

Narratives of Femininity in the Work of Usama ibn Munqidh

Abstract:

This article focuses on the narrative of women and femininity in *The Book of Contemplation* by Usama ibn Munqidh. The author of the source, a member of the Muslim aristocracy, provides an autobiographical account covering primarily the events of the 12th century. The article analyzes the portrayal of Muslim women, who are depicted in Usama's account as nearly ideal figures. I also examine his narrative on Christian women, about whom he did not write in similarly laudatory terms. By comparing these two contrasting depictions of femininity, I aim to illustrate how the Muslim aristocracy of the time perceived women and their roles in society. This work will address themes such as the role of women as matriarchs, their expected conduct in life-threatening situations, the significance of social hierarchy, and the prescribed nature of relationships between men and women, particularly when they were neither related by blood nor marriage. In my analysis, I employ traditional historical research methods. To examine selected passages, I use inductive reasoning to derive Usama's perspective on contemporary femininity from specific observations. In analyzing the portrayal of Christian women, I apply the method of "reading the silences" in historical sources, as Usama omits certain aspects for various reasons. Additionally, I utilize comparative analysis to juxtapose his narratives of Christian and Muslim women.

Keywords: herstory, crusades, *The Book of Contemplation*, Islam

Introduction¹

The following text is devoted to analyzing the image of women in the work of Usama ibn Munqidh known as *The Book of Contemplation*. Usama ibn Munqidh was a representative of the Muslim aristocracy who lived from 1095 to 1188. His family ruled the border region of Shayzar. In his youth, he received a thorough education from traveling teachers. His father and uncle played a huge role in his upbringing. They shaped him as a warrior (*pharis*) and instilled in him the love of hunting. During his life, he served the most important Muslim rulers of his time, such as Nur ad-Din and Saladin. He traveled extensively, which allowed him to create a wide network of contacts, including contacts with Christians. He even had the opportunity to meet the king of Jerusalem, Fulk, personally during his diplomatic mission. Usama was also the author of many poems and longer literary works. Unfortunately, most of them have not survived to this day. His main work, an autobiography entitled *The Book of Contemplation*, has survived to this day in an incomplete form. This work contains a lot of information about important political events in which Usama took part (such as the battles against Antioch, the actions of Saladin, or political upheavals in Egypt). Above all, the work is a collection of the author's memoirs, anecdotes, and observations. It focuses on the personal valor of Usama, as well as his family and companions. The work also has moralizing elements, which may have been taken from the *adab* literature that was popular at the time. It provides a unique insight into the life of the author and the political elites of the Muslim Middle East during that period.²

The primary goal of my work is to show how, by shaping this image, the Arab chronicler repeated or refuted his own narrative concerning femininity in the Middle Ages. Before I move on to the work, it is worth outlining its theoretical assumptions and the research methods I have used in this article. I will begin by defining what will be understood in this work as a narrative. I will use this term to describe how the image of women is constructed and presented within the text, potentially reflecting or shaping broader societal understandings. This approach allows for an analysis of how Usama ibn Munqidh's work contributes to the creation and dissemination of specific stories and representations of women. It is also necessary to specify what exactly my goals will be in this work. I aim to demonstrate how *The Book of Contemplation* constructs narratives about Muslim and Christian women, exploring the potential contrasts and underlying messages within these portrayals.

In my considerations, I will primarily use qualitative research methods that are classic for historical research. The most important tool in my work

¹ This paper was originally presented at the International Conference for Young Scholars *Vestigia: Myths & Narratives*, which took place between 24 and 26 April, 2025 at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb.

² For more see: Paul M. Cobb, *Usama ibn Munqidh. Warrior-Poet of the Age of Crusades* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2012); *The Crusades: an encyclopedia*, s.v. Usama ibn Munqidh (1095-1188).

will be the inductive method. Through this, I will build an understanding of the narratives surrounding Christian and Muslim women based on the specific mentions and descriptions within the text. When analyzing the image of Christian women, the method of reading from the silence of the sources will be extremely useful, as Usama sometimes omits details related to them, which can be interpreted as being part of his narrative construction. In the case of Muslim women, the deductive method will also be helpful. Understanding the broader narratives presented about them in *The Book of Contemplation* will facilitate the analysis of individual descriptions within that framework. Comparative analysis will allow me to compare the narratives constructed around Christian and Muslim women.

Muslim Women in *The Book of Contemplation* – General Characteristics

Muslim women are one of the more fascinating topics in Usama ibn Munqidh's work. Women are not exposed as leading characters in *The Book of Contemplation*. At the same time, in the case of the aforementioned Muslim women, they are described in a rather unusual way. Why? Compared to the brave men (around whom the main plot of the narrative revolves), they are presented in situations in which a woman should not find herself, as a rule.

To better understand the analysis of selected examples, one must understand the general assumption that could have been behind the presentation of this and not another image of a Muslim woman. As we well know, Muslim society in the 12th century was patriarchal. The male element dominated it, and it was assigned a leading role due to the different tasks of men and women and the resulting separation of the sexes. This did not mean that women did not have any rights, and the status of Muslim women could be much higher than the commonly prevailing myth.³ Their position depended primarily on the social status of the woman in question, but also on a multitude of other minor factors.⁴ Why is this information important in the context of Usama's memoirs? Well, because it destroys today's public opinion about the 12th century Muslim woman as almost a slave. It is worth noting, however, that the author of the source, despite his specific approach to contemporary times, does not depart from the traditional model of a woman that can be observed in a society professing Islam.

At first glance, Usama may seem like a 12th-century Muslim feminist. He presents Muslim women as an active element of life in the Islamic world of that time. However, this would not be a completely correct conclusion. His description is, contrary to appearances, a consequence of recognizing the traditional role of women. So, how is the atypicality of these women, mentioned at the beginning, to be realized? First of all, the role of women was not only to be obedient to their husbands. They were also required to be able to take independent

³ Janusz Danecki, *Arabowie* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2001), 326–327.

⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate* (New Haven London: Yale university press, 1992), 103.

action.⁵ Hence, thinking about Muslim women in the category of “housewives” or “gray mice” is wrong in this case. On the contrary, according to Usama, a woman should not have been content with such an attitude. In this way, he presented an image of a woman that was not so much contrary to traditional values, but rather constituted a different way of realizing the virtues of a lady.

When analyzing the role of women in the Islamic world, one must consider the purpose of Usama’s invocation of them. First of all, it is necessary to recall the fact that ibn Munqidh included didactic elements in his work.⁶ Muslim women were not only to show a different way of fulfilling traditional social roles, but above all to be role models for fellow believers. Women usually had fewer opportunities to prove themselves, but due to the dangerous conditions of the Crusades, they needed to have models from which to draw courage and values to face new challenges.⁷ Such intentions can also be evidenced by the fact that several stories about Muslim women are linked thematically and presented together in *The Book of Contemplation* under the heading “Brave Muslim Women”. As in other parts of the memoir, Usama often brings together separate anecdotes under broad thematic headings rather than presenting them in the form of a strict chapter division.⁸

Brave Muslim Women

We must therefore take a closer look at how Usama presented female characters. Three examples will be used for this purpose. Two of them will be related to the aforementioned stories devoted to women. I will use the image

⁵ Gill, Le Fevre, “Perceptions of Muslim Women and Combat in Twelfth-Century Syria How are Muslim women’s experiences of combat depicted in The Book of Contemplation, and what are the implications for the understanding of the place of women in twelfth-century Syria,” *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/67855947/Perceptions_of_Muslim_Women_and_Combat_in_Twelfth-Century_Syria_How_are_Muslim_womens_experiences_of_combat_depicted_in_The_Book_of_Contemplation_and_what_are_the_implications_for_the_understanding_of_the_place_of_women_in_twelfth_century_Syria (accessed January 23, 2025), 11.

⁶ The period under discussion saw the development of various prose genres and forms, notably the *adabs*, which were didactic works. Usama’s work shows discernible influence from these, suggesting he was likely inspired by them. See: Józef Bielawski, *Klasyczna literatura arabska. Zarys* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 1995), 131; Marek Dziekan, *Dzieje kultury arabskiej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2008), 217.

⁷ During this period there was great chaos, and the Muslim world of the Levant was shaken by both internal and external conflicts; on the one hand there were wars between Muslim states, and on the other hand there were conflicts with Christian states at the same time. For more check: Cobb, Paul M., *Krucjaty. Arabska perspektywa*. trans. Mateusz Józefowicz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Astra 2018).

⁸ This title comes from the Polish translation; in the English version, this passage was divided into smaller sections about women’s courage. See: Usama ibn Munkidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, trans. Józef Bielawski (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1975), 219.

of Usama's mother and grandmother presented in this case in more detail. The third example will present the character of a Turkmen woman, whose story Usama heard from a poet friend from Baghdad.⁹ These three stories will better illustrate the narration about (positive) femininity they created in the work.

The first example will be the aforementioned mother of Usama. During one of the clashes with the Ismailis, she arbitrarily gave weapons to her servants and hid with her daughter on the balcony of the house. In case of defeat, she was ready to kill her child, so that it would not fall into the hands of the attackers.¹⁰ Usama has a positive attitude towards his mother's behavior. What is the reason for this? Well, in this case, as Usama himself pointed out, his mother was forced to take active action to defend their family home. This was nothing new or shocking. Ibn Munqidh's mother did not break fundamental norms with her actions, because in this situation the priority was to defend her daughter's honor. From the very beginning of Islam, it was known that a woman, although not equal to a man (because she performed different functions in society), could play an important and active role in the history of the world. An example of this is the figure of A'isha, who as the daughter of the first caliph Abu Bakr and wife of Muhammad, was called the "mother of the faithful" and took an active part in shaping the state of the first caliphs at the beginning of the history of the Muslim world. She was therefore a model of a woman actively working for the community of Muslim believers.¹¹ However, it is important to emphasize that in both cases they, both Usama's mother and the aforementioned A'isha, played such a role due to their origin and place in the Muslim hierarchy. For Usama, as Paul M. Cobb emphasizes, the place of a person in social structures was very important. In the opinion of ibn Munqidh and probably his circle as well (when referring to Usama's "circle", I use this term in a broad sense to describe his family, patrons, and associates from the Muslim aristocracy who shared similar values and social outlooks) the value of an individual was strongly connected with social position.¹² Therefore, something that might seem at first glance to be "stepping out of line" was an active use of the privilege of origin that Usama's mother had. Her actions aimed to fulfill the basic tasks of a woman, which in this case was the protection of the family home and care for women's honor.¹³

⁹ Usama ibn Munqidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 142; Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, trans. Paul M Cobb, (London, New York: Penguin, 2008), 83–84.

¹⁰ Usama ibn Munqidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 222–223; Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 136–137.

¹¹ Denise A. Spellberg, "Political Action and Public Example: A'isha and the Battle of the Camel," in *Women in Middle Eastern History Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Beth Baron and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven – London: Yale University Press 1992), 48.

¹² Paul M. Cobb, *Usama ibn Munqidh. Warrior-Poet of the Age of Crusades* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications 2012), 86; Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate*, 103.

¹³ Le Fevre, "Perceptions of Muslim Women and Combat in Twelfth-Century Syria How are Muslim women's experiences of combat depicted in The Book

An equally important issue is whether Usama approved of the mother's willingness to kill his sister in this situation. This is a very important issue because Usama considered this decision to be right. At first glance, this may be shocking. However, when I realize the situation in which both women found themselves, this initial opinion may change significantly. Namely, in this case, social norms left neither the mother nor the daughter any better way out of the situation. In the event of failure, a fate awaited them compared to which death itself did not seem as the worst solution. Honor, in Usama's view, was one of the most important virtues for a Muslim woman.¹⁴ It was this honor that demanded that one not surrender to the enemy so easily. Not only did surrendering risk falling into slavery and rape, but surrendering to the enemy was also associated with other losses, including those of religious origin. The Ismailis were heretics who had strayed far from the traditional currents of Islam.¹⁵ This posed a double threat, both in terms of the aggressiveness of the attackers and the danger to the faith of those women who, in captivity, could be forced to abandon Sunni orthodoxy. These factors meant that even death was not as terrible to them as physical and figural defilement. A woman had to achieve higher goals, regardless of the seemingly tragic costs, which were seen as insignificant compared to the need to defend a woman's dignity.

A similar case is the story of the Turkmen woman, which Usama, as mentioned, heard from a Baghdad poet. Her story began during a journey, during which she came across bandits. However, instead of attacking, raping, and robbing her, they made a deal with her. She was to deliver a valuable item to them, in exchange for a guarantee of safety. The woman only seemingly agreed to this agreement, because she quickly brought a Turkman to the bandits, who killed some of them and ordered the rest to appear before the justice.¹⁶

What does this story indicate? To understand this, we must begin by answering the question of the role of men in women's lives. By recalling this story, Usama praises above all the protective element of a patriarchal culture, which Muslims absorbed from pre-Islamic times, in which women were under the care of men.¹⁷ We can therefore see a certain regularity. According to her, it is primarily the man who is responsible for defense and makes a physical effort to eliminate the threat. In such a situation, a woman should not fight.

of Contemplation, and what are the implications for the understanding of the place of women in twelfth-century Syria," 7–8.

¹⁴ Cobb, *Usama ibn Munqidh. Warrior-Poet of the Age of Crusades*, 81.

¹⁵ This primarily concerns Sunnism, which was the dominant branch of Islam, but also Shiism, which Usama supported.

See: Irwin Rober, "Usamah ibn Munqidh: An Arab-Syrian Gentleman at the Time of the Crusades Reconsidered," in *The Crusades and their sources. Essays Presented to Bernard Hamilton*, ed. William G. Zajac, John France (New York: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2016), 78.

¹⁶ Usama ibn Munkidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 142; Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 83–84.

¹⁷ Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate*, 4, 41.

Her task is completely different. She should strive to separate herself from the sphere of male life, which is fighting.¹⁸ In return, she has the right to expect that when a threat appears, she will find her protector in a man. Fighting, as a rule, is not becoming for a lady.

This situation also shows us the lengths to which a woman could go in a dangerous situation. As already mentioned, one of her greatest treasures is dignity. In the story about the Turkmen woman, she finds a way to protect herself. In this case, however, it required a greater effort. The story does not indicate that the Turkmen woman came from the upper classes of society to be able to appeal to her servants. If she had them, the attack would probably not have happened. At the same time, the woman had no chance to physically defeat the attackers, especially in a fairly large group.¹⁹ This shows that, in addition to a certain obedience to men, women should keep their cool in dangerous situations and also show wisdom. Therefore, any trickery in such a situation should be acceptable.

The third example that will be discussed here is the aforementioned grandmother of Usama. The most important information about her, provided by ibn Munqidh, is her advanced age, which made her the senior of the family. There is also her high religiosity, with regards to which she was supposed to be equal to, for example, Usama's father. The figure of the senior appeared in the description of a lion hunt by Usama himself, who wanted to impress his uncle. The grandmother considered this to be a very dangerous situation and decided to talk to her grandson. She explained to him that such irresponsible behavior would not win his uncle's favor. She claimed that by acting this way he had only exposed himself to danger and his behavior was irresponsible. Usama agreed with her and wrote in his memoirs that such an attitude befits every woman who is to raise a future warrior of the Islamic world. In this way, he emphasized his irresponsible behavior.²⁰

What role in the family did Usama's grandmother play? As the eldest of the family, she was the senior of the house, and therefore the head of the family, whose care should encompass every member of the family. Here again, Usama's aforementioned love for social hierarchy is emphasized. He considered his grandmother to be an exceptionally important figure in his family. This is highly intriguing, considering that as a woman she could not own any goods on her own, and therefore her position did not entail any material entitlements.²¹ Her status in the family therefore resulted from intangible values

¹⁸ Paul Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Women in Middle Eastern History Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven – London: Yale University Press 1992), 74.

¹⁹ There is mention of a whole gang of attackers who allegedly attacked the Turkmen woman.

²⁰ Usama ibn Munkidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 225; Usama ibn Munqid, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 138.

²¹ Muslim law significantly restricted women's right to own property, hence their property status was much more limited than that of men, to whom they were

and her influence on reality from the respect for her life experiences by family members. This position, as Usama presented it, was not only associated with privileges for his grandmother. It was also a kind of duty. The senior's task was to ensure the proper behavior of individual members of the family community. Usama emphasized both her position and the duty of care in the following words:

"We carried off the lion and entered the town as night approached. In the dark of night, my grandmother on my father's side (may God have mercy upon them both) came to me, carrying a candle before her. She was a prodigiously old woman, nearly one hundred years of age. I had no doubt that she had come to congratulate me on my safety and to inform me of her joy at what I had done. And so, I met her and kissed her hand, but she said to me with annoyance and anger..."²²

In the next fragment, the grandmother reprimands him, as mentioned above. At the same time, Usama's exit to meet the approaching woman confirms her high position in the Munqidh family. In addition, it is worth noting how she condemned her grandson's behavior. Namely, she did not do it publicly, so as not to humiliate him in front of other men, but at night by candlelight. It is clear here that even the senior of the family did not want to reprimand her grandson publicly and ostentatiously.

Another aspect that Usama also mentioned was the issue of his grandmother's religiosity. He pointed out in his memoirs that she was an extremely pious woman, whose devotion to God surpassed even that of ibn Munqidh's father.²³ Thus he presented her as a model of how one should practice one's faith.²⁴ This is quite significant, as it shows that gender does not play a key role in religiosity. A woman is just as strongly obliged to observe the basic principles of faith as a man, and nothing stands in the way of her realizing them as best she can.

In this matter, it is worth paying attention to another issue, namely the educational value. A woman, and especially the senior of the family, takes part in the upbringing of the next generations. Usama emphasized this issue with the following words: "I learned then that she (may God have mercy upon her) was giving me wise counsel with these words and speaking the truth. By my life, these are indeed the mothers of men!"²⁵ In this way, he indicates that

usually subject in this respect at that time. See: Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate*, 110–111.

²² Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 138.

²³ Usama ibn Munqidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 226–227; Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 140.

²⁴ Interestingly, he also places her above his father. This is quite significant, because as written in the chapter Muslim Women in *The Book of Contemplation* – General Characteristics, the father played a key role in transmitting religious values to Usama. When we consider that this same man, at the expense of power, devoted himself to an intellectual life, such a distinction of the grandmother takes on a stronger resonance.

²⁵ Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 139.

women can have a significant influence on the formation of future generations. Their wisdom can play a significant role in the lives of future knights, among whom Usama was one.²⁶ What is intriguing about this is the fact that he also indicated that a woman can play her part in the upbringing of a warrior.²⁷

Usama thus created a very interesting image of Muslim women. In his story, he presented Muslim women as extremely devoted. It created an image in which Muslim women were active social factors who at the same time maintained the conventions of the Islamic world. This image is of course not, as I have tried to show, without foundation. Muslim women had the opportunity to function at the level of independence that Usama showed. At the same time, it should be remembered that the women he presented were supposed to be role models, and they mainly came from higher social classes. These factors explain why the image of Muslim women in *The Book of Contemplation* takes on an idealized and exemplary character, promoted by the author of the source.

Christian Woman – The Fallen Woman

General Characteristics of Latin Women in The Work

Christian women in Usama ibn Munqidh's work appear less frequently than their Muslim counterparts. Still, they are mentioned several times in the description of the strange customs of the Franks. However, even taking into account the proportion of stories about Latins to those about Muslims, Christian women are much less exposed in comparison to Muslims. Hence, the question of where such a disproportion could have come from becomes justified. The basis here may of course be the way the narrative is constructed, which, as mentioned above, focuses primarily on the actions of men. Since the Franks are primarily enemies, the main theme of Usama's work were various struggles with them, in which women did not play a significant role.

One can also find another element here, which can much better justify Usama's approach to Christian women. Namely, their clear omission could have resulted from the fact that Usama considered them unworthy figures, and his attitude towards Christians was often hostile.²⁸ By describing Christian

²⁶ This becomes even more important when we realize how difficult the Muslim world was. It was not until Saladin's rule that the scales were decisively tilted in favor of the Muslims. The earlier period was characterized by great changeability of fate, which made it all the more important to educate new soldiers. For more see: Thomas Asbridge, *Pierwsza Krucjata: nowe spojrzenie*, trans. Ewelina Jagła (Poznań: Rebis, 2006).

²⁷ I wrote more on this topic in: Rafał Kanas, „Rycerze i farysi – o wojownikach w Księdze pouczających przykładów Usamy ibn Munkidha, in *Człowiek a historia. Ludzie i wydarzenia*, tom X, ed. Błażej Cecota, Jakub Kuchta (Piotrków Trybunalski: Wydawnictwo IHiSM, 2024), 98–115.

²⁸ As we will point out later, Usama's position towards the Franks is quite nuanced. See, for example: Jerzy Hauziński, „Od narracji zmitologizowanej do interpretacji semiotycznej: piśmiennictwo o krucjatach w ujęciu źródłowym i historiograficznym,” *Śląskie studia historyczne* 8 (2000): 29; Zdzisław Pentek,

women, he wanted to show them as the opposite of women of his faith. Thus, just as in the case of Muslim women, he wanted to create an idealistic narration about femininity, so in the case of the Christian world, he wanted to do the exact opposite. The way he shaped the image of Christian women was by arousing aversion and disgust towards these women. Their behavior was to be a warning to future generations on how not to behave.

It should be stressed that Frankish women never stand at the centre of Usama's anecdotes. They are consistently shown only in relation to the deeds—whether blameworthy or praiseworthy—of their husbands or fathers. This pattern may simply reflect Usama's lack of interest in Latin women as individuals, in contrast to the attention he devotes to Muslim women. Yet this very marginalisation is itself revealing. By rendering Frankish women secondary to male actions, Usama highlights the extent to which women's honour and conduct were regarded, in his society, as inseparable from the reputation of their families. Even when they are absent from the narrative focus, women thus remain central to the values he sought to convey.

So how did this sinister narration about wicked Christian women shape up? We should start with two descriptions of men's submission to Christian women's violations of convention. Ibn Munqidh began by noting that Christian women were too lenient in their contact with the opposite sex. Their men, instead of opposing them, allowed their women to have long conversations with other men, waiting on the sidelines for the conversation to end.²⁹ Usama then related a more controversial situation in which a certain Latin woman went to bed with a strange man. In this awkward situation, she was caught by her husband. Usama was very outraged by the fact that the man did not take any decisive action but was supposed to have a relatively civilized conversation with the man who had been caught in the act.³⁰ The second situation took place in unusual circumstances, which the bath attendant presented to him. The Frank's face was said to show surprise (which disgusted Usama) caused by the shaved private parts of the servant. Delighted by this fact, he ordered the bathroom attendant to shave his private parts, and what disgusted Usama even more, also his woman's.³¹

These unworthy women

It is easy to guess that the situations described above did not present these women in a positive light. Why did the author of the source decide to present

„O najważniejszych arabskich kronikarzach wypraw krzyżowych,” in *Historia bliższa i dalsza. Polityka-Społeczeństwo-Wojskowość. Studia z historii powszechnej i Polski*, ed. Stefan Kowal, Gerard Kucharski, Marian Walczak (Poznań-Kalisz: Instytut Pedagogiczno-Artystyczny UAM w Kaliszu, 2001), 153.

²⁹ Usama ibn Munkidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 240; Usama ibn Munqid, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 148.

³⁰ Usama ibn Munkidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 242–243; Usama ibn Munqid, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 150.

³¹ Usama ibn Munkidh, *Księga pouczających przykładów*, 239–240; Usama ibn Munqid, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 148–149.

them in this particular way and not another? The answer to this question is particularly important. After all, Usama was able to nuance opinions about the Franks, or even positively speak about them.³² However, in the case of women, he did not do this. This may be due to several factors. The first of them is related to the general role of women presented in the work. Namely, as mentioned above, Muslim women were supposed to constitute a certain archetype to imitate. However, Christian women, women from the enemy camp, could not be this positive archetype in any way. So what was left for Usama? First of all, to present them in such a way that they constituted a form of anti-model of femininity. This was to be manifested in their relationships with men, and in very intimate situations.

In the Muslim world, especially in the 12th century, it was unthinkable for a woman and a man who were strangers to have close contact.³³ Here, Christian women disrupted the basic convention used by the Muslim world in male-female relations, brutally violating the separation of the sexes in everyday life.³⁴ The very fact that a man was supposed to shave a woman's private parts was unacceptable, and the attitude towards betrayal was completely incomprehensible because betrayal was never tolerated. Attention must also be paid to the attitude of Frankish men, who in their relations with women did not perform their role of protector against strangers. Usama drew particular attention to this when describing the betrayal of the Frank's wife. This man was supposed to have acted incomprehensibly in the opinion of ibn Munqidh. In such a situation, verbal instruction alone seemed completely unnatural, and even unmanly. It can be seen here that in the opinion of the author of *The Book of Contemplation* in male-female relations, a man should not submit to a woman, because if he does so, he disturbs the division of gender roles.

The issue of approaching male-female conversations could also raise understandable controversy. After all, as mentioned, the roles of men and women are different, and their implementation requires separation. Hence, it would be unacceptable for a woman to be able to freely talk to men who were strangers or unrelated to her by family ties. All the more strange to Usama was the passive and servile attitude of the woman's husband, who in this case only

³² I have mentioned this topic in the following articles: Rafał Kanas: „Rycerze i farysi – o wojownikach w Księdze pouczających przykładów Usamy ibn Munkidha,” in *Człowiek a historia. Ludzie i wydarzenia, tom X*, 95–117, ed. Błażej Cecota, Jakub Kuchta, 98–115 (Piotrków Trybunalski: Wydawnictwo IHiSM, 2024); Rafał Kanas, „Apostrofy w kształtowaniu wizerunku chrześcijan i muzułmanów w polskim przekładzie *Księgi pouczających przykładów Usamy ibn Munkidha* autorstwa J. Bielwskiego,” in *Vade Nobiscum*, vol. XXIV/2024, ed. Patryk Grancow, (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2024), 21–40.

³³ Of course, this is about the moral assessment of such a phenomenon. The practice of prostitution existed all over the world, but it was a particularly taboo subject in the Muslim world.

³⁴ Muslims believed in a strong gender division, in which women and men not bound by marriage or other family ties lived in separation from each other, which should not, in principle, be disturbed. See: Paul Sanders, “Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law”, 74.

passively observed the situation. In the Muslim view, this is an attack on both the basic role of men in the life of the community, as well as the abandonment of honor by a woman, which she should take special care of regardless of the situations that occurred.³⁵ This resulted from the fact that the implementation of patriarchal assumptions in Christian marriages did not always work out, which was based on the differentiated position of women in Christian relationships.³⁶

It is also worth noting that Usama was also able to appreciate individual cases of how women were treated in the Christian world. The situation in question took place in the men's bathhouse, where a certain woman was brought. Usama ordered the circumstances of this event to be checked because at first, it outraged him. However, the matter was quickly explained by one of the Franks in the following way:

"I couldn't be sure if she was a woman. So I said to one of my companions, 'By God, go have a look at this one—is she a woman?' What I meant was for him to go and ask about her. But instead he went—as I watched—and lifted her hem and pulled it up. At this, her father turned to me and explained, 'This is my daughter. Her mother died, and so she has no one who will wash her hair. I brought her into the bath with me so that I might wash her hair.'"³⁷

This is the only situation in which Usama speaks positively about the Franks' attitude towards the woman. The reason for this attitude is intriguing. It is worth paying attention to the information about the status of this girl. As a half-orphan, she had no mother who could take care of her. The only man in her life was her father. She was therefore in a unique situation in which even a deeply religious Muslim like Usama had to praise the Latin's attitude. He took care of his daughter in the most appropriate way. After all, if he had entered the women's bath, he would have violated the Muslim ethical code much more severely.³⁸ He therefore chose a solution that, in the eyes of both him and ibn Munqidh, remained the lesser evil.

Misunderstood ladies?

Christian women, or the nature of their relationships with men, held no value in the eyes of Usama and, presumably, his circle. Beyond the previously mentioned elements, it's worth considering examples about which the source

³⁵ Cobb, *Usama ibn Munqidh. Warrior-Poet of the Age of Crusades*, 80–84.

³⁶ There were situations in which the woman's role began to dominate in the relationship, influenced by a number of factors, from the activities of the Church, through the wife's status in relation to her husband, etc. See: Natasha R., Hodgson, *Women, crusading and the Holy Land in historical narrative* (Woodbridge Rochester: Boydell Press, 2007), 107–108.

³⁷ Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades*, 149–150.

³⁸ Paul Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," 74.

remains silent. The most obvious case would be to discuss Queen Melisende³⁹, who was the spouse of King Fulk, a man Usama had the opportunity to meet. While the chronicler may not have encountered her in person, due to the disputes and scandals between her and the king, the question remains as to why this matter was omitted from his account.

The silence on this issue can be explained in several ways. Firstly, Usama may not have understood the queen's position, as she played a crucial role in political life as the heiress to the kingdom.⁴⁰ At the same time, the numerous scandals surrounding her relationship with Fulk must have made her a sort of *persona non grata* in Usama's eyes. He likely saw her as someone whose behavior and actions were in direct opposition to his own values, making her a powerful anti-example of the female role. However, it is crucial to be cautious when asserting that this silence confirms Usama believed a story about her would be too scandalous.

It is also worth looking at the matter from another angle. It is plausible that due to the conflicts between Fulk and his spouse, Usama never had the chance to meet the queen personally. He could have heard about the marital disputes during his visit or at a later time. Previous examples in the source dealt with more intimate, everyday matters and did not touch upon the highest echelons of power and political conflicts. Therefore, the most straightforward explanation is that he did not mention the queen precisely because he did not grasp the political situation he was observing and, concurrently, had little interest in the Franks' political affairs.

In considering the figure of Melisende, and Christian women in general, it is key to remember that the lack of their inclusion in Usama's narrative might stem from a negative view of their role in Frankish society and their relationships with men. Conversely, and perhaps more importantly, their absence could simply be due to the chronicler's lack of understanding and interest, preventing him from dwelling on their stories, even when they held a role as significant as Melisende's.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Usama aimed to present a particular idealized portrayal of women. On the other hand, he offered cautionary accounts regarding how wo-

³⁹ Melisende was the daughter of the previous King of Jerusalem, Baldwin II. As the heir to the throne, she was the most valuable Catholic woman in the Middle East. It was thanks to her that King Fulk could take power in Jerusalem. The queen herself, who took the throne with her husband in 1131, tried to take an active part in the exercise of power. This caused numerous conflicts between her and her husband. In parallel to these adventures, a moral scandal broke out at the court of Jerusalem with her in the leading role. Additionally, the same woman later took over the rule of the kingdom as regent on behalf of the minor Baldwin III. See: Hodgson, *Women, crusading and the Holy Land in historical narrative*, 76–77; Régine Pernoud, *Kobieta w czasach wypraw krzyżowych*, trans. Iwona Badowska, (Gdańsk: Marabut, 2002), 44–47, 79–97.

⁴⁰ Hodgson, *Women, crusading and the Holy Land in historical narrative*, 58–59.

men should not behave. He constructed a dichotomy between Christian and Muslim women, who became representations of vice and virtue, respectively. This rather simplistic dichotomy reveals the formation of judgments within his work.

It is important to note that the two narratives shaped by Usama diverge from common understandings. As previously mentioned, Muslim women in his account were not merely passive and obedient to men, but became active participants contributing to the benefit of society. Christian women, unlike their Muslim counterparts, ceased to function within similar patriarchal structures, and in his view, were even depicted as morally degenerate.

Usama constructed these narratives based on two fundamental elements. The first was the behaviour of the women themselves. In the case of Muslim women, he emphasized traits such as care for others, virtuousness, and shrewdness. The first two characteristics are evident in the accounts of his mother and grandmother, while the third is illustrated in the story of the Turkmen woman. In the case of Christian women, he particularly highlighted their alleged licentiousness. The second element were the interactions with the wider society and its behaviour towards them. This is demonstrated through examples such as his grandmother effectively fulfilling her role as the matriarch of the family, and a Turkman defending a Turkmen woman who was at risk of losing her life and honour. Conversely, in the case of Christian women, he depicted instances where men permitted inappropriate interactions and reacted inadequately to their behaviour. Furthermore, his omissions of certain details eloquently reinforced the message he conveyed about them.

These two narratives that Usama shaped also served a fundamental didactic purpose. As previously stated, they were intended to illustrate specific exemplary patterns of femininity. This was also the objective of the pronounced dichotomy in his portrayal of Christian and Muslim women. It should be remembered that regardless of this, the opinions that constitute the content of the work were informed by Usama's perspectives, which aimed to construct a model he deemed commendable and to caution against one he considered reprehensible. Such images were intended to serve both women as role models, but also men, to show them how to build relationships with the opposite gender.

In conclusion, ibn Munqidh, seeking to present his perception of femininity, crafted his narrative regarding it. This narrative establishes two hyperbolic and simultaneously contradictory visions of women: the virtuous and exemplary Muslim woman, and the Christian woman who served as her antithesis. These, while potentially having some basis in reality, remained subject to the author's prejudices and opinions, and should not be considered a comprehensive reflection of the realities of the time.

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Sažetak:

Članak obrađuje narative o ženama i ženstvenosti u *Knjizi pouke* Usame ibn Munkiza. To je djelo autobiografski izvještaj autora, člana muslimanske aristokracije, koji poglavito pokriva događaje 12. stoljeća. U članku se analizira prikaz muslimanki u djelu, koje Usama opisuje gotovo kao savršena bića. Ujedno se ispituje narativ o kršćankama, koje autor ne časti istim pohvalama. Usporedbom ta dva protivna prikaza ženstvenosti nastojim objasniti kako je tadašnja muslimanska aristokracija tumačila žene i njihovu ulogu u društvu. Ovaj se rad dotiče tema žena kao matrijarha, njihovoj očekivanoj ulozi u smrtonosnim situacijama, značaju društvene hijerarhije i pripisane prirode odnosa između muškarca i žena, posebice kad nije bio rodom ili brakom određen. U svojoj se analizi koristim tradicionalnim historiografskim metodama. Induktivnim ću rasuđivanjem razlučiti Usamino razumijevanje tadašnje ženstvenosti na temelju izabranih isječaka iz teksta. Analizirajući prikaz kršćanki upotrijebit ću metodu „iščitavanja tišine“ u povijesnim izvorima jer Usama ignorira pojedine značajke zbog raznih razloga. Nadalje, koristit ću se komparativnom analizom kako bih usporedio narative o muslimankama i kršćankama.

Ključne riječi: *herstory*, križarski ratovi, *Knjiga pouke*, islam

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