and the values that were attached to them—frustratingly obscure. This article focuses on a rare and provocative account of one bodily practice, women's systematic cultivation of ample bodies, which has until now received little scholarly attention. Although the factual information provided is fragmentary and polemical, it can contribute to the reconstruction of an episode

1. For historical and comparative overviews of attitudes towards fat, see Gilman, *Fat*; Elena Levy-Navarro, *Culture of Obesity*; Popenoe, *Feeding Desire*; Vigarello, *Metamorphoses of Fat*.

2. See, for instance, Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*; Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*; Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food*; Richardson, *Difference and Disability*.

in the history of the care and manipulation of the body. More directly and less conjecturally, it contributes to our understanding of the values that have been attached to bodily size and the gendering of fat.

## The Text and its Claims

The *Madḥal* of the fourteenth-century Cairene Mālikī Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ (d. 737 AH/1336 CE), which criticizes the religious deviations of his contemporaries in vivid and informative (but also jaundiced and polemical) detail, is well known for its unusual attention to the everyday practices of Cairene women.<sup>3</sup> One of its most sustained individual critiques addresses the issue of systematic and intentional overeating:

There are those [women] who engage in an act that is blameworthy and repugnant, combining five kinds of vices, the first of which is [directly] violating the divine law, the second of which is squandering wealth, the third of which is praying with substantive impurities [on the body], and the fourth of which is exposing the private parts (*ʿawra*) without legal necessity (*ḍarūra šarʿiyya*). That is that some of them have adopted a blameworthy custom, which is that when a woman goes to bed after eating dinner and filling her belly, she takes with her to bed the pith of bread (*lubāb al-ḥubz*) that she crumbles up with a number of other things and swallows with water, since she cannot eat it because she is already so sated; sometimes she repeats that after some of the night has passed.

It has been forbidden for someone to eat in excess of what he needs; she has eaten so much at dinner that she did not leave room for water to pass, as is usual among those of them who want to become fat, which is excess upon excess. That is something that causes illnesses, diseases and maladies, contrary to her intention. It is transmitted from one of the early Muslims (*salaf*) that his son ate more than he was accustomed to, so he became sick; his father said, “If he were to die [from this], I would not pray over him.” This was only because he was of the opinion that [his son would have] caused his own death, and a person of virtue and religion would not pray over someone of whom this was the case.

These are two aspects—that is, of the aforementioned [five], [direct] violation of the law and squandering of wealth. As for the violation of the law, it is because of what Abū Dāwūd transmitted in his *Sunan* from ʿImrān ibn Ḥusayn (may God be satisfied with him!) that he said: the Messenger of God (peace be upon him!) said, “The best of generations is my generation in which I was sent [as a prophet], then those that follow them, then those that follow them”—God knows best whether he mentioned the third [generation] or not—“then there will appear among them people who give testimony when they are not asked for their testimony, make vows that they do not keep, betray and are not trustworthy; and fatness will appear among them.”<sup>4</sup> As for the squandering of wealth, it is clear to anyone that going beyond satiety [in eating] falls into the category of squandering

3. On Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ and his accounts of women’s activities see Lutfi, “Manners and Customs”; for her comments on this particular passage, see p. 110.

4. Al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-ṣaḥādāt*, *Bāb lā yašhadu ʿalā ṣaḥādāt ḡawr id ušhida*; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-ṣaḥāba*, *Bāb faḍl al-ṣaḥāba tumma allaḍīna yalūnahum tumma allaḍīna yalūnahum*.

wealth, since it is done without any legally recognized benefit. The pursuit of fatness (*ta'āṭī al-siman*) has [also] led to something deplorable and dreadful, which is that some of them eat human gall (*marārat al-ādami*) because those of them who use it eat a lot and are rarely sated, and as a result grow fat, according to what [the women] claim. This is something whose prohibition no scholar would dispute—may God give us refuge from His affliction by His grace!

The third [vice] is that some of them become so large and fat that their arms cannot reach to clean the impurity that is upon [their private] parts because of the fatness of body that they have caused. These [women] fall into two categories. The first [possibility] is that she may be poor and unable to pay for someone to remove that [impurity] from her, so she prays with impurities [on her body] because she is unable to remove them, as has been mentioned. The second category—which is the fourth aspect [of the five objectionable implications of fattening] is that she is able to retain someone to attend to that part of her and remove [the impurity] from her, which causes her to expose her private parts without a legally valid necessity. A single slave girl may not suffice her, so she needs more, and the sins increase with the number of people who expose her private parts without a legally valid necessity; if she were to pray with the impurities on her it would be less serious than exposing her private parts, because the removal of impurities is subject to dispute among the scholars while [the status of] exposing the private parts is certain...<sup>5</sup>

The fifth [vice] is more serious than what has been mentioned so far; that is that she has caused the omission of one of the obligatory components of prayer, which is standing, because some of them cannot stand in prayer; the same usually applies to bowing, so she prays sitting down, and she is the one who has inflicted this on herself. Look—may God have mercy upon us and upon you!—at the shameful of this ugly action that they have innovated! We have already mentioned someone who ate too much one time and got sick because of that, and his father said, “If he dies I will not pray over him”—that is the case when he did not do that intentionally and only did it one time, as has been mentioned above; so what of someone who makes that a consistent custom until she becomes as fat as has been mentioned, particularly because if illness or death befalls her the likelihood is that she brought it upon herself because of excessive eating, as has been explained, and because she may become so fat that the fat (*ṣaḥm*) reaches her heart and covers it so that she dies as a result, and it may rise to her brain and confuse it so that she loses her mind, and it may rise to her eye and blind her—and she is the one who has caused all of this; that has happened often. It has been transmitted that “Whoever kills himself with something will be tormented with it on the Day of Resurrection.”<sup>6</sup> [Even] more repugnant than this is for some men to engage in the behavior that has been mentioned, since it is devoid of any objective at all, because a woman does that in order to increase her beauty (as she claims) and so that men will be pleased with her (*yaḡṭabīṭu bihā*), in contrast to a man, for whom it is ugly to be fat; [thus] for men to engage in that

5. Here Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ continues (pp. 64-65) to complain that if a woman's private parts are cleaned by another person and she believes it necessary to cleanse the inside of her vagina (as he claims women tended to do), manual penetration by the other woman both constitutes improper sexual activity and potentially breaks the woman's fast (if she is fasting and *Ṣāfiʿī*).

6. See al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-aymān wa-l-nuḍūr*, *Bāb man ḥalafa bi-milla siwā millat al-islām*; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-īmān*, *Bāb ḡilaṣ taḥrīm qat al-insān nafsahu*.

by its means (*bi-asbābihi*) is many times more repugnant. Muslim (may God have mercy on him!) transmitted in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* from Abū Hurayra (may God be pleased with him!) that the Messenger of God (peace be upon him!) said, “The big, fat man will come on the Day of Resurrection and not weigh as much as a gnat’s wing in God’s sight...”<sup>7</sup>—that is, unless fatness is a predisposition in him that he did not cause; in that case there is no objection, because God created him that way and it is not of his doing. Look—may God have mercy on us and on you!—at how many blessings come from conformity with the [divine] law (*al-šarʿ*)! Don’t you see that if a person refrains from [eating] the [amount of] food stipulated by the law (*al-ḡidāʾ al-šarʿī*) that the body requires to be healthy, he will be harmed and weakened by that, and similarly if he manifestly exceeds the food that is stipulated by the law his energy will be weakened in proportion to the amount that he has exceeded it; that is [something that has been] observed and experienced. Well-being for the body (lit., “the external form,” *al-qālab*) and the heart, the religion and manliness (*murūʾa*), the intellect, the spirit, and the innermost being (*sirr*) can all be achieved only by following [the Prophet]—peace be upon him!—and conforming to his *sunna*; the opposite of all that—I mean exceeding or falling short of satiety or anything else—causes the opposite of the goodness that has been mentioned, which is badness...<sup>8</sup>

The concrete factual claims made in this passage are quite simple: women systematically gain weight by swallowing pills of bread (mixed with other ingredients) at night when they have already eaten to satiety. The resulting girth can be considerable, since it may pose an obstacle to standing in prayer or reaching one’s own genitals. In another passage, he notes that if a woman is portly (*mubdina*) she may refrain from fasting during Ramadan for fear of diminishing her girth; similarly, the parents of virgins may keep them from fasting, particularly if the girl in question is engaged and they fear that her size will decrease before the consummation of the marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Can these claims be corroborated from other sources? An eighth/fourteenth-century Šāfiʿi manual of disputed authorship on legal rulings relating to women (*Aḥkām al-nisāʾ*) pauses in its discussion of women’s dress, grooming and adornment to observe that “fatness is [legally] undesirable for women” (*wa-tukrahu al-sumna li-l-nisāʾ*). Following the citation of several relevant hadith reports, the author digresses to observe that:

I heard about the women in our times when I was in Egypt in the year 700 [1300-1301] that they fatten themselves up with the pith<sup>10</sup> of bread until they are unable to stand; as a result of

7. See al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, *Bāb sūrat al-kahf*; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb šifāt al-qiyāma wa-l-ḡanna wa-l-nār*, first (untitled) *bāb*.

8. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, *Madḥal* 2, pp. 63-66.

9. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, *Madḥal* 2, p. 60.

10. “*Lubāb al-ḥubz*,” the same expression used by Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ.



that their faces and bodies are affected by [indecipherable] to the point that one of them is unable to wash her vagina and anus, and requires the help of someone who exposes her private parts and cleans her after she relieves herself—we ask God to preserve us from all of that!<sup>11</sup>

The parallels between these two passages are, despite their disparate size, sufficiently striking to raise the question whether we are dealing with independent corroboration or with textual interdependence. It seems unlikely that Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ could have expanded the terse remarks from *Aḥkām al-nisā'* into the lengthy discussion in *al-Madḥal* (or that he would have needed the testimony of a foreign visitor on women's practices at home in Egypt), but quite conceivable that the passage in *al-Aḥkām* is a summary of his remarks. However, Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ is reported to have completed *al-Madḥal* only in the year 732 AD, more than three decades before the author of the other work claims to have “heard” about the Egyptian women's distinctive fattening practices.<sup>12</sup> Either Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ was already fulminating about this issue long before the completion of his book, or both authors are retailing a more widespread set of tropes about the potential consequences of women's pursuit of fatness.

Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's most outré claim is that in their pursuit of enhanced appetite (and thus of fatness) women consume human gall. Although the use of human gallbladders seems both repulsive and impractical, it is notable that in the previous century Ibn al-Bayṭār (d. 646/1248) described cow's gallstones as being used by “women in Egypt” (*al-nisā' bi-l-diyār al-miṣriyya*) as a fattening potion.<sup>13</sup> At the least, his observation supports the idea that Egyptian women of this period actively pursued fatness as a systematic “body project”<sup>14</sup> with the help of dietary aids. Certainly outside observers of later centuries reported that Egyptian women cultivated extreme portliness through an elaborate dietary regime. In the sixteenth century, the Venetian physician Prospero Alpini reported at length on the techniques Egyptian women used to increase their girth, believing that they would be more desirable to men the fleshier they were—including the ingestion of cow's bile. He asserted that as a result one saw many very fat women there—interestingly, particularly among the Jewish women.<sup>15</sup> An essay on Egyptian traditional medicine in the *Description de l'Égypte* produced by the Napoleonic expedition at the turn of the nineteenth century reported that “The numerous preparations

11. *Kitāb aḥkām al-nisā'*, Ibn al-Naẓẓār [attributed], Cairo ms., Dār al-Kutub, Fiqh Šāfi'i mīm, microfilm 2742, fol. 17a. This work is not mentioned in *Kašf al-zunūn*; Ismā'il Bāšā al-Baḡdādī notes that it is attributed to an Ibn al-Naẓẓār, but is clearly in doubt (al-Baḡdādī, *Idāḥ* 1, p. 37). The author's name is also sometimes rendered as Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār (cf. al-Haytamī, *Fatāwā* 1, p. 287, introducing a citation from this work). I have not been able to consult any other of the manuscripts that appear to be of the same work; see al-Maḡma' al-Malikī li-Buḥūṭ al-Ḥaḍāra al-Islāmiyya, *al-Faḥras al-šāmil li-l-turāṭ al-ʿarabī*, p. 217.

12. Kātip Çelebi, *Kašf al-zunūn* 2, p. 1643.

13. Ibn al-Bayṭār, *Ġāmi'* 11; for references to cow's gallstones in Arabic pharmacological texts, see Maimonides, *Šarḥ asmā' al-ʿuqūr*, pp. 60–61.

14. The phrase “body project” is from Popenoe, *Feeding Desire*, p. 30.

15. Alpini, *Médecine des Égyptiens* 1, p. 230 (the description of the techniques and recipes used, particularly when in the public bath, continues to p. 236; the reference to cow's bile is on p. 236). On Alpini's portrayal of Egyptian women see Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust,” p. 214; “Melting Moments,” p. 98.

that the inhabitants of Egypt use in order to acquire portliness (*embonpoint*) are mainly sought out by the rich and by well-to-do city dwellers... The women, for whom excessive portliness is a perfection of beauty, make great use of them.”<sup>16</sup>

The intentional cultivation of female fatness through systematic over-feeding is certainly not unheard-of cross-culturally. The anthropologist Rebecca Popenoe has exhaustively discussed the pursuit of extreme fatness by women among the Azawagh Arabs of southern Niger. In this context, girls are (or were in the 1980s and 1990s, when Popenoe did her fieldwork) fattened before marriage through the forced daily consumption of milky porridge (and after puberty of couscous). A combination of systematic feeding and physical inactivity (which also inculcates an appropriately staid feminine demeanor) yields a body ideally displaying “pendulous upper arms, rolls of fat around the waist, a protruding behind, and thighs that together form one vast expanse.”<sup>17</sup> Popenoe notes of one of her informants, whom she describes as “a paragon of Moor womanliness, ... full in body and demure in comportment,” that she could no longer stand to pray in the manner prescribed by Islamic law (although the woman herself did not attribute this to her size).<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, the historical antecedents of these practices were noted by an observer very close to the time of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, one who also visited and described contemporary Cairo. Visiting the same general region studied by Popenoe, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa admiringly described the Berber women of the Bardāma as “the most perfect of women in beauty, and the most remarkable in appearance, with radiant whiteness and fatness; I have never seen women in any country who have reached the same degree of fatness”. He continues to describe a fattening regimen involving milk and sorghum consumed every morning and evening.<sup>19</sup> It is notable that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa describes Bardāma women as being both outstandingly corpulent and outstandingly alluring (an observation that presumably reflects his own sensibilities as much as theirs); this pairing parallels Popenoe’s observation that the central motivation for Azawagh fattening is the pursuit of eroticized beauty.

Pending the emergence of further evidence (and acknowledging the elusiveness of everyday practices of the distant past), it seems reasonable to infer that Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ’s account is exaggerated and polemical, but basically founded in fact. His work was intended for circulation within the society it purported to describe; while his uniquely vivid and circumstantial accounts often lack corroboration in their details (and have thus loomed disproportionately large in the reconstruction of the social history of his time), in their basic outlines they tend to correspond to what is known from other sources. It seems unlikely that Cairene women routinely achieved incapacitating levels of bulk; had they done so, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa would not have found the women of the Bardāma unique in their fatness. The woman who cannot reach to wash herself (or cannot stand to pray) is more likely to be a literary trope, a male fantasy or a religious caution than a representative contemporary body type. Nevertheless, for the account

16. Rouyer, “Notice sur les Médicaments,” I, p. 221. Translation mine.

17. Popenoe, *Feeding Desire*, p. 43.

18. Popenoe, *Feeding Desire*, p. 42.

19. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥla* 2, p. 287; see also Popenoe, *Feeding desire*, pp. 33-34.



to retain any credibility in a contemporary context it must have rung true that women would force-feed themselves to increase their size, and the specter of fat-related disability suggests that the ideal they strove for went beyond the cultivation of gentle curves.

Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ places his discussion of women's fattening practices at the intersection of several different discourses: the religious, the erotic, and the medical. (He himself invokes erotic discourses only indirectly, but asserts that eroticized ideals of beauty are the motivating factor for the women involved.) Each of these frames of reference is in some sense normative, in the sense that it prescribes some ideal way for a woman to behave or be. The remainder of this paper will put the issue of women's fatness in the context of each of these three fields as they might have appeared around the time of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ.

### The First Frame: *Fiqh*

For a religious polemicist like Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, the overriding framework of value is Islamic law. Although he describes women's overeating as being aimed at the production of an aesthetically valued body shape, his critique of the practice focuses overwhelmingly on the ethics of eating rather than on the size or shape of the reified body. Odium attaches not to the fat body itself but to the practice of eating beyond satiety and the possibility of failure to fulfill ritual duties. In taking this approach Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ followed a well-established tradition. Al-Ġazālī (one of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's favorite authors, based on the references to his work in the *Madḥal*) presents in his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* an exhaustive enumeration of the virtues of hunger and the dangers of satiety. His discussion overwhelmingly focuses on the spiritual states accompanying fullness and hunger and their impact on worship, alluding to the resulting fat (or thin) body only fleetingly and without elaboration.<sup>20</sup> He declares in his discussion of the "manners/ethics of eating" (*ādāb al-akl*) that if someone "eats for the sake of the energy for worship (*quwwat al-'ibāda*), his intention will be sincere only if he eats less than [is necessary for] satiety, for satiety is an obstacle to worship..."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in his discussion of the "ethics of eating" (*ādāb al-akl*) elsewhere in his *Madḥal*, Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ elaborates on the idea that the ability to fulfill one's ritual duties is the central criterion of appropriate nourishment. He states that it is obligatory (*wāḡib*) to eat enough to fortify oneself to perform one's obligatory ritual duties; recommended (*mandūb*) to eat enough to engage in supererogatory worship and pursue learning and other acts of obedience; and permissible (*mubāḥ*) to eat until one is full. In contrast, it is reprehensible (*makrūh*) to overeat somewhat, and forbidden (*muḥarram*) to eat so much that it harms one's body.<sup>22</sup> The idea that one should never eat to (let alone beyond) satiety, which had a firm basis in hadith, was also well established in the Mālikī legal tradition.<sup>23</sup>

20. Al-Ġazālī, *Iḥyā'* 3, pp. 91-96.

21. Al-Ġazālī, *Iḥyā'* 2, p. 5.

22. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, *Madḥal* 1, p. 218. See also Ibn 'Imād al-Aqfahsī, *Ādāb al-akl*, pp. 54-56 (which elaborates on Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's schema).

23. The Prophet's counsel to fill one-third of one's belly with food and one third with drink, leaving a third for the passage of air, was included in the *Risāla* of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996); see al-Nafrāwī,

In this schema, the fat body itself has no moral valence except insofar as it may prevent the fulfillment of specific ritual duties. It is worth noting that a physical inability to fulfill obligations such as standing in prayer is not in itself religiously problematic; dispensations in the *fiqh* rules accommodate worshipers whose physical disabilities prevent them from carrying out the physical actions of prayers.<sup>24</sup> Here the problem is that the individual has *willfully acquired* a body that cannot carry out the normal ritual obligations.

On the rare occasion when Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ does cite a religious text apparently deprecating the moral value of the fat person, he is quick to specify that such a body carries no religious stigma unless it is the result of voluntary action (implicitly, of intentional over-indulgence); if it arises from a God-given predisposition, in contrast, “there is no objection.” The hadith cited by Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ predicting the spread of fatness in the end times is a well-authenticated one, appearing in the *Ṣaḥīḥ*s of al-Buḥārī and Muslim.<sup>25</sup> However, commentators on this text (including those of the Mamluk period) routinely took pains to note that fatness has a negative moral valence only when it is the result of willful overconsumption, rather than of a constitutional disposition. (Indeed, they even pondered metaphorical interpretations, taking “fatness” to refer to the accumulation of wealth or to the puffery of those who claim noble qualities they do not have.)<sup>26</sup>

The disinclination to attribute moral or religious meaning to body size was not universal; commenting on the report that “God hates a fat scholar (*ḥabr*)” (which he observes has no valid chain of transmission from the Prophet), Muḥammad al-Saḥāwī (d. 902/1496) presents a report in which al-Šāfi‘ī is said to have declared, “No fat person has ever flourished [i.e., spiritually; *aflaḥa*], unless it be Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan [al-Šaybānī].”<sup>27</sup>

He was asked, “Why?” He said, “Because a rational person is always in one of two states: either he is worried about the next world and his afterlife, or about this world and his livelihood—and fat does not accumulate when one is worried. If a person is devoid of either of these things, he becomes like an animal and fat accumulates.”<sup>28</sup>

However, even in the rare cases where bodily girth was made an occasion for religious judgment, fatness was not always construed as a damning sign of levity and spiritual unconcern.

*al-Fawākih al-dawānī* 2, p. 512 (base text).

24. See Rispler-Chaim, *Disability*, pp. 23–24.

25. Al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-ṣaḥādāt*, *Bāb lā yaṣḥadu ‘alā ṣaḥādat ḡawr id uṣhida*; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, *Bāb faḍl al-ṣaḥāba tumma allaḍīna yalūnahum tumma allaḍīna yalūnahum*.

26. See al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* 16, p. 320; al-‘Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī* 11, p. 78; al-‘Aynī, ‘*Umdat al-qārī*’ 13, p. 214.

27. The author of *Aḥkām al-nisā’* offers an alternate version in which al-Šāfi‘ī declares that he has seen no rational (‘*āqil*) fat person but Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan (fol. 17a). In another anecdote, al-Šāfi‘ī is said to have declared (with similar condescension) that he had never debated a smarter fat man than al-Šaybānī (al-Ḍaḥabī, *Tārīḥ* 12, p. 359); see also Richardson, *Difference and Disability*, p. 28.

28. Al-Saḥāwī, *Maqāṣid*, p. 125.

Ibn Raḡab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1393) reiterates the sentiment that satiety dulls spiritual receptivity, but destabilizes the link between fatness and spiritual dullness:

Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Baššār was asked, “Can a friend of God (*walī*) be fat?” He said, “Yes, if the friend of God is faithful (*amīn*).” He was asked, “How is that, when God hates the fat scholar?” He said, “If the scholar knows Whose slave he is, he increases in fatness.”<sup>29</sup>

In this view true spiritual awareness can result not only in emaciating worry, but in plump serenity. Once again, there is a reluctance to associate good or bad spiritual traits with any specific bodily shape.

Although it is not completely absent, the fat body thus appears strikingly marginal to Islamic normative works of this period even when they comment on the occasional texts that explicitly invoke it. Even Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ’s Syrian contemporary Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyya, who strives in his “Medicine of the Prophet” to meld religious guidance with medical insights on the care of the body, presents a thorough discussion of health and diet (including issues of satiety and overeating) without any reference to reified body types.<sup>30</sup>

These observations resonate with Elena Levy-Navarro’s claim that in Europe “the premodern period is a ‘time before fat.’”<sup>31</sup> Writing on the fourteenth-century English work *Piers Plowman*, she notes that “opprobrium [did] not adhere to specific body types”; regardless of girth, “anyone can be... a glutton.”<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Georges Vigarello emphasizes that as French friars of the twelfth and thirteenth century strove to popularize the virtues of austerity and continence (which had previously largely been confined to monastic circles), “the evocation of bodily forms in moralizing speeches and sermons” became prevalent.<sup>33</sup> In addition to geographical and chronological differences, it seems likely that the salience of the reified body varied with context and genre. It would be difficult to claim that Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ’s discussion unfolds in a “time before fat”, if only because fatness is the avowed aim of the practices he describes. Nevertheless, he himself firmly declines to invest the women’s expanded bodies with aesthetic or moral meaning; for him, the women’s bodies—like those of all people—are instruments whose value lies in their capacity for prayer.

If Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ worked within a tradition of religious scholarship that generally assigned little significance to the size of the reified body, however, his comments also continued

29. Ibn Raḡab, *Maḡmū‘ rasā’il* 1, p. 118. Compare the report in the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Šayba stating that “As for the one who is fat in [times of] fruitfulness or draught, it is the believer who gives thanks if he receives, and is patient if he is afflicted; as for the one who is lean in [times of] fruitfulness or draught, it is the unbeliever or the sinner...” (8, p. 294).

30. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ṭibb*, p. 17, 21. Characteristically, Ibn al-Qayyim cites a hadith about ‘Ā’iša’s mother’s efforts to fatten her for marriage to illustrate the benefits of a balance between “hot” and “cold” foods, without evincing any interest in body size (*Ṭibb*, p. 68).

31. Levy-Navarro, *Culture of Obesity*, p. 36.

32. Levy-Navarro, *Culture of Obesity*, p. 43.

33. Vigarello, *Metamorphoses of Fat*, p. 18.

a long-standing Mālikī tradition of protesting women's fattening practices in works condemning religious innovations (*bida'*) or prescribing religious rules for women—two genres very relevant to the understanding of his *Madḥal*. In his book on norms for women, the Andalusian Mālikī 'Abd al-Malik ibn Ḥabīb (d. 238/852) presents a short chapter on the repugnance of "fattening" (*al-tasammun*). It cites a report in which the Prophet declares, "Woe to the fattened women (*al-mutasammināt*) from a weakness that will be in the bones on the Day of Resurrection!"<sup>34</sup> This poorly-authenticated hadith is followed by an anecdote in which people are said to have been in the habit of bringing young girls (*al-ḡawārī*) to 'Ā'isha for her blessing. "She was brought a girl who had been fattened (*musammāna*), and said, 'You have stuffed her with wheat mush (*sawīq*)'—and did not bless her."<sup>35</sup> In his book on *bida'*, Muḥammad ibn Waḍḍāḥ (d. 286/899) transmits an apocalyptic hadith predicting that in the end times the Muslim *umma* will exceed the sins of previous communities through excesses including "the fatness of women: a girl (*ḡāriya*) will be fattened until she dies of fat."<sup>36</sup>

It is true that these texts condemn an activity (the systematic over-feeding of girls) rather than a body type. However, the activity is itself defined by the pursuit of a specific bodily size (apparently rather large one, given the specter of a girl "dying of fat"), rather than by considerations of gluttony or immoderation. Indeed, both in these texts and in Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's discussion, women's pursuit of fat is anything but a self-indulgence; it is a discipline of the body. There is no reason to assume that Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ was directly inspired by these passages, although he may well have been familiar with them; indeed, the basic practices implied seem rather different, in that the earlier Andalusian texts seem to allude to the fattening of young girls (perhaps in preparation for marriage) rather than the self-care of women in general. In any case, if not directly the fat body itself, then the pursuit of fat is visible in the Mālikī tradition of denouncing *bida'* specifically when it deals with women.

The Mālikī tradition offered precedents for attention not only to women's fattening practices, but to the aesthetic and erotic impact of the large female body. Writing about the legal status of women's participation in funeral processions, the jurist Ibn Ruṣḍ al-Ġadd (d. 520/1126) cites the view (which he characterizes as *maṣḥūr*) that women fall into three categories: the mature woman (*mutaḡālla*), who may attend anyone's funeral; the young woman (*ṣābba*), who may attend only the funerals of her closest relatives; and the woman who is "magnificent, moonlike, stout, and massive" (*rā'i'a badra ḡasīma ḍaḥma*), who preferably should not go out in public for any purpose.<sup>37</sup> The Qayrawānī Mālikī jurist Abū al-Ḥasan al-Laḥmī (d. 478/1085) expresses the opinion that a woman is not obligated to walk to Mecca to perform her obligatory pilgrimage, even if she is physically able, if she is "magnificent and stout" (*rā'i'a wa-ḡasīma*) such that

34. See also Ibn Abī Ṣayba, *Muṣannaḡ* 8, p. 295 (in *Kitāb al-zuhd*, the "Book of Asceticism").

35. Ibn Ḥabīb, *Adab al-nisā'*, pp. 229–230. The placement of this judgment in 'Ā'isha's mouth is striking in the light of the report stating that 'Ā'isha herself is reported to have been intentionally fattened up (by her mother) in preparation for her marriage to the Prophet. See Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *Kitāb al-ṭibb*, *Bāb fī al-sumna*; Ibn Māḡa, *Sunan*, *Kitāb al-aṭ'ima*, *Bāb al-quṭṭā' wa-l-ruṭab yuḡma'āni*.

36. Ibn Waḍḍāḥ, *Bida'*, p. 78.

37. Ibn Ruṣḍ, *Bayān* 2, p. 222.

she would attract attention on her way (*man yunẓar li-miṭlihā fi tarīqihā*); conversely, if she is elderly or otherwise unlikely to excite notice (*lam yu'bah bihā*), she is obligated to walk just like a man.<sup>38</sup> Such scattered allusions are not sufficient to ground any concrete hypothesis about the historical cultivation and appeal of women's fatness in Mālikī Spain and North Africa, but they do demonstrate that in the legal tradition Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ worked in, women's body size was a marked category that could come into play in legal argumentation. Whereas the normative tradition more broadly focused on issues of pious agency surrounding food and drink and the immediate bodily states resulting from their consumption, when it came to women the reified body and its size came more clearly into view.

Concern with female fatness was not unique to the Mālikīs. The allusion to Egyptian women's fattening regime cited above from the Ṣāfi'ī *Aḥkām al-nisā'* occurs in a passage that condemns women's "fatness" (*sumna*) in general and remarks with great feeling, "There is no doubt that fatness weighs down the body and makes it lazy, brings on sleep and does away with intelligence; the one who is affected by it is incapable of taking care of his own needs and those of others..." The text goes on to condemn fatness as the cause of vapors, sweat and disease.<sup>39</sup> Given the passage's location in a manual of rules for women and its central focus on the problem of women's systematic cultivation of fatness, it appears that the vigor of its condemnation has as much to do with issues of gender and sexuality as with broader religious attitudes towards fat.

Outside of the genres of *bida'* and *aḥkām al-nisā'*, the issue of overfeeding women does not appear to feature widely in the *fiqh* literature. However, both the idea of a fattening regime for women and the assumption of its erotic motivation are reflected in a fatwa originating from Tunis two generations after Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ. Abū al-Qāsim al-Burzulī (d. 844/1440) reports that "I asked our teacher [identified by Ibn 'Arḍūn as Ibn 'Arafa (d. 803/1401)] about the fattening of women (*tasmīn al-nisā'*). The latter answers that anything that leads to harm to the body or the spoiling of food (Ibn 'Arḍūn elucidates with a reference to vomiting) is not permissible. However, "As for what exceeds satiety that does not lead to this, the correct opinion is that it is permissible because it is one of the things that perfects [sexual] pleasure (*li-annahū min ikmāl al-mut'a*), which is permissible."<sup>40</sup> The reference to sexual pleasure (*mut'a*) is underlined by the fatwa's placement in a passage dealing with the selection of marriage

38. Al-Laḥmī, *Tabṣira*, p. 13. Al-Ḥaṭṭāb al-Ru'aynī implies in his citation of this opinion that al-Laḥmī attributes it (through Muḥammad [al-Mawwāz]) to Mālik; however, in the *Tabṣira* the reference to the large and beautiful woman appears to be al-Laḥmī's own commentary on the opinion attributed to Mālik, which states simply that a woman is not obligated to make the *ḥaǧǧ* on foot because doing so constitutes inappropriate exposure (*mašyuhā 'awra*) (al-Ḥaṭṭāb, *Mawāhib* 3, p. 486). As Vigarello has observed of medieval French texts, it can be difficult to distinguish between references to fatness and those to the merely robust physique (*Metamorphoses*, p. 4). In this context, one might wonder whether references to women's fatness might best be interpreted as referencing nubility, rather than any distinctively large body type (a usage that does appear elsewhere in legal texts). However, Ibn Rušd's litany of admiring adjectives suggests an aesthetic judgment, and in the schema he cites impressive size and beauty appear as a criterion additional to that of age.

39. *Kitāb aḥkām al-nisā'*, fol. 17a.

40. Al-Burzulī, *Fatāwā* 2, p. 183; Ibn 'Arḍūn, *Muqni'* 1, p. 263.



partners.<sup>41</sup> Unlike Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, Ibn ‘Arafa here prioritizes the legitimate sexual enjoyment of men within marriage (implicitly understood as being enhanced by female fatness) over the ethics of eating as practiced by the woman, which would ordinarily preclude consumption beyond satiety (let alone to the point of vomiting or physical harm). It is worth noting that the transitive verb form *tasmīn* (“fattening”) may suggest that the woman or girl is being fattened by someone else, perhaps in preparation for marriage.

## The Second Frame: Erotica

The assumed link between female fat and sexual pleasure brings us to the issue of aesthetic and erotic appreciation.

Admiration for female fatness has a long history in Arabo-Islamic literature. Early Arabic poetry suggests that “the ideal Arab woman must be so stout that she nearly falls asleep; that she must be clumsy when rising and lose her breath when moving quickly...” (although, improbably, her waist should also be slender).<sup>42</sup> It has been claimed that “bellies with folds of fat, which had been the delight of men in the pre-Islamic period, lost the hold that they had exerted over men... The Omayyads and Abbasids preferred them taut and smooth.”<sup>43</sup> However, any shift in this direction was clearly neither as swift nor as unidirectional as this summary would suggest.

Erotic writing of the Mamluk period supports both the idea that fatness was a widespread (if not undisputed) ideal of female beauty, and that this ideal could sometimes take rather extreme forms. ‘Abd Allāh al-Tiġānī (who died sometime after 717/1317-1318) was a contemporary of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ; his marriage manual *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs wa-nuzhat al-nufūs* provides a voluminous body of observations and lore about the desirable physical qualities of women with an eye to mate selection and sexual pleasure. Its fifteenth chapter, which discusses the merits of fatness and thinness, is nominally balanced between the two but displays a distinct affinity for the charms of female fat. Although al-Tiġānī hailed from Tunis rather than from Egypt, his work must have circulated in Egypt; al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) draws heavily on his material relating to female fatness in his monograph *al-Yawāqīt al-tamīna fī ṣifāt al-samīna* (“Precious Sapphires on the Attributes of the Fat Woman”). Al-Suyūṭī’s odd little work combines a lexicographical survey of adjectives denoting different varieties of female fatness with a selection of lore and poetry about fat women. The author himself characterized it as work of erotica; the desirous

41. Similarly, Ibn ‘Arḍūn cites it in a marriage manual within a passage on fattening as a beauty treatment. For other citations of this fatwa see al-Ḥaṭṭāb, *Mawāhib* 4, p. 377; al-‘Adawī, *Ḥāṣiya*, printed with Khuraṣī, *Ḥāṣiya* 3, p. 392.

42. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*, p. 32; see al-Munaġġid, *Ġamāl al-mar’a*, pp. 104-107. Ettinghausen draws a connection with the voluptuous forms of female figures depicted at the Umayyad-era site of Quṣayr ‘Amra (see illustration in *Arab Painting*, p. 31).

43. Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, p. 141 (summarizing the findings of al-Munaġġid, *Ġamāl al-mar’a*, p. 105).



male gaze is always implied and many of the anecdotes are bawdy.<sup>44</sup> While al-Suyūṭī's work might seem to be purely antiquarian, both he and al-Tiġānī excerpt and juxtapose their materials in a way that highlights and celebrates women's girth more dramatically than their primary sources.

The gendered and sexualized tone of al-Tiġānī's treatment of fatness is set by the *bons mots* with which he opens the relevant chapter. The first quotes the early Muslim governor of Iraq Muṣ'ab ibn al-Zubayr as declaring that "Women are beds; the most pleasant of them are the best cushioned."<sup>45</sup> This maxim is followed by another saying attributed to an early Iraqi authority, the jurist Ibn Šubruma: "I have never seen a garment more becoming to a man than eloquence, and I have never seen a garment more becoming to a woman than fat (*šaḥm*)."<sup>46</sup> In these two statements women's physical size is valorized in terms of male sexual pleasure. In the second, women's physical abundance is juxtaposed with men's expressive prowess. Indeed, parallel versions of this saying further underline the implied dichotomy between male religio-cultural skills and women's eroticized physicality; one contrasts female fleshiness with male moral habitus [*adab*], another with the ability to speak Arabic, and a third with the male prerogative of ritual slaughter [*naḥr*].<sup>47</sup>

Al-Tiġānī continues with a series of anecdotes (several of which are later reproduced by al-Suyūṭī) about specific women that appear to root the preference for abundant bulk in prestigious figures of the early Islamic period. The first is a hadith in which 'Ā'isha reports her mother's efforts to fatten her up in preparation for marriage. Al-Tiġānī immediately follows this anecdote with one in which 'Ā'isha recounts that she once beat the Prophet in a race; later, "When I took on flesh" (*lammā ḥamaltu al-laḥm*), he challenged her to another race but she demurred, saying "How can I race you, O Messenger of God, when I am in this condition?"<sup>48</sup> The juxtaposition of these two reports creates the impression that 'Ā'isha was fattened up until she became stout enough to keep her from running—something that is not necessarily implied by either report on its own. Put together, however, they suggest how an imaginative person might represent the systematic and even extreme fattening of women as tantamount to a *sunna*.

Al-Tiġānī continues with anecdotes about 'Abda bint 'Abd Allāh ibn Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya, a member of the Umayyad house who was married to the caliph Hišām ibn 'Abd al-Malik (reigned 105-125/724-743). Quoting from the eleventh-century scholar al-Bīrūnī, he recounts

44. See al-Suyūṭī, *Wišāḥ*, p. 34 (where he also expresses his admiration of, and indebtedness to, al-Tiġānī in his works on sex). I owe this reference to Prof. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila.

45. Al-Tiġānī, *Tuhfa*, p. 193.

46. Al-Tiġānī, *Tuhfa*, p. 193.

47. Al-Suyūṭī, *Yawāqit*, pp. 91-92. Another version of the saying attributed to Ibn Šubruma pairs men's eloquence (*faṣāḥa*) with women's hair—an equally striking juxtaposition of male cultural prowess with female physicality (al-Zamaḥṣarī, *Rabī' al-abrār* 1, p. 856). "The Qur'anic scholar and philologist Abu'l-Barakat 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-Anbari (d. 328/940) records one early saying to the effect that the most beautiful clothing for men is Arabic while nothing is more beautiful for women than the clothing of mere flesh (*shahm*), suggesting the gendered value marking Arabic as a strong noble, public language" (Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, p. 74).

48. Al-Tiġānī, *Tuhfa*, p. 193; see al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, *Kitāb 'iṣrat al-nisā'*, *Musābaqat al-raḡul zawḡatahu*.

that “she was exceedingly fat and could not stand without the help of three or four slave girls.” In a rather cruel interaction, Hišām offers her a priceless pearl if she stands up unaided; she does so with great exertion only to fall on her face and bloody her nose, upon which he gives her the pearl.<sup>49</sup> The anecdote itself has nothing to say about the aesthetic or erotic valence of ‘Abda’s bulk,<sup>50</sup> but once again al-Tiğānī creates an artful juxtaposition, following up with a passage from another source in which she is described as so dazzlingly beautiful that she enthralls a man who is otherwise uninterested in women. This passage does not mention her fatness, just as the first did not mention her allure; put together, however, they construct a picture of a woman who is irresistibly corpulent. These stories are followed by one from the *Kitāb al-ağānī* about another woman of the Umayyad era, Hind, the daughter of Asmā’ ibn Ḥārīḡa. The scenario involves her engagement and marriage to al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ; she is described as being so fat that her black silk shawl gets caught between her buttocks and her back, and she cannot stand up straight because of her bulk.<sup>51</sup> Again, the cited passage offers no commentary on her attractiveness, although al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ is certainly depicted as being very eager to secure her hand and consummate the marriage; the description of his lavish marriage gift places this woman of size within an atmosphere of luxury and prestige.

Later in the work, al-Tiğānī inventories the positive and negative characteristics of individual parts of the female body. He devotes one section to the charms of rolls of stomach fat (*‘ukan*). While he acknowledges these to be inherently unattractive to those who prefer slender women, the discussion is largely positive; he cites a series of poetic passages praising these folds, although one emphasizes that they should be modest in size.<sup>52</sup> He returns to the subject of fat in his discussion of the hindquarters (*ardāf*), pointing out that a woman is known as *‘aḡzā* if she has a large posterior; “This is one of the attributes of the woman who is considered attractive (*al-mar’a al-mustaḥsana*), [although] some have disliked for it to be excessively large...” He notes, however, that two words for women having small posteriors are universally considered to be terms of disapprobation.<sup>53</sup> Despite his acknowledgement of varying masculine tastes, this section once again features images of prodigiously large women of the early Islamic elite. In one anecdote, ‘Ā’iṣa bint Ṭalḥa (the niece of the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’iṣa) is described as needing two women help her to stand up. This is followed by a report in which a woman recounts how she visited ‘Ā’iṣa bint Ṭalḥa and mistakenly thought that there was another woman sitting behind her, so massive were her hindquarters.<sup>54</sup>

49. Al-Tiğānī, *Tuḥfa*, p. 194; al-Suyūṭī, *Yawāqīt*, pp. 148-149. See al-Bīrūnī, *Ġamābir*, p. 253.

50. It is stated in another report that ‘Abda “was one of the most beautiful of women (*kānat min aḡmal al-nisā*)”, but it is not clear whether her perceived beauty was related to her size or whether the reports on these two subjects reflect different life stages or even different literary images of ‘Abda. Thus, it is probable but not definite that her image is an example of the eroticization of fatness in the early Islamic period. See Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīḥ madīnat Dimašq* 69, p. 263.

51. Al-Tiğānī, *Tuḥfa*, p. 195; al-Suyūṭī, *Yawāqīt*, pp. 150-152; see Abū al-Faraḡ al-Iṣfahānī, *Ağānī* 20, pp. 366-367.

52. Al-Tiğānī, *Tuḥfa*, pp. 280-281.

53. Al-Tiğānī, *Tuḥfa*, p. 288.

54. Al-Tiğānī, *Tuḥfa*, p. 289; al-Suyūṭī, *Yawāqīt*, pp. 134-135.

Like the eroticized female body ideals of many other times and places, the composite image produced by al-Tiġānī combines physical traits that rarely coexist; if rumps were preferred to be large, waists were also expected to be slim,<sup>55</sup> and one of the anecdotes about ample backsides features a woman who can lie down and roll a citron under her back and out the other side<sup>56</sup>—implying her to be less uniformly massive than impressively curvy. Nevertheless, overall this work, like al-Suyūṭī's, certainly lends plausibility to the idea that some women might have gained significant weight to make themselves pleasing to men.

Another possible source of evidence for erotic ideals, one whose individual components are very difficult to locate in time and place but whose less scholarly format may place it closer to popular perceptions than the sources examined so far, is the *Thousand and One Nights*. The material that has coalesced under this title appears to reflect a predominantly Cairene milieu and some elements can be dated to the Mamluk period; however, many stories were drawn into its orbit in later centuries, and may have had other geographical origins.<sup>57</sup> Thus, what this source can add to our picture of the body ideals of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's time is merely suggestive.

Overall, Robert Irwin has noted that the same “pneumatic image” of eroticized female fatness familiar from classical Arabic poetry is current in the *Nights*; one of its romantic heroines is described as having “soft folds” in her belly and “hips and hinder cheeks like mounds of sand”.<sup>58</sup> The most relevant narrative in the *Nights* involves a verbal duel between a fat slave girl and a thin one, one bout of a tournament orchestrated by their owner that also pits a fair-skinned girl against a dark-complexioned one and a blonde against a brunette. The fat slave girl opens with a dramatic display of bodily confidence; pointing to her scrawny rival, she bares her legs and wrists, then reveals her belly to display its folds (*ṭayyāt*). She then dons a sheer garment that displays her entire body before beginning, “Praise be to God who created me, made my form beautiful, and made me fat...” Her recital ends with a bawdy couplet lamenting the lot of the man who must sleep with a bony woman.

The slim woman, whom the narrator likens to a willow bough or a flexible piece of bamboo, retorts that she is light when she stands and dainty when she sits; she has high spirits when joking and a sweet temper when relaxed. No one yet has admiringly described his beloved as being as big as an elephant or a mountain; rather, they speak of the beloved's slender form. She is satisfied with a small amount of food and drink; she is as busy as a sparrow and as light-footed as a starling, and bends to her lover's touch. “As for you”, she resumes to her fat rival, “you eat like an elephant and are not satisfied by little or much”. The fat woman is exhausting

55. Al-Tiġānī, *Tuhfa*, p. 279.

56. Al-Tiġānī, *Tuhfa*, p. 289.

57. On the dating and development of the corpus, see Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, pp. 42-62. Irwin advocates “treating the *Nights* as a source on the history of society and of *mentalités*” (p. 6). Jean-Claude Garcin observes that the specific tale discussed below is one of a set of “old tales” inserted into the Būlāq edition of the *Nights*. The tale is set in the court of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn but is itself of uncertain provenance; the Būlāq version contains a reference to a popular quarter of Cairo that emerged only in the fourteenth century C.E. Jean-Claude Garcin, *Pour une lecture historique*, p. 221.

58. Irwin, *Arabian Nights*, pp. 166-167.

to her lover, because if the girth of her stomach does not prevent him from penetrating her he will be impeded by the bulk of her thighs. If someone teases her she becomes angry, and if he plays with her she becomes sad. There is no movement or blessing in her; all she does is eat and sleep. The slender slave girl finishes by claiming that when the fat woman goes to the privy she needs someone to clean her off and pluck her pubic hair for her.<sup>59</sup>

This exchange is (in keeping with its literary genre, which involves the reciprocal and playful rivalry of two opposite things) quite balanced in its entertaining airing of the two opposing sides. However, arguably nothing in the slim woman's recital equals the sheer eroticism of the fat woman's initial bold and wordless display of her ample body. Much of the slim woman's monologue centers on the practical claims that she is energetic, cheerful, and inexpensive to feed. Indeed, her arguments sometimes suggest an inverted version of the modern stereotype of the fat girl who compensates with a "good personality"; here it is the skinny girl who is jolly and the fat one whose moodiness is implicitly tolerated for the sake of her beauty. Regardless of how asymmetrically one judges the two body types to be portrayed, it is also true that here the eroticized fat body is quite ample indeed. The fat girl is not merely plump or buxom, but the proud possessor of belly folds. While certainly humorous (and of course fictional), the story's description of a woman so fat she must seek help to cleanse her private parts resonates suggestively with the comments of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ.

Like the materials excerpted by al-Tiḡānī and al-Suyūṭī, this story frames fatness in terms of erotic allure; the narrative context, involving slave girls vying for the attention of their master, could not better dramatize the centrality of the male gaze—although in this case, it is the women's eloquence and wit that are ultimately highlighted in each one's clever promotion of her distinctive charms. The point is not that works of erotica or entertainment would have themselves inspired women to pursue the cultivation of fatness, but that they reflect a fairly pervasive preoccupation with large women in the erotic literature and thus perhaps in prevailing tastes. Whether a preference for pronounced fatness actually guided men's personal desires or mate selection strategies in the time of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ is impossible to know, as is the degree to which such considerations might have motivated women to pursue this bodily form.

It is notable that ample fatness was a strongly gendered body ideal. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ himself points to this fact when he observes that the sinfulness of overeating is at least somewhat mitigated for women because they are striving to make themselves attractive, while a man has no such excuse; fatness is ugly in men. The assumption that men should not be fat is not a universal or inevitable perception. Georges Vigarello notes that in medieval France, "massive bodies can be praised... as denoting power and ascendancy"; the "promotion of bigness" is reflected, for instance, in the prodigious feats of gourmandism attributed to noblemen in medieval romances.<sup>60</sup>

59. *Alf layla wa-layla* 3, pp. 77-79; Garcin, *Pour une lecture historique*. See Burton, *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* 4, pp. 253-256.

60. Vigarello, *Metamorphoses*, p. ix, 5. Only beginning in the fifteenth century is "heaviness" as a "sign of ascendancy and authority" (p. 24) replaced by a pattern where "the low and the popular are associated with heaviness and the high and distinguished with lightness" (p. 26).

Unsurprisingly, this link between girth and power appears to have been predominantly gendered male. In contrast, Paulina Lewicka notes in her comprehensive study of foodways in medieval Cairo that “unlike in some regions, the individual’s significance did not go hand in hand with his waist size, for in this part of the world a sizable belly was nothing to be proud of... This is not to say, of course, that obesity did not manifest material affluence or social position. But, unlike in other regions, it apparently did not generate respect or admiration”.<sup>61</sup> The sources examined here (as well as the evidence in Syrinx van Hees’s essay in this volume) suggest that this observation should be modified to reflect the different body types associated with the two sexes, as well as the gaps that could emerge between the diverse regimes of value at play in a single social context. It seems likely that religious discourses, with their emphasis on humility and self-restraint, may be sufficiently over-represented in our source base largely to obscure any positive value attached to girth as a marker of prosperity and status. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which a widespread appreciation of well-nourished female figures reflected associations with wealth and leisure. Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ seems to assume that a woman pursuing a regime of fattening may be either rich or poor (and thus either able or unable to retain a servant), but this appears more like a schematic enumeration of logical possibilities than a sociological observation.

### The Third Frame: Medicine

In addition to religious ethics and physical beauty, Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ cites physical health as a criterion for proper bodily self-care. He vigorously asserts that over-eating and obesity are unhealthy, potentially leading to immobility, blindness, mental handicap and even death. Assertions of the medical hazards of obesity had a long history in Arabic medicine; Ibn Sīnā’s *Qānūn fi al-ṭibb* contains a similarly frightening enumeration of the ill effects of excess fat.<sup>62</sup> Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ himself is largely at pains to assert the congruence of religious and medical guidance on nutrition: the pious self-control urged by the law is identical with the moderation enjoined by medicine.

Medical discourse also contributed to the conversation about female fatness beyond the work of Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ. Ibn Sīnā saw excessive thinness, as well as excessive fatness, as a danger; his work thus includes discussions of fattening foods, bathing, massage, and the use of bandages to force nourishing blood into specific limbs one desires to make plumper.<sup>63</sup> Large swathes of Ibn Sīnā’s advice in this area were later incorporated into the literature on female beauty. The thirteenth-century Tunisian Ahmad al-Tifāṣī, whose work “The Qualities of Women” (*Awṣāf al-nisāʾ*) focuses explicitly on the attributes conducive to male sexual desire, devotes

61. Lewicka, *Food and Foodways*, p. 440. Even if not admired, male fatness also does not appear to have been perceived as a salient physical defect; Kristina Richardson’s analysis of the “flood of literature related to blighted bodies” produced in the Mamluk period suggests that it played little or no role in the enumeration of physical defects and peculiarities ranging from hunchbacks and blindness to freckles, moles and baldness (Richardson, *Difference and Disability*, p. 81 and *passim*; on the ambiguous valence of fatness in classical Arabic literature overall, see p. 28).

62. Ibn Sīnā, *Qānūn* 3, p. 2253.

63. Ibn Sīnā, *Qānūn* 3, pp. 2246-2247.



a chapter to advice on fattening drawn primarily from Ibn Sīnā (or from a common source).<sup>64</sup> In a somewhat later period, the maghribi scholar Ibn ‘Arḍūn (d. 992/1584) includes a number of recipes for women who want to fatten themselves for cosmetic purposes drawn from medical authorities (including Ibn Sīnā) in his marriage manual *Muqni’ al-muḥtāḡ fi ādāb al-zawāḡ*.<sup>65</sup> Alpinī’s description of Egyptian women’s fattening regimes focuses centrally on their use of the public baths, a technique strongly advocated by Ibn Sīnā and apparently rooted in the Galenic tradition.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, despite such classical precedents, it seems likely that women’s fattening treatments were in practice largely based on an independent folk tradition; one of the most pharmacists’ manuals most widely circulated in the Mamluk period mentions fattening as an objective of treatment only glancingly.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Although medieval Egyptian women’s apparent pursuit of fat is little known today, Christopher Forth has demonstrated that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European reports about the cultivation and appreciation of female fat in other parts of the world (including the Middle East and North Africa) were used to construct “a temporal curve from ‘primitive’ ‘corpulence’ to ‘civilized’ moderation” that eventually contributed to the “pronounced denigration of fat that emerged in Britain and France by the early twentieth century”.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, what was at stake was not simply the prevalence of fat people (particularly women) in these regions—something that Europeans were quite aware of at home—but the perception that non-Western women cultivated an “art of fattening” and that men particularly desired fat women.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, colonial-era European stigmatization of the desire for fat parallels the stigmatization of homoeroticism; emerging European heteronormativity involved not merely mandatory male desire for women, but desire for the right kind of women (dainty rather than majestic, and subdued by the disciplines of slenderness).<sup>70</sup>

Given the extent to which historical and ethnographic study have relativized and provincialized the value attached to slenderness in the contemporary west, the cultivation of fatness no longer appears deviant. Neither, however, should the celebration of slimness (or its association with values such as moderation or self-control) be seen as unique to western modernity. As recent historical work has demonstrated, there is no universal and primordial admiration of female fat

64. Al-Tifāṣī, *Awṣāf*, pp. 83–89.

65. Ibn ‘Arḍūn, *Muqni’* 1, pp. 267–273.

66. Alpin, *Medecine* 1, pp. 231–235; Ibn Sīnā, *Qānūn*, pp. 2246–2247.

67. See al-‘Aṭṭār al-Hārūnī, *Minhāḡ al-dukkān*, p. 186 (specifically attributed to Syrian or Damascene women, *al-šāmiyyāt*, p. 231); Chipman, *World of Pharmacy*, p. 208.

68. Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust,” p. 215; see also Forth, “Melting Moments,” pp. 96–100.

69. Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust,” pp. 214–215.

70. See, for instance, El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, pp. 156–160; Massad, *Desiring Arabs*; Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*.



that was displaced only in recent times.<sup>71</sup> Although ampler body size does accentuate women's secondary sexual characteristics (and may thus be assumed to emphasize femininity),<sup>72</sup> the evidence suggests that any underlying preference of this kind can be obscured by more proximate social factors. Beyond the level of nubile plumpness, nor is female fatness necessarily associated with fertility; Ibn Sīnā was not alone in observing that very heavy women might have difficulty conceiving (an idea supported by modern bio-medicine).<sup>73</sup> Our understanding of the diverse and changing meanings attached to different body sizes and styles—and the ways in which they are gendered—thus depends on historical evidence like the glimpse provided by Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ.

Of course, Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's remarks represent not only the complexity of one elite male scholar's attitudes towards the body and its care, but a testimony—indirect and polemical as it may be—of a systematic and disciplined “body project” pursued by some women. Far from reflecting self-indulgence or gluttony, overeating here represents an exercise of self-mastery in the service of a goal; it appears as a rather demanding beauty regime, and one apparently pursued in defiance of religious and medical conventions condemning overconsumption (although, of course, we cannot be sure of the degree to which these ideas were familiar or meaningful to the women involved). Based on the fragmentary evidence surveyed here, it would seem that women pursued these practices in the service of male-defined ideals of female attractiveness. If so, those women that participated in them may in some ways have lived in an age “before fat” (in the sense that contemporary religious discourses focused overwhelmingly on the ethics of eating rather than the moral valences of body size) but not in an age before the tyranny of reified body types, circulated and reinforced in ways that are much less visible to us in the sources.

However, even assuming that our sources' description of women's fattening activities are factually grounded (if perhaps exaggerated), we cannot be sure that the motivations attributed to the women by male authors accurately reflect their own understanding of their practices. The fact that male religious authorities routinely represent women's clothing, perfume and adornment in terms of sexual allure should not blind us to the probability that women themselves probably often understood them in different ways—for instance, in terms of status maintenance vis-à-vis other women. Similarly, in the absence of testimony from participants in these practices, it is impossible to reconstruct the full range of meanings that may have been attached to the full female body. Even as these meanings remain inaccessible to us, Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ's discussion may offer a page in what Levy-Navarro has called the “fat history [that] is needed at this particular historical moment to make us consider the bodily categories that have come to seem so natural to many of us.”<sup>74</sup>

71. Vigarello, whose dazzling historical survey illustrates the many transformations and reversals in preferences for women's body size (primarily in France) over a period of centuries, concludes that “It is... impossible to conceive of any ancient general attachment to an ideal of big women”. See also the discussion of the ideal of female slenderness and small-breastedness in French texts of the twelfth and thirteenth century in Phan and Flandrin, “Metamorphoses,” pp. 52–53.

72. See the hypothesis of Havelock Ellis in Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust,” p. 231.

73. Ibn Sīnā, *Qānūn* 3, p. 2253.

74. Levy-Navarro, *Culture of Obesity*, p. 1.

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