

**PROCEEDINGS**  
**OF THE**  
**SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES**

**VOLUME 41**  
**2011**

Papers from the forty-fourth meeting of the  
Seminar for Arabian Studies  
held at the British Museum, London,  
22 to 24 July 2010

**SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES**

**ARCHAEOPRESS**  
**OXFORD**

Orders for copies of this volume of the *Proceedings* and of all back numbers should be sent to Archaeopress, Gordon House, 276 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7ED, UK.

Tel/Fax +44-(0)1865-311914.

*e-mail* bar@archaeopress.com

<http://www.archaeopress.com>

For the availability of back issues see the Seminar's web site: [www.arabianseminar.org.uk](http://www.arabianseminar.org.uk)

### **Seminar for Arabian Studies**

c/o the Department of the Middle East, The British Museum

London, WC1B 3DG, United Kingdom

*e-mail* seminar.arab@durham.ac.uk

The Steering Committee of the Seminar for Arabian Studies is currently made up of 13 members. The Editorial Committee of the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* includes 6 additional members as follows:

#### **STEERING COMMITTEE**

Dr Robert Carter (Chair)  
Dr Mark Beech  
Dr Nadia Durrani  
Dr Robert G. Hoyland  
Dr Derek Kennet  
Mr Michael C.A. Macdonald  
Dr Ardle MacMahon (Secretary)  
Dr Venetia Porter  
Dr St John Simpson  
Mrs Janet C.M. Starkey (Editor)  
Mr Andrew Thompson (Treasurer)  
Professor Janet Watson  
Dr Lloyd Weeks

#### **EDITORIAL COMMITTEE: ADDITIONAL MEMBERS**

Professor Alessandra Avanzini  
Dr Ricardo Eichmann  
Professor Clive Holes  
Professor Khaleel Al-Muaikel  
Professor Dan Potts  
Professor Christian Robin

**Opinions expressed in papers published in the *Proceedings* are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Editorial Committee.**

The *Proceedings* is produced in the Times Semitic New font, which was designed by Paul Bibire for the Seminar for Arabian Studies.

© 2011 Archaeopress, Oxford, UK.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISSN 0308-8421

ISBN 978-1-905739-40-0

## Some observations on women in Omani sources

OLGA ANDRIYANOVA

### Summary

In the field of Omani studies, a relatively young historical discipline, no serious academic research on the political, social, and cultural role of women in the history of Oman has yet been undertaken. This can be explained by the nature, preservation, and availability of source material. The present contribution attempts to combine existing approaches towards women's history, elaborated with reference to material from other parts of the Middle East, with first-hand primary sources collected in Oman, in order to stimulate further research in this underexplored field. After a short historiographical review, three types of available sources are revealed. Biographical dictionaries provide us with long lists of women renowned for their knowledge and piety, thus raising the issue of female religious education in Oman. Works of Omani historians such as *Kashf al-ghummah*, attributed to Sirḥān al-Azkawī, or *Al-faṭḥ al-mubīn* by Ibn Ruzayq are seemingly 'male-oriented'. However they throw some light on women's roles in the political life of the country and, vice versa, on the impact of the turbulent Omani history on women's lives from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Finally, legal documents from private collections (wills and acts attesting the purchase of property) elucidate women's relatively active participation in local economic life and women's importance in the matters of charity, education, and general well-being of the community.

**Keywords:** women, Oman, sources, economy, education

Where have the women gone? The idea of this paper was inspired by several factors: the seeming absence of women in local historical sources (al-Azkawī 2005; Ibn Ruzayq 1983; al-Sālimī 2000); the apparent lack of studies that question women's roles in the history of Oman; and, of course, my natural interest in the problem as a female researcher working in the field of the Omani socio-political history of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

In search of women in the relevant literature, I have attentively reread the Omani chronicles, keeping this 'gender' approach in mind, and also studied new sources that I recently came across. The aim of this paper is to present the primary source material available to me at this stage, and — wherever possible — make parallels with relevant research findings on other regions of the Middle East, many of them better documented, in order to avoid completely speculative conclusions.

After a short historiographical overview, three types of sources (biographical dictionaries, chronicles written by Omani historians, and legal documents from private collections) are discussed, each illuminating an aspect of women's day-to-day life.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Given the limited volume of this paper, the study of the status of women as drawn from Ibādī *fiqh* works is not included here, nor is the

### Historiographical remarks

Women studies in Oman are as old, or as young, as academic Omani studies in general. Gender studies were pioneered by two anthropological works: Uni Wikan's book on women in Suḥār (1982) and Christine Eickelman's comprehensive study on female networks in al-Ḥamrā' (1984). Both were based on field studies made in the 1970s and contain very little historical information, concentrating instead on contemporary issues related to women's lives.<sup>2</sup> These studies were made at a time when Omani society was just beginning a social, economical, and cultural transformation brought by modernity; these two works are, nevertheless, crucial for a better understanding of Omani women's past.

Thus there has been no serious historical research on women in Omani society which could be compared with the works on women in other regions of the Arab world (Marcus 1983; Zilfi 1997; Nashat & Tucker 1999; Okkenhaug & Flaskerud 2005; Keddie 2007). None of the general reviews on the feminine condition in Arab lands contain references to Oman in the Middle Ages or

representation of women in Omani literary works.

<sup>2</sup> A series of studies by sociologists and anthropologists followed, attracted as they were by the rapidly changing Omani society (Chatty 2002; Beaudévin 2004).

in the modern era (e.g. Keddie 2007: 13–59). Moreover, the peculiarities of the country's historical development mean that the changes visible in the 'central' regions of the Middle East and North Africa in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century — in particular, the impact of modernization and westernization as described by Keddie (2007: 60–101) — were absent in Oman. This absence of serious academic research on Omani women may be explained by the problem of the nature and conservation of the sources. In Oman there are no serial shariah court records similar to those in the lands under the Ottoman control that have been widely exploited to produce evidence of the social and economic life of women (Jennings 1975).

European travellers made a number of commentaries on Omani women, but the veracity of information cannot be checked, and the information itself is often of a purely observational character or simply second-hand.<sup>3</sup> While repeating here the generally accepted opinion that travel literature 'teaches us more about European views on gender at the time the book was written than about the Middle East' (Roded 2008: 9), we must, however, mention that the notes on women by J.R. Wellsted and S.B. Miles cannot be overlooked, both authors having spent sufficient time in the interior of Oman (in the 1830s and 1880s respectively) to be able to leave some credible information (Wellsted 1838, i: 58, 63, 67–68, 193–194; Miles 1896: 533; 1901: 467; 1910: 171). For the first half of the twentieth century, quite interesting material on women's lives in the Persian Gulf region is provided in the publications of The Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America, even if they must be treated with care given the background of the authors. After the opening of a mission station at Muscat in 1893, a number of reports on Oman appeared in the publications of the Mission (currently available for researchers in *Neglected Arabia* [The Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America 1988]). Recently, these materials were used by E. Doumato (2000), who employed an unusual approach towards women's social and spiritual life. Unfortunately, the monograph provides very little information on Oman.

The study of contemporary books published in Oman reveals that the Omanis themselves manifest an interest in women's roles in the history of their country. This local interest is probably stimulated by the social transformation experienced in the Sultanate with the appearance of an educated female audience which

is interested in the subject. Sultan Qābūs's political position towards women, which included promoting their education and encouraging active participation in the country's development, may also have played a role in the process.

Nowadays, the new publications generally enumerate prominent women famous for their piety, their beneficial acts, their roles in religious education, and their knowledge of traditional medicine. Some of their names have been preserved in Omani written sources, on gravestones, or in the memories of elderly persons. As far as we are aware, there are at least three recently published biographical dictionaries devoted exclusively to women, and more publications are to be expected (al-*Shaḥḥiyyah* 2000; al-Sayfī 2003; al-*Shaybānī* 2004). Moreover, none of the books on history and culture of Omani towns ignore the 'gender' question (al-*Kharūṣī* 2007: 66–70; al-*Ghaylānī* 2009: 302–337; 357–363). Unfortunately, these works are mainly an accumulation of information in which no critical analysis is applied. Nevertheless, based partially on local oral evidence (the number of elderly people possessing oral historical information is fast declining) and on written materials that are not easily accessible to outsiders, these collections can be an excellent instrument for further research.

### **Biographical collections: women, piety, and education**

The first biographical collection to be considered is notes by ʿAlī b. Sālim b. Nāṣir al-Ḥajrī on the virtuous women of Biddiyyah in the province of al-*Sharḥiyyah*. Written in 1977 at the request of the scholar Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Sālimī, it has never been published, although a semi-official edition of the manuscript can be traced on the Internet (al-Ḥajrī ʿASN 1977). The fact that this collection appeared in Biddiyyah is by no means surprising: the activity of the famous Omani scholar Nūr al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh al-Sālimī (c.1870–1914) provoked the creation of an Ibādī scholarly centre in al-*Sharḥiyyah* province from the end of the nineteenth century. Apparently, as in other Omani towns known for their scholarly traditions, there were a number of educated women in Biddiyyah. The choice of the women collected in this list is also understandable, as noted by Roded (1994: 12): 'because most authors of the biographical collections were religious scholars, they devoted more attention to women and men who contributed to Islamic scholarship and religious life.' Thus, this and recent collections mentioned above lead to the question of women's education.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical analysis of British travel writing on Oman refer to al-Hajri 2006. See also Pastner 1978.

If Omani folklore often presents women under a negative light as being people deprived of reason and capable only of fulfilling household chores (al-Ḥamīdī 1986, i: 256; Wellsted 1838, i: 63), the historical evidence often indicates the contrary. In every village there was at least one educated woman who would have known the basic rules of Ibādī jurisprudence. She would have been qualified to advise illiterate women on issues of family law or on the performance of religious duties (interview with Shaykh Muḥannā al-Ḳharūṣī in al-ʿAwābī, 19 February 2010). Biographical dictionaries mention numerous women who possessed a good knowledge of the Qurʾān and traditional healing methods, teaching other women, organizing women’s meetings, and leading collective prayers. These learned women often have the title *al-shaykhah*, which underlined their highly esteemed position in society. A study of the personal names of pious women reveals that there are no theophoric names, but most of them are adjectives describing moral qualities of high esteem: Sālimah (‘good’), Shaykhah (‘respected’, ‘learned woman’, ‘teacher’), Raḥmah (‘merciful’), Ṣafīyyah and Naqīyyah (‘pure’), Rāyah (‘flag’, ‘banner’; perhaps a woman who can be an example to others). Women’s names are often quoted along with the names of their learned brothers, fathers, and husbands (al-Ḥajrī ʿASN 1977: 15, 18–19; al-Ḳharūṣī 2007: 69, 70; al-Sayfī 2003: 41, 45, 55 *et alibi*).<sup>4</sup> Apparently, to acquire knowledge, women could rely on the help of these scholarly relatives, who considered education necessary for their spiritual well-being (see Berkey 1991: 147). The marks of ownership appended on old manuscripts attest that women could possess, buy, and inherit books. To give an example, on one of the blank pages of the manuscript of volume 6 of the eleventh-century Muḥammad al-Kindī’s *Bayān al-ṣharʿ* (one of the major Ibādī works of *fiqh*), it is written that the manuscript, now held by the public library of Biddīyyah and initially copied for Sulaymān b. Muḥammad al-Maʿmarī al-ʿAqrī al-Nizwī in 1144 /1732, was then passed on to his wife, ʿUwayna bint ʿĀmir b. Aḥmad b. Sālim al-ʿUḥmāniyyah, in 1177/1763. Girls also attended traditional Qurʾanic schools, together with boys who formed the majority (Miles 1901: 467). The Ibādī jurisprudence works often quote a *ḥadīth* which noted that acquisition of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man or woman (al-Bisyānī 2007: 5). If there is

no theoretical obstacle for the education of women there must have been major socio-economic factors that meant that the majority of women were illiterate, even those from the upper class and the religious elite. It is often stressed that the lack of education for women in Arabia was related to the overwhelming view that a woman’s place is in the home and that knowledge may lead to *ḥarām*, ‘improper behaviour’ or ‘sin’ (al-Zahrānī 2004: 401). In the Omani biographical collections ‘staying at home’ and ‘not talking to other women’ are praised as a sign of virtue and goodness (al-Ḥajrī ʿASN 1977: 13).

### Omani chronicles: women and politics

The political roles of women, as well as the impact of the country’s history on their lives, are evident in a rereading of the Omani historical literature which, at first glance, is quite male-oriented.

Women appear as victims of tribal conflicts and foreign invasions. During the civil war in Oman in the 1720s, 100 women and children are said to have perished in a cavern, hiding from the atrocities of the followers of one of the political leaders (al-Azkawī 2005: 122). The Persian intervention in Oman in the late 1730s harmed the female population in various ways: many were killed or brought to Shiraz, although the possibility that 10,000 women and children were murdered in Nizwā alone is probably an exaggeration (Ibn Ruzayq 1983: 337–338). The Wahhābī commander Muṭlaq al-Muṭayrī, who came to Oman in 1807, may have killed men and captured women who had not converted to Wahhabism (al-Sālimī 2000, ii: 206). In these turbulent circumstances, women’s jewellery and cash could be stolen; they could be forced to ‘marry’ their offenders ‘without divorcing their husbands and without application of the rules for *ʿiddah*’ (Ibn Ruzayq 1983: 277, 446–447).<sup>5</sup>

Women in historical works are often anonymous. Ibn Ruzayq, the nineteenth-century Omani historian, mentions three daughters of the Imām Aḥmad b. Saʿīd (1744–1783) but explains that he omitted their personal names as a courtesy — literally *li-luzūm al-adab* — in other words, in order to save the women’s honour (Ibn Ruzayq 1983: 386, 442). His daughter Mūzah became famous for her involvement in the process of succession to power within the Āl Bū Saʿīd family at the beginning of the nineteenth century — a common story in Middle

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes women provided financial support to their learned, but not always well-to-do husbands. Thus, al-Shaykhah Shuwaykh bint Muḥammad al-Saʿūdiyyah (d. 1768) transferred part of her property to her husband, ʿālim Ḥabīb b. Sālim Ambūsaʿīdī (al-Sayfī 2003: 29) at least twice.

<sup>5</sup> *ʿiddah*: a period during which a widowed or divorced woman cannot remarry (al-Bisyānī 2007: 210–213).

Eastern history.<sup>6</sup> Her personal name came to us through European sources describing her regency in the early years of Saʿīd b. Sulṭān's reign.<sup>7</sup> The honour of women of lesser rank is protected in the same manner (Ibn Ruzayq 1983: 259; al-Sālimī 2000, ii: 332).

Women in historical writings do not exist independently and are always somehow connected to the 'greater', 'male' history. Anonymous women save men's lives and are saved themselves by righteous men. Wives appear beside their husbands, interrupt men's conversations, and sometimes even discuss political affairs (Ibn Ruzayq 1983: 144–146, 280, 495, 540; al-Sālimī 2000, ii: 17, 328). In these sources, the day-to-day life of these women and their economic status remain beyond our reach.

### Private documents: charity, sponsorship, religious duties, and agricultural economy

Ordinary, more or less well-to-do women reappear in legal documents from private collections such as wills, acts of purchase, and/or sale or acts of transfer of property. Here, the names of women appear in their complete form as the strict rules for notaries demand that those involved must be clearly identified. It is, however, admitted that if a document is generated by a man it is sufficient to identify his female relatives mentioned therein by their personal name and the degree of relationship to him (Ibn ʿUbaydān 1985–1986, ii: 226–227).

Legal documents in Oman are difficult to access. As there was an absence of centralized archives, ancient documents are difficult to find. People either do not realize the historical value of these 'old papers' or perceive them as family property and remote from historical research. During my stay in Oman I had the opportunity, thanks to the good will and historical consciousness of the owners, to gain access to two private collections of documents.

The first one is a collection of documents of various types (wills, correspondence, talismans, extracts from the Qurʾān) dating back to the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century and kept by a nephew of the late *kātib* ('writer', 'notary') of al-Ḥamrāʾ, an oasis town

to the north-west of Nizwā (al-Dākḥiliyyah province) and the main settlement of the al-ʿAbriyyīn tribe from the seventeenth century. Several wills generated by women from this collection are discussed below.

The second collection comes from al-Fīqayn, one of the villages constituting the oasis of Manaḥ (to the south of Nizwā), an ancient settlement which was, according to tradition, the first foothold of the Azdite tribes that came from Yemen. For centuries, it was one of the important agricultural regions of Oman. Manaḥ is one of the main settlements of Āl Bū Saʿīd, a large tribe from which the present ruling dynasty stems. Although it was not possible to see many originals, the present owner of the collection, Sayf b. *Khalfān* b. *Khālifa* al-Būsaʿīdī, gave us digital copies of seventy-eight documents. These were mainly *ṣukūk* (sg. *ṣakk* 'act', 'document') confirming transactions with reference to property, purchase and sale of land, or water rights. The documents cover the period from 1748 to 1961. Several factors make this collection unique for Oman: the number of documents, their age (for the historians of Oman, a private document on local affairs which is over 100 years old is always a treasure), their good state of preservation, and their homogeneity (documents of the same type from the same locality). As almost half of the documents attest transactions in which women are involved as the main participants, they were destined to be analysed within the scope of this article.

### Wills from al-Ḥamrāʾ

Women's wills show their preoccupation with fulfilling religious duties, with charity, and with their concerns about the well-being of their town or village. One of the items studied was the undated will of a certain lady, Nakīdah, now held in the private collection of Sulṭān b. Sayf b. Qaswar al-ʿAbrī in al-Ḥamrāʾ, Oman. Nakīdah states in her will that her property must be used upon her death to feed sixty poor people and that a payment must be established for those who will fast in her place during the month of Ramaḍān. She also bequeathed MT\$ 1 (Maria Theresa thaler)<sup>8</sup> to pay those who clean the *falaj*<sup>9</sup> of al-Ḥamrāʾ and MT\$ 1 to pave the road to the cemetery. Another woman's will, dated 17 *Shaʿbān* 1369/3 June 1950, from the private collection of Sulṭān b. Sayf b. Qaswar al-ʿAbrī, gives a long list of beneficent acts to

<sup>6</sup> This is similar to the activities of al-Dār al-Shamsī in neighbouring Yemen in the thirteenth century (Sadek 1989: 122), or the manipulation of the succession to the caliphate by *Khuzayran*, an ex-slave and second wife of the ʿAbbasid caliph Muḥammad al-Mahdī in 785 (Roded 2008: 84–91).

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Ruzayq consistently called her *al-Sayyidah bint al-imām* or simply *bint al-imām*, the titles *al-sayyid* or *al-sayyidah* being employed for the members of the ruling Āl Bū Saʿīd family (1983: 462, 466, 476, 482, 495 *et alibi*).

<sup>8</sup> A silver coin widely used in Arabia in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries.

<sup>9</sup> A *falaj* (pl. *aflāj*) is a channel bringing subterranean waters to the surface for irrigation and water-supply purposes. For a detailed study of the *aflāj* of Oman, see Wilkinson 1977.

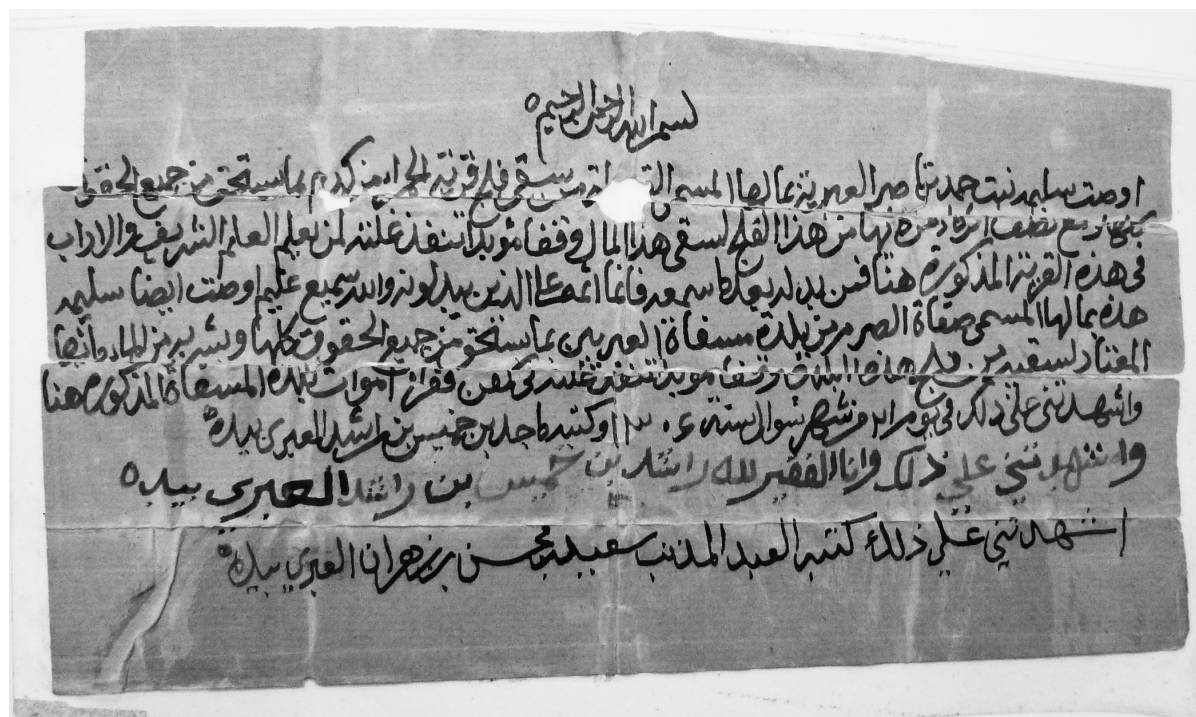


FIGURE 1. The will of *Salīmah bint Ḥamad b. Nāṣir al-ʿAbriyyah* (1306/1889).  
(From the collection of *Sulṭān b. Sayf b. Qaswar al-ʿAbrī*; photograph by O. Andriyanova.)

be executed on her behalf after her death, including the feeding of sixty poor people of al-Ḥamrā<sup>2</sup>, establishing a ‘salary’ (*ujrah*) for those fasting for her, and a payment of MT\$ 4 for her relatives who do not inherit from her. Another MT\$ 4 was donated to the person responsible for the orphans of the town (*wakīl al-aytām*), so that he could buy clothing for his wards and, finally, MT\$ 70 to be given to the three brothers whose parents were kind to her ‘when she was in good health and when she was ill’.

To give an example of a typical will, we quote here most of the will dated 21 *Shawwāl* 1306/20 June 1889 from the same archive collection (Fig. 1).

- (1) *bismi ʾllāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*
- (2) *awṣat salīmah bint ḥamad b. nāṣir al-ʿabriyyah bi-mālīhā al-musammā (?) min saqiy falaj qaryat al-ḥamrā<sup>2</sup> min kidam bi-mā yastaḥiqqu min jamīʿ al-ḥuqūq*
- (3) *kullihā wa maʿa niṣf atharihā lahā min hadhā ʾl-falaj li-saqiy hadhā ʾl-māl waqfan muʿabbadan tunfad ghallatuhu li-man yuʿallim al-ʿilm al-sharīf wa-ʾl-adāb*

- (4) *fī hadhīhi ʾl-qaryah al-madhkūrah hunā fa man baddalahu baʿda mā samīʿahu fa-innamā ithmuhu ʿalā ʾl-ladhīna yubaddilūnahu wa-ʾllāhu samīʿ ʿalīm wa awṣat ayḍan salīmah*
- (5) *hadhīhi bi-mālīhā al-musammā ṣifāt al-ṣarm min baldat misfāt al-ʿabriyyīn bi-mā yastaḥiqqu min jamīʿ al-ḥuqūq kullihā wa bi-shurbihi min al-mā<sup>3</sup>*
- (6) *al-muʿtād li-saqiyi min falaj hadhīhi ʾl-baldah waqfan muʿabbadan tunfad ghallatuhu [li-yukaffan(?)] fuqarā<sup>4</sup> amwāt bi-hadhīhi ʾl-misfāt al-madhkūrah hunā*
- (7) *wa-ashhadatnī ʿalā dhalika fī yawm 21 min shahr shawwāl sanat 1306 wa-katabahu mājid b. khamīs b. rāshid al-ʿabrī bi-yadihi [...]*

Translation:

- (1) In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,
- (2) Salīmah bint Ḥamad b. Nāṣir al-ʿAbriyyah bequeathed her [date palm] plantation (*māl*)

called (?) watered by the *falaj* of al-Ḥamrāʾ in [the region of] Kidam with all the rights due to it

- (3) together with half an *athar*<sup>10</sup> of water that she owns from this *falaj* as an everlasting, inalienable *waqf*.<sup>11</sup> Revenues from it should be spent for the sake of teachers of religious sciences and literature
- (4) [who teach] in this village mentioned here. *If anyone alters a will he had heard, the sin of altering befalls those responsible for such altering. God is Hearer, Knower.*<sup>12</sup>

This Salīmah also bequeathed

- (5) her plantation called *Ṣifāt al-Ṣarm* situated in the village Misfāt al-ʿabriyyīn<sup>13</sup> with all the rights due to it and together with the water which is usually spent
- (6) to irrigate it from the *falaj* of this village as an everlasting inalienable *waqf*. Revenues from it should be spent for the winding of bodies of poor people who die in this Misfāt mentioned here.
- (7) And she made me her witness in this on the 21st of *Shawwāl* 1306. Mājid b. Khamīs b. Rāshid al-ʿAbrī wrote it with his own hand.

This example of women's sponsorship in the document cited above from al-Ḥamrāʾ finds its counterparts, though quite late, in the aforementioned Biddiyyah, where women also used to endow properties and books (al-Ḥajrī ʿASN 1977: 7, 15, 40; al-Ḥajrī MS 2009: 14, 44).

Apparently, throughout the interior of Oman, with its agricultural economy based on growing date palms with the help of *falaj* irrigation, it was common practice to endow water rights or land property for the use of the religious scholars (ʿulamāʾ) and their students. Books, as a precious medium of learning, used to be endowed directly (al-Ḥajrī MS 2009: 17). Women seem to have played a significant role in providing material support for those seeking knowledge through the *waqf* institution, even if, at the moment, we have few examples. J.C. Wilkinson came across women's bequests while studying

<sup>10</sup> *athar*: a time-share of a *falaj*, about 30 minutes during which water will come to the plantation once in each cycle of the *falaj*. 1 *athar* = 24 *qiyāsah*.

<sup>11</sup> *waqf* (pl. *awqāf*): an inalienable bequest made for charitable purposes.

<sup>12</sup> Qurʾān 2. 181. A verse apparently used to stress the inalterability of the will.

<sup>13</sup> An old mountainous village situated not far from al-Ḥamrāʾ.

a register of the distribution of *falaj* shares from Izki (1977: 213–214).

The problems related to the women's *awqāf* in Oman are still to be studied. The existing material is scarce, dispersed, and mostly dates back to the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Researchers and government should unite their efforts to set up a database of archives to facilitate the study of social and economic history. Some steps have already been taken in this direction,<sup>14</sup> and there is some hope that a sufficient quantity of material will be available soon to enable general conclusions on the functioning of the *waqf* in Oman to be reached. Were the religious endowments made by women intended mostly for charity and educational purposes? Or were they also used as a means to get around the inheritance laws? What was the part played by family *awqāf* (*waqf dhurri*) as against that exercised by religious *awqāf* (*awqāf li-sabīli ʾllāh*)?<sup>15</sup>

### Documents from Manaḥ (al-Fīqayn village)

The documents from this collection clearly reflect the historical realities of the agricultural economy in the interior of Oman. The wealth of the inhabitants of Manaḥ consists in the possession of *amwāl* (sg. *māl* 'date plantations') and 'āwābī' (sg. 'ābiyah 'farm', 'piece of land proper for seasonal agriculture') as well as water rights, i.e. shares of the *falaj* debit used for irrigation. An oasis settlement may consist of several quarters, often built close to a fortress and surrounded by date plantations and farms. The *falaj* runs through the quarter and then brings water to the plantations (see Fig. 2).

Of the seventy-eight documents we were able to study, thirty-six manuscripts give information on forty-seven transactions over property, in which about thirty women<sup>16</sup> were involved as sellers (22 cases), buyers

<sup>14</sup> In 2007, following H.M. the Sultan's Decree No. 2007/60, the National Records and Archives Authority was founded. From the time of its foundation, it has reorganized the state and historical archives by collecting, or at least digitalizing documents of historical interest throughout the country (al-Ḍawayānī 2009: 10–25; Singh 2011).

<sup>15</sup> On 18–20 October 2009, Sultan Qaboos University hosted an Arabic-speaking conference (not yet published) entitled *Awqaf in Oman: past and present*. Most of the papers on the 'past' were concerned with the role of *waqf* in education and the propagation of religious knowledge. For Ibādī terminology and classification of *waqf*, see the Bahḥāz & al-Sālimī 2008, ii: 1087–1093; Wilkinson 1977: 213. For a discussion on women's *awqāf* in other regions and epochs, see Cahen 1961: 54–55; Baer 1984; Sadek 1989: 124–125; Deguilhem 2003; Keddie 2007: 43; on women and *waqf* in eighteenth-century Aleppo (Meriwether 1997) and in Egypt (Fay 1997).

<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to state the exact number of women, as in some documents names are partially or completely missing.



FIGURE 2. The ruins of the ancient quarter of al-Fīqayn and the surrounding plantation of date palms as seen from al-Fīqayn fort. (Photograph by O. Andriyanova.)

(7), beneficiaries/inheritors (9), bequeathers (7), or had participated in an exchange of properties (2). Seven transactions were made in the period from 1770 to 1793, fifteen in 1801–1849, twenty-three in 1863–1915, and two between 1957 and 1961. Being so dominated by women, this collection confirms the very active involvement of women in the economic life of the community. Water rights were the object of transaction in thirty-two cases, and land in thirteen cases; one case presents the purchase of a house, and one in which a sum of money was bequeathed by a woman to her grandson. In one of these cases, sheep and personal belongings were bequeathed together with water rights. Some documents are damaged and lack parts of the information, but they can still be used for analysis (see Fig. 3).

The structure of the documents is quite homogeneous and follows a certain pattern that does not change over

time.<sup>17</sup> Only minor differences are visible: from about 1820, prices are given exclusively in MT\$ (previously they were given in *muḥammadiyyah*)<sup>18</sup> and the year of transaction is not written in words. First comes the *basmalah* (*Bismi ʿllāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*) followed by the names of the participants in the transaction. Then its object, conditions, price, confirmation of the payment, date, the writer's signature that legalizes the document; and sometimes one or several *shahādāt* (witness statements). The description of the property is sometimes quite detailed, in recognition of the Ibādī *fiqh* principle

<sup>17</sup> Given the existence of a long tradition of bureaucratic writing, the pattern of the documents is not very different from those employed in other parts of the Middle East (see e.g. documents from Jerusalem court archives in Roded 2008: 135–139).

<sup>18</sup> A Persian silver coin named after the Safavid *shāh* Muḥammad *Khudābandah* (1578–1587).

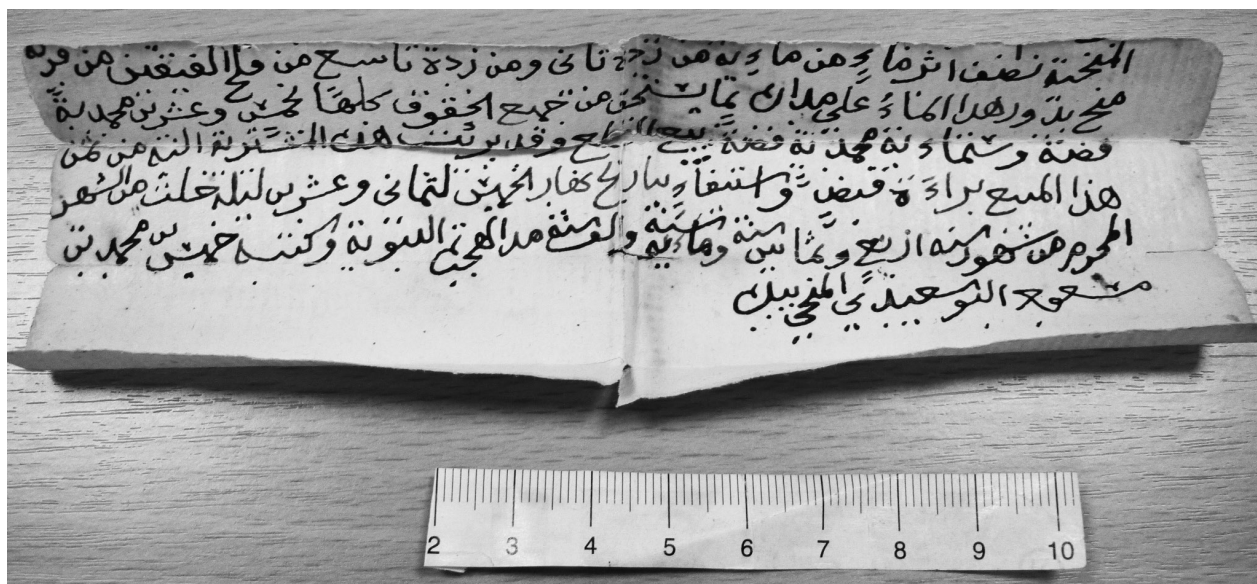


FIGURE 3. An original document confirming the acquisition of water rights by a woman from al-Fīqayn (1184/1770). (From the collection of Sayf b. Khalīfān b. Khalīfah al-Būsaʿīdī; photograph by O. Andriyanova.)

that the object must be known and agreed upon by both sides (al-Bisyānī 2007: 288, 291–292).

Below is an example of a line-by-line translation of a document from the private collection of Sayf b. Khalīfān b. Khalīfah al-Būsaʿīdī (al-Fīqayn, Manah), dated 1202/1787.

- (1) In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,
- (2) Bishārah bint ʿĪsā b. Muḥammad [...] al-Nizwaniyyah confirmed that she sold to Mubārak b. Masʿūd b. Muḥammad al-Būsaʿīdī al-Manḥī
- (3) 1 third of an *athar* of the water that she had inherited from her husband Khalīfān b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd allāh al-Būsaʿīdī,
- (4) At the normal irrigation cycle with all the rights due to it, the transaction being irreversible, for the sum of 107 silver *muḥammadiyyāt*.
- (5) This buyer has already liberated himself from all the obligations related to this transaction, having paid the sum, which was confirmed by her to him on Monday morning,
- (6) The 7th of the month of *Ṣafar* of the year 1202 from the Hijrah of the Prophet. Wrote this [document] humble before God Nabḥān b.

Masʿūd b. ʿUmar b. Masʿūd b. Abī Nabḥān with his own hand.

The present collection is as precious as it is somewhat faulty. The fact that the documents come mostly from the archive of the same family makes the selection narrow and not representative of the whole local community, even though it gives a fascinating insight into the life of one particular family. For obvious reasons, a one-sided picture is given: the list of sellers is much more diversified than that of buyers, as families tend to preserve the documents attesting to the purchase (and not the selling) of property by its members. Their dispersal in time allows us to follow the process of the constitution of the family's wealth, but does not allow us to draw further conclusions on the dynamics of the overall economy at a given period. It is, however, possible to throw light on some important issues.

What was stated for other regions of the Middle East is confirmed for Oman by the documents of this collection: the most important source for women to constitute wealth is inheritance (see Nashat & Tucker 1999: 65). The Ibādī *fiqh* provides elaborate rules for inheritance, with a strict stratification of relatives. For example, if a woman dies leaving a child and a husband, half of her property goes to the child and a quarter to her husband. When a man dies, half still goes to the child, but only an eighth to

his wife (al-Bisyānī 2007: 146–151). These rules seem to have been implemented in al-Fīqayn. One document (1241/1826) shows the distribution of the heritage of a certain Ṭayyibah: 20 *qiyāsāt* of water from al-Fīqayn *falaj* went to her daughter, 10 to her husband, and the 10 *qiyāsāt* left were distributed between her two brothers and a sister. Female relatives inherited smaller shares of property (according to a general rule prescribing that a woman should inherit half of the share of a man), but they inherited nevertheless, thus obtaining the possibility of managing the property further.

In al-Fīqayn women apparently most often dealt with water rights, and not with land. They could inherit (7 cases) or buy (6) water rights that they could sell (15 cases) or bequeath (4) later. Of the twenty cases of purchase of land properties or single palm trees mentioned in the collection, eighteen properties (90%) were purchased by men. Could this be explained by a specific custom that a woman's part of the heritage was often in the form of water rights rather than land? Water rights are probably easier to manage, as the management could be assigned to the *wakīl al-falaj* (person responsible for the distribution of water). Nevertheless, a plantation needed to be inspected and this would contradict the women's seclusion inside the household. There were cases (2) where women inherited land in this collection, but these were mostly small plots (*jalbah*) with several palm trees, which were subsequently sold. It is difficult to draw conclusions on the basis of a deficient, or rather, an incomplete collection, but we can trust the words of an elderly woman from a shaykhly family of al-Fīqayn: 'women were not interested in land. They used to stay at home and keep the house. This was their life. They were more interested in buying a new bigger house' (interview in al-Fīqayn, 20 March 2010). The general trends seem to be the same everywhere even if the economic and geographical setting is different: in mid-eighteenth-century Aleppo, gardens and orchards were mostly the object of trading between men. Women were more active in the transactions within the extended family circle and were often anxious about consolidating their shares in houses (Marcus 1983: 146, 153, 156).

As most documents do not contain any background information, it is hard to speculate how the inherited or bought property was managed. Was it done under pressure from the male part of the family; moved by the principle of *al-shuf'a* or preferential purchase (al-Bisyānī 2007: 288); or by the principle of the reunification of the family property? Were there cases when women acted independently? In several documents it is clear that the interests of women were represented by their male

relatives. There is an interesting case of a woman selling her water rights (document dated 1196/1782) to her brother in Manaḥ after she had moved to Nizwā, probably after having been married outside the community.<sup>19</sup> We can suppose that this transaction was made under pressure from the family, taking into account the difficulties related to managing property situated in another town. Water rights could be sold by women to their sons or grandsons (as is seen in relevant transactions dated 1240/1824 and 1264/1848). Guity Nashat argued that elsewhere men were eager to obtain property that women had inherited and these men would buy it at a fraction of its real value (Nashat & Tucker 1999: 66). The comparison of prices in al-Fīqayn documents shows that there was no abuse of women vendors. Even when water rights were sold to a close relative, the price was correct and corresponded to the average market price. Thus, in 1848 a woman sold an eighth of the *athar* to her grandson for MT\$ 3.75, while the year before, in a transaction between men, a quarter of the *athar* cost MT\$ 7.5.

The collection provides us with an interesting example of accumulation of property by a woman from a shaykhly family, economically active throughout her apparently long life. In 1813, she purchased 5 *qiyāsāt* of water from her first husband. In 1826, she inherited 20 *qiyāsāt* of water from her mother. Her second husband (economically active in 1791–1841) was probably much older than her. Before his death, he transferred an important part of his property to his wife — mostly water rights. Four transfers are preserved in the archive collection. The annotations witnessing to the new owner of the water were made by the same notary and possibly simultaneously. The woman thus became the owner of at least 1.75 *athar* of water from different *raddāt*<sup>20</sup> of the al-Fīqayn *falaj*. In 1848, she bequeathed MT\$ 27 to her grandson upon her death. In 1849 she bought a house in al-Fīqayn, and her last transaction (purchase of an *athar* of water) was registered in 1872. Of course, these are the exploits of a single upper-class woman and they are not necessarily representative, nevertheless it is quite remarkable that documents enable us to revive, if even very approximately, the destiny of a woman from a small community in the interior of Oman. The archive documents also help to illuminate the communities'

<sup>19</sup> A rare case for the interior of Oman and especially for small communities like the one of al-Fīqayn, where marriages between cousins were preferred.

<sup>20</sup> *raddah* (pl. *raddāt*): a subdivision of an irrigation cycle of the *falaj*, initially territorial, in practice temporal. A *raddah* can represent one day during which water comes to a certain part of the cultivated lands..

genealogical trees from which women are almost always absent.

### Conclusions

There are several possibilities of restoring women to a proper place in Omani cultural, economical, political, and religious history. In biographical collections, we come across educated virtuous women actively participating in the religious life of the community. The chronicles show us women participating in tribal and dynastic politics. In the legal documents, women reappear as owners of land and water rights, as benefactors and establishers of *awqāf*, thus opening the way to a thorough understanding of local communities. We do not intend to follow contemporary researchers who stress only ‘the positive aspects of women’s lives’, a counter-tendency that appeared as ‘a reaction to the predominant highly negative view’ on gender relations in the Muslim world (Keddie 2007: 10). The positive or negative character of our examples is directly related to the information supplied by the sources.

Sources are numerous, but they lack regularity and are physically dispersed. The documents discussed in this paper are but a drop in the ocean of the material — we

remain optimistic — previously not available or under-exploited by researchers. Only through detailed studying of all the types of sources available in one single locality (oral history, *marginalia* and ownership marks of the manuscripts, private documents, poetry, etc.) will the researcher be able to draw a comprehensive picture of the history of the local community with both its male and female components. We can only suggest that the bringers of Western research methodologies into women’s history support the efforts of Omani researchers and lovers of history.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sultan Qabus University (Oman) for hosting me as a visiting researcher in December 2007 and December 2009 to March 2010. I would also like to thank Sulṭān b. Sayf b. Qaswar al-‘Abrī (al-Ḥamrā’) and Sayf b. Khalḥān b. Khalīfah al-Būsa‘īdī (Muscat & al-Fīqayn, Manaḥ) for kindly permitting me to use their collections for research. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all those Omanis, men and women, who granted me their friendship, help, support, and hospitality.

### References

- al-Azkawī, Sirḥān b. Sa‘īd/ed. A.Ḥ. al-Qaysī.  
2005. *Tārīkh ‘umān al-muqtabas min kitāb kashf al-ghummaḥ al-jāmi‘ li-akhbār al-ummaḥ*. Muscat: Wizārat al-turāth wa-<sup>3</sup>l-thaqāfah.
- Baer G.  
1984. Women and *waqf*. An analysis of the Istanbul *tahrīr* of 1546. Pages 9–27 in G.R. Warburg & G.G. Gilbar (eds), *Studies in Islamic society: contributions in memory of Gabriel Baer*. Haifa: Haifa University Press.
- Baḥḥāz I.B. & al-Sālimī ‘A.S. (eds).  
2008. *Dictionary of Ibāḍī Terminology* (2 volumes). Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.
- Beaudevin C.  
2004. Souk féminins en Oman: séparatisme commercial ou renforcement d’une « culture de genre ». *Chroniques yéménites* 12: 141–173. Also available online at <http://cy.revues.org/189>.
- Berkey J.P.  
1991. Women and Islamic education in the Mamluk period. Pages 143–157 in N.R. Keddie & B. Baron (eds), *Women in Middle Eastern history: shifting boundaries in sex and gender*. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press.
- al-Bisyānī, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad.  
2007. *Kitāb mukhtaṣar al-Bisyawī*. London: Dār al-ḥikmah.
- Cahen C.  
1961. Réflexions sur le waqf ancien. *Studia Islamica* 14: 37–56.
- Chatty D.  
2002. L’activité féminine en Oman: entre choix individuel et contraintes culturelles. Pages 261–277 in M. Lavergne & B. Dumortier (eds), *L’Oman contemporain: État, territoire, identité*. Paris: Karthala.

- al-Ḍawayānī H.M. (ed).  
2009. *Ahamm al-nuṣūṣ al-qānūniyyah al-‘umāniyya fī majall al-wathā‘iq wa-l-mahfūzāt*. Muscat: Hay‘at al-wathā‘iq wa-’l-mahfūzāt al-waṭaniyyah.
- Deguilhem R.  
2003. ‘Gender Blindness’ et l’influence sociétale à Damas à la fin de l’Empire ottoman: des femmes qui créent et administrent les fondations pieuses. *HAWWA: Revue de la femme au Moyen-Orient et du monde musulman* 1/3: 329–350.
- Doumato E.A.  
2000. *Getting God’s ear: Women, Islam and healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eickelman C.  
1984. *Women and community in Oman*. New York: New York University Press.
- Fay M.A.  
1997. Women and *Waqf*: Property, power and the domain of gender in eighteenth-century Egypt. Pages 128–152 in M. Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire. Middle Eastern women in the early modern era*. Leiden: Brill.
- al-Ghaylānī H.H.M.  
2009. *Wilāyat ṣūr: kitāb yatanāwal sīrat ‘adad min abnā’ al-wilāyah fī ‘l-idārah wa-’l-adab wa-’l-ta‘līm wa-’l-ṭibb al-taqīdī*. [Muscat], Sultanate of Oman: al-Maṭābi‘ al-‘ālamīyyah.
- al-Ḥajrī ‘A.S.N.  
1977. *Dhikrā al-karīmāt min nisā’ balad al-wāṣil* (also known as *Kitāb al-ummuhāt al-ṣāliḥāt*). (Manuscript in the Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī’s private library in al-Mintirib, Biddīyyah). Also available online at [www.almajara.com/forums/attachment.php?attachmentid=858&d](http://www.almajara.com/forums/attachment.php?attachmentid=858&d).
- al-Hajri H.  
2006. *British travel-writing on Oman: Orientalism reappraised*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- al-Ḥajrī M.S.  
2009. Al-ishāmāt al-‘ilmiyyah li-’l-waqf fī ‘umān: wilāyat biddīyyah numūdhajan. Paper read at *Al-waqf fī ‘umān bayna al-ḥāḍir wa-’l-māḍī*, conference held at Sultan Qabus University, Muscat, 18–20 October 2009. [Unpublished.]
- al-Ḥamīdī Kh.A.  
1986. *Aqwāl ‘umān li-kull al-azmān*, i. Ruwi: al-Maṭābi‘ al-‘ālamīyyah.
- Ibn Ruzayq, Ḥumayd b. Muḥammad/ed. A. ‘Āmir & M.M. ‘Abd Allāh.  
1983. *Al-fath al-mubīn fī sīrat al-sādah al-būsa‘īdiyyīn*. (Second impression). Muscat: Wizārat al-turāth al-qawmī wa-’l-thaqāfah.
- Ibn ‘Ubaydān, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh  
1985–1986. *Jawāhir al-āthār* (20 volumes). Muscat: Wizārat al-turāth al-qawmī wa-’l-thaqāfah.
- Jennings R.C.  
1975. Women in early seventeenth-century Ottoman judicial records. The sharia court of Anatolian Kayseri. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 18: 53–114.
- Keddie N.R.  
2007. *Women in the Middle East: past and present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- al-Kharūṣī M.Kh.  
2007. *Al-rustāq ‘alā ṣafahāt al-tārīkh*. [Muscat]: Maṭābi‘ al-nahḍah.
- Marcus A.  
1983. Men, women and property: dealers in real estate in eighteenth-century Aleppo. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*. 26/2: 137–163.
- Meriwether M.L.  
1997. Women and *Waqf* revisited: the case of Aleppo, 1770–1840. Pages 128–152 in M. Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire. Middle Eastern women in the Early Modern era*. Leiden: Brill.

- Miles S.B.  
 1896. Journal of an excursion in Oman, in south-east Arabia. *Geographical Journal* 7/5: 522–537.  
 1901. Across the Green Mountains of Oman. *Geographical Journal* 18/5: 465–498.  
 1910. On the border of the great desert: A journey in Oman. *Geographical Journal* 36/2: 159–178.
- Nashat G. & Tucker J. (eds).  
 1999. *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: restoring women to history*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Okkenhaug I. M. & Flakerud I. (eds).  
 2005. *Gender, religion and change in the Middle East: two hundred years of history*. Oxford: Berg.
- Pastner C.McC.  
 1978. Englishmen in Arabia: Encounters with Middle Eastern Women. *Signs* 4/2: 309–323.
- Roded R.  
 1994. *Women in Islamic biographical collections. From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who*. Boulder, CO/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Roded R. (ed).  
 2008. *Women in Islam and the Middle East. A reader*. London/New York: I.B.Tauris. [First edition 1999.]
- Sadek N.  
 1989. Rasūlid women: power and patronage. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 19: 121–136.
- al-Sālimī, Nūr al-Dīn ʿAbd allāh b. Humayd.  
 2000. *Tuhfat al-ʿayn bi-sīrat ahl ʿumān*. (2 volumes in 1). Seeb: Maktabat al-imām nūr al-dīn al-sālimī. [First published 1928].
- al-Sayfī M. ʿA.  
 2003. *Nisāʾ nizwāniyyāt*. Muscat: Maktabat al-anfāl.
- al-Shaqṣiyyah B.Ḥ.  
 2000. *Al-sīrah al-zakiyyah li-ʾl-marʾah al-ibāḍiyyah*. Ruwi: al-Maṭābiʿ al-ʿālamīyyah.
- al-Shaybānī S.M.  
 2004. *Muʿjam al-nisāʾ al-ʿumāniyyāt: dalīl tārikhī ilā tarājim aṣḥḥar al-nisāʾ fī tārikh ʿumān al-mājidah*, i. Muscat: Maktabat al-jīl al-wāʿid.
- Singh K.  
 2011. Maintaining records in letter and spirit. *Oman Daily Observer Online*. 21 January 2011. www.main.omanobserver.om/node/37529.
- The Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America.  
 1988. *The Arabian Mission: Field Reports, Quarterly Letters, Neglected Arabia, Arabia Calling* (8 volumes, 1892–1962). Gerrards Cross: Archive Editions.
- Wellsted J.R.  
 1838. *Travels in Arabia*. (2 volumes). London: J. Murray.
- Wikan U.  
 1982. *Behind the veil in Arabia: women in Oman*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilkinson J.C.  
 1977. *Water and tribal settlement in south-east Arabia: a study of the aflāj of Oman*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- al-Zahrānī Ḥ.J. al-H.  
 2004. *Al-ḥayāh al-ijtimāʿiyyah wa-ʾl-iqtisādiyyah fī ʾl-dawlah al-saʿūdiyyah al-thāniyah (1824 – 1891)*. Dārat al-malik ʿabd al-ʿazīz.
- Zilfi M. (ed).  
 1997. *Women in the Ottoman Empire. Middle Eastern women in the Early Modern era*. Leiden: Brill.

*Author's address:*

Olga Andriyanova, 22 rue du Commandant René Mouchotte, 94160 Saint-Mandé, France.

*e-mail* misr\_olga@yahoo.co.uk