

Queen Buran Podcast Outline

Episode outline and show notes for episode 295, titled Queen Buran, Astrologer in 9th Century Baghdad, with Chris Brennan and guest Ali A. Olomi.

<https://theastrologypodcast.com/2021/03/12/queen-buran-astrologer-in-9th-century-baghdad/>

Episode released on March 12, 2021.

Most of what follows represents Chris' outline for the episode that he wrote in preparation for the interview, integrated with some comments and changes from Ali.

Outline

Introduction

- Recorded on Wednesday, March 10, 2021, starting at 9:07 AM in Denver.
- This is the 295th episode of the show.
- Today I'm going to be talking with Ali A. Olomi
- Our topic is Buran of Baghdad, who lived in the 9th century.
 - She was a queen during the early Islamic Golden Age
 - Married to one of the great caliphs, al-Ma'mun.
 - She is the first woman we know of by name to have practiced astrology.

Introduce Ali and talk about his work

- Ali is a Historian of Middle East & Islam
 - Focuses on politics, gender, Islamic esotericism, astrology, folklore.
- Host of the Head on History Podcast, which is available on Patreon:
 - Posts on jinn, magic, and astrology
 - <https://www.patreon.com/headonhistory>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/aaolomi>

Background on Early Women in Astrology

- Background about previous work on women in ancient astrology.
- I have a small section on this in my book titled *Hellenistic Astrology*.
 - Also talked about it in episode 86 while I was writing the book.
- Women were not typically afforded the same education as men in ancient times.
- As a result we don't know the names of any ancient women who did astrology.
- I tend to think some would have picked it up in the family lineages at least.
 - Astrology passed down as a profession in some Mesopotamian families.
 - Also family lineages like Thrasyllus and Balbillus, Paulus and his son, etc.
- The 1st century satirist Juvenal mocks women who see astrologers
 - Seeing them so frequently that they eventually become astrologers themselves
- Hypatia was a 5th century philosopher who lived and taught in Alexandria

- Her father was the famous astronomer Theon of Alexandria
- She is known to have collaborated with him on an astronomical commentary
- Almost nothing of her work survives
- A Christian mob killed her purportedly due to her using magic and astrolabes
- We don't know what her views on astrology were, or if she practiced it.
- But if she had some training in astronomy then she likely would have in astrology
- Accident of history then that we don't know the name of any earlier women.
 - No doubt many names have been lost.

Buran

- Buran is the first woman we know of by name who is said to have used astrology.
- Shout-out to Kenneth Johnson who wrote a paper on Buran in the NCGR journal in 2006.
 - Kenneth Johnson, "Buran of Baghdad: An Astrological Woman in the Early Middle Ages," in the National Council for Geocosmic Research (NCGR) *Geocosmic Journal*, ed. Leigh Westin and Demetra George, Autumn 2006, pp. 29–33.
- Her given name may have been Kadijah, but she was called Buran.
- Her name is transliterated from Arabic as Buran or Bawran.
 - [AO: The name is Persian, from Boran.](#)
 - Named after the 7th century Persian Queen Boran.
 - Daughter of Kusro II, grandson of Kusro Anushirwan (r. 531–579 CE)
 - Buran lived in the 9th century.
 - She lived from 807 to 884 CE.
 - Conflicting reports about her birth year.
 - December 5, 807 CE in the evening, in Baghdad (Kenneth Johnson)
 - Some discrepancy between Dec 5 or 6, Sunday or Monday
 - Possible year discrepancy due to report she died at 80.
- During the early Abbasid dynasty
 - The third caliphate or dynasty after the Prophet Muhammed.
- She lived in Baghdad
 - During the early Islamic Golden Age
 - Golden age of science, translations, and astrology
- Background info on the founding of Baghdad (long digression/sub-topic)
 - The caliph Al-Mansur founded the city of Baghdad in 762
 - Wanted to move the capital from Damascus
 - Convened a group of astrologers and asked them to pick an electional chart
 - The head astrologer was Nawbakht the Persian
 - [AO: He went on to become the court astrologer](#)
 - Others involved were Masha'allah, Umar ibn Farrukhan al-Tabari, and al-Fazari
 - Chart is preserved in Al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms*
 - July 31 (30?), 762 CE, around 2:00 PM, Sagittarius rising
- The House of Wisdom set up in Baghdad
 - Many works translated into Arabic

- Baghdad becomes the center for science and commerce and philosophy
- (Library of alexandria → house of wisdom)
- Sending out people to Byzantines to get manuscripts
- Research institute
- Buran was part of the Nawbakht family line
 - Long and illustrious Persian family from Khorasan
 - AO: Khorasan is Eastern Iran, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan.
 - Family lineage of astrologers
 - Earlier tradition of astrology in Sassanian Persia
 - AO: Might be useful to define terms a bit “Arabic astrology” “Persian astrology” etc and also brief discussion of similarities vs differences from Hellenistic astrology and modern. Don’t want to assume a singular “astrology” here.
 - Some forms of horary and historical astrology may have developed in Persia
 - Nawbakht the Persian (c. 679-777)
 - Son: Abu Sahl Nawbakht (d. 786)
 - Son: Abu Sahl al-Fadl ibn Nawbakht (d. c 815) court astrologer to Harun al-Rashid and supervisor of the library.
 - Grandsons served other caliphs
 - Given that she came from a family of astrologers, Buran had some exposure.
 - Possibly also some training?
 - The circumstances were right.

The Wedding

- Buran was married to Caliph al-Ma’mun and became Queen.
- Buran’s father was al-Hasan ibn Sahl ibn Nawbaht.
 - Al-Hasan ibn Sahl became the vizier of Baghdad under Caliph al-Ma’mun
 - Vizier is like a high-ranking political advisor or minister.
- She was betrothed to al-Ma’mun when she was 10.
 - They weren’t married until she was 17/18, after the civil war ended.
- Al-Ma’mun (reigned 813–833)
 - Seventh Abbasid Caliph
 - Became Caliph after defeating his brother al-Amin in a civil war.
 - Reigned from 813 until he died in 833.
 - AO: he also had some astrological knowledge, used to test his astrologers
 - Digression about al-Qabisi and his surviving test of astrologers
 - Khorasan is where al-Ma’mun originally had his base of power, before the war.
 - Al-Ma’mun was personally involved in the House of Wisdom.
- Buran’s wedding was very lavish or extravagant
 - Became something of a legend in it of itself.
 - Festivities lasted for 17 days
 - They married in December 824 - January 825
 - Special gifts for each of the guests.
 - Showered in pearls
 - The Caliph granted Buran three wishes

- Healing some of the rifts during the civil war

Sahl ibn Bishr

- Had a connection to Sahl ibn Bishr
- Sahl ibn Bishr was active 815–825 CE.
 - AO: Syriac Christian or Zoroastrian who wrote in Arabic.
 - AO: The appellation “Yahudi” refers to the community he came from, not specifically his religion.
 - Highly influential with later astrologers, as late as William Lilly.
 - His text also formed the basis of the Tajika tradition in India.
 - Discussed in episode 268 with Martin Gansten.
- Sahl ibn Bishr was employed by Buran’s father
 - Originally Sahl ibn Bishr worked for the governor of Khorasan, Tahir ibn al-Husayn
 - AO: there’s an important astrological connection here. May be interesting to connect the “qat” and concept to the killing planet to the Tahirid story
 - Later Sahl came to work for Buran’s father in Baghdad
 - Buran would have known Sahl ibn Bishr then, which is notable.

Later Life

- Buran may have had issues bearing children?
 - No heirs are recorded.
 - (CB: Johnson spends some time talking about this in his article, as well as some possible tensions as a result with her husband, but we didn’t end up talking about this in the interview, and I was uncertain about Johnson’s source for this.)
- She accompanied him on a military expedition against the Byzantine empire.
- Buran’s husband al-Ma’mun died in 833.
 - Food poisoning
 - Buran was with him when he died
 - Poem by Buran to mourn her husband:
 - “Weep, my eyes! The Caliph has passed on and I’m a captive to melancholy. Once I was the one who ravaged fate; now he’s gone, and fate ravages me.” (from Ibn al-Sa’i)
 - Translation from: Ibn al-Sā’ī, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa, NYU Press, 2015, p. 43.
- Buran lived for another 50 years, dying in September 884.
- Her father fell out of power, and out of favor with the next caliph, al-Mu’tasim (833-842)
- Buran’s own lands and estates were confiscated by al-Mu’tasim’s new vizier.

The Astrological Legend

- Astrological legend preserved by 13th century historian Ibn Khallikan.
- Summarized by George Saliba:

- George Saliba, “The Role of the Astrologer in Medieval Islamic Society,” *Bulletin D'études Orientales*, vol. 44, 1992, pp. 45–67.
- “The last example of a *ta'sil* is reported about the only female astrologer as a historical personality that we know of to date. Bawran, the daughter of al-Hasan b. Sahl b. Nawbaht (d. c. 845) and the wife of al-Ma'mun “used to lift the astrolabe and look at the horoscope of the caliph, al-Mu'tasim.” One day she noticed that a crisis (*qat*) was about to befall the caliph through a wooden instrument. She sent her father al-Hasan, who had fallen out of favor with the caliph, to the court with the ominous news. At the appointed time, every precaution was taken so that the caliph would not come near any wood. When his servant brought him his comb and tooth picks, al-Hasan ordered the servant to use them before offering them to the caliph. As soon as he did, his head swelled and he fell dead. Needless to say, al-Hasan was then taken back into the service of the caliph as a reward and Bawran was allowed to repossess her villages and estates that Ibn al-Zayyat (d. 847), the vizier of al-Mu'tasim, had confiscated from her.”
- Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary is the main source for the legend.
 - Ali mentions it in at least one other source as well.
- “used to lift the astrolabe and look at the horoscope of the caliph, al-Mu'tasim.”
 - Crucial sentence.
- After she saved the Caliph her lands were restored and her father regained power.
- Like with other legends involving astrologers like Thrasullus, impossible to know the truth.
- But circumstantially she had the family background where it's not entirely implausible.
- Not clear what would have signified a wooden instrument though.
 - Ali offers some possibilities.
- While not the first woman to ever practice astrology, the first named one we know of.
- She continued to live in Baghdad even after the capital moved elsewhere.
- When a later Caliph wanted to move it back to Baghdad, she had to forfeit her home.
- She died on September 21, 884, at the age of 79 or 80.

Ending

- More about Ali:
 - <https://www.patreon.com/headonhistory>
 - <https://twitter.com/aaolomi>
- Shout-out to Matias Del Carmine for the cover art illustration for this episode!

Bibliography

Kenneth Johnson, “Buran of Baghdad: An Astrological Woman in the Early Middle Ages,” in the National Council for Geocosmic Research (NCGR) *Geocosmic Journal*, ed. Leigh Westin and Demetra George, Autumn 2006, pp. 29–33.

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