Alice: Hello and welcome to Queer as Fact, the podcast bringing you queer history from around the world and throughout time. I'm Alice.

Irene: I'm Irene.

Jas: And I'm Jason.

A: And today we're talking about the 8th century poet, Abu Nuwas.

[Into music plays]

A: I'd like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of the land on which we record this podcast, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. They are the custodians of an oral history tradition far older than this podcast.

We have some content warnings before we begin this episode. This episode will include discussions of historical and modern racism and queerphobia. Discussions of sex, sexual relationships between adults and minors, and sexual assault. There will also be mentions of slavery, some swearing in quotes, quite a bit of discussion of alcohol, mentions of imprisonment, execution, and death by poisoning, and brief mentions of the death of a dog and of civil war. If any of that sounds like something you don't want to listen to, feel free to skip this episode, and check out the rest of our content.

Before we get into Abu Nuwas' life, let's talk a bit about our sources. Abu Nuwas lived in the 8th and 9th centuries in what is modern day Iran and Iraq. His work, and anecdotes about his life, come down to us in three main anthologies, all compiled a century or so after his death. There are also various mentions of him in other sources, including 1001 Nights.

I: Oh really?

A: Yes, really.

I: Are there other real people in 1001 nights?

A: Yeah, Abu Nuwas lived in during the Abbasid caliphate, and the caliph is Harun al-Rashid, and he's the caliph in 1001 nights, so he lives in the time that that's set. Ja'far will also be here.

J: Very good.

I: Oh that's funny.

A: I was like 'oh, that's a real guy'.

[laughter]

A: Anyway. All of that aside. There's a couple of issues I wanted to flag with these sources we use for Abu Nuwas' life. Firstly, there are issues of transmission. Hamza al-Isfahani, who compiled one of these anthologies of Abu Nuwas' work in the 10th century, himself acknowledges that the provenance of a lot of his information and the poems he includes already isn't clear. And this is an issue in pretty much everything we know about Abu Nuwas.

Secondly, none of these “primary sources” (as I’ll call them, even though they are somewhat removed from Abu Nuwas’ life itself), none of them were available to me in English, and much of the secondary scholarship is also in Arabic, which made it very difficult for me to chase up the origin of a lot of the information I read about Abu Nuwas. I’ll tell you a lot of anecdotes about his life, but I can’t tell you where they come from, so it more serves to paint a general picture of how he’s understood as a person than be definitive facts of “this is what he did”.

I: Until that one time that it was on the Queer as Fact bingo card ‘sorry I don’t speak x language’–

[laughter]

I: –I was like, “we don’t do that that much!”, and since it’s been on the bingo card, I’ve been like “oh no, we do that every episode”.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, I do not speak Arabic. I apologise for any Arabic I mangle in this episode, I am doing my best.

J: Before you continue, so what is this guy’s name?

A: Abu Nuwas. A-B-U, N-U-W-A-S.

J: Okay, so it’s two names: Abu, Nuwas.

I: Abu Nuwas.

A: Mm, no, it’s one name–

J: Oh is it hyphenated at all?

A: –two words.

I: Don’t call him Abu.

A: You can’t call him Abu.

J: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[laughter]

A: We’ll get onto his name in a sec, but the third thing I wanted to comment about the sources and the information about him is that a lot of the information we have about his life is based on his poetry, but obviously we can’t actually know what parts of his poems are fictional and what parts actually reflect his personal experience.

J: Ohh, I see, you’re in my world now.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, it’s this problem.

J: Like half the media episodes we do.

A: Yeah.

J: I'm specifically thinking about, like, James Baldwin here, in terms of a recent example, but yeah this has happened a few times.

A: At least we know what happened in James Baldwin's life, to, you know, some degree. So, let's get into Abu Nuwas' life.

Abu Nawas was born in Ahwaz, in south-west of modern day Iran in the mid-700s. His full name was Abu 'Ali al-Hasan ibn Hani al-Hakami. Abu Nuwas is actually a nickname, but it's what he's generally called today. Nuwas is a word which refers to the curls which young men wore long in front of their ears at the time. I don't know what was notable about Abu Nuwas' curls, I guess they were very, you know–

I: They were particularly curly and lucious.

A: –luxuriant.

I: Was that, like, a fashion thing?

A: Yeah, yeah, it was a fashion thing.

J: Hang on, so they, so they wore them in front of their ears, so it's kind of like sideburns, but curly.

A: Yeah, I guess, picture like what an orthodox Jewish man might have.

J: Oh yeah, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

A: Like that kind of hairstyle.

Abu Nuwas' mother was a Persian seamstress named Jullaban. His father was a man named Hani ibn 'Abd al-Awwal. He's generally said to be a soldier from Damascus, who served in the army of the Ummayad caliphate – the former rulers of much of the Middle East and North Africa, who had recently been deposed by the Abbasid caliphate.

I: Mmkay, and that's the current caliphate.

A: Yes, that's the current caliphate, that's gonna be present throughout this whole story.

J: So this city that he's born in–

A: Yes.

J: –like, is there a name for the nation that he's in currently? Or like, the empire, or whatever.

A: The Abbasid empire, I guess.

J: Oh, okay!

A: So, that includes, like, Iran, Iraq, the Arab peninsula, a whole load of North Africa.

J: Mm hm.

A: Just like, that whole bit of the world.

J: And, so you said that his mother was Persian?

A: Yes.

J: Okay, so what is Persia in this context?

A: So, Persia is, roughly, analogous to modern day Iran.

J: Yeah.

A: So within the Abbasid caliphate, well especially in the part of the world he's in, there are two main ethnic groups, which is Arabs and Persians.

J: Okay.

A: So for a bit of, kind of, historical background and context, prior to around the early 600s, this part of the world had been ruled by a Sassanid empire, which was a Persian empire. The rise of Islam, beginning in the early 600s, had coincided with a general transition from a rural society to a more centralised urban society, and to a society ruled by Islamic rulers, who are called caliphs. Once the caliphs came to rule this part of the world, various non-Arab groups found themselves under this rule, and there's a lot of tension at this time, therefore, between Arabs and these other groups, especially Persians - which is why I specified that Abu Nuwas' mum was Persian, and that will come back to discussions about his identity.

So Abu Nuwas' dad, Hani, died when Abut Nuwas was very young, possibly before he was born, and he and his mum moved to the city of Basra, in what is now south-eastern Iraq - possibly for economic reasons. There, Abu Nuwas studied the Qu'ran, the Hadith - which is the sayings of Muhammad - Islamic law, and Arabic poetry.

I: How did his Persian mum feel about this, was she Muslim?

A: I'm not sure, so quite a lot of Persians did convert to Islam, but I don't know specifically about Abu Nuwas' mum.

I: Okay.

A: He's Muslim.

J: What religion did Persians have?

A: Zoroastrianism.

J: Ohhh, that's where Zoroastrianism comes from.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, that’s where Zoroastrianism comes from.

J: Cool.

A: And there’s a bunch of other, like, pre-Islamic polytheistic religions that had previously, and still at this time existed, that we just don’t know as much about.

So in Basra, Abu Nuwas eventually came to the attention of a man named Wālibah ibn al-Ḥubāb. Walibah was a Persian poet from the city of Kufa, in central Iraq. Abu Nuwas returned to Kufa with Walibah to study as his apprentice.

J: The word apprentice in a poetry context is quite funny.

[laughter]

J: Protégé?

A: Protégé might be better than apprentice.

J: But I don’t know, I kinda like the idea of using the word apprentice, because it’s, like, more acknowledging that, you know, this is work that they’re doing.

I: Yeah, it makes him sound like an artisan, you know.

J: Yeah.

A: I would say that ‘poet’ is definitely more of a formalised job at this time than it is today.

J: Yeah okay, well then apprentice probably works better.

A: Yeah. So, Walibah’s poetry on themes of shu’ubiyah – which is an anti-Arab, pro-Persian literary movement – and we also see this influence in Abu Nuwas’ work, as well as more generally in his work we see uses of Persian vocabulary and mentions of Persian cultural practices.

So this ties into the debate, which comes back to Abu Nuwas’ father Hani, about whether Abu Nuwas’ came from an entirely Persian background, whether both his parents were Persian, or whether he came from a mixed Persian and Arabic background, and his dad was Arabic. And we don’t necessarily know what his dad’s background was.

I: And we will never, just never know that, no facts about that?

A: I mean, as I said, I don’t have all the sources–

I: Ah, okay.

A: –because I don’t speak Arabic. So, if I did, I might be better positioned to read the different arguments and say, ‘Ah no, it’s actually clear that he was this guy, or he was this guy’, but I don’t have that.

I: Yeah.

A: And as we'll discuss in a minute, there's definitely some bias going on in that debate as well. But we'll get to that.

So, on the flip side to this Persian influence in his work, at other points in his work, Abu Nuwas also mocks the use of Persian vocabulary by other people, and shows a strong affiliation with southern Arabic tribes in particular – which was not politically prudent at the time, but with whom his father was possibly connected.

J: Hang, so he uses Persian language and rhetoric in some of his poetry?

A: Yes.

J: And then criticises the use of it in other people's poetry.

A: Yes.

J: Okay, I just wanted to confirm that that's where we're at.

A: Yeah, if you try to reconstruct his life from his poems, it's very contradictory. And another factor in that is that, at the time a poet depended on their patron, whoever that might be, to support them, so they had to write poetry which aligned to some degree to what their patron thought.

J: So I don't know if you know in what order these poems were published…

A: No, and that's a problem with analysing his life through his work.

J: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

J: Because it sounds like, from what you were saying before, that his mentor was writing–

I: Pro-Persian.

J: – pro-Persian poetry.

A: Yeah.

J: And so, you know, it would make sense if he was initially writing Pro-Persian poetry and, like, later on started writing pro-Southern Arabic poetry–

A: Yeah, yeah.

J: –but, like, that's purely speculative if we don't know what order these poems were written.

A: Yeah, yeah, we just don't know, and like, people definitely do try to place his poems in order, along various themes in his life, to make a coherent picture.

J: Mmhm.

A: We'll get to this in a bit when we talk about alcohol, he writes poems about wine, but he also writes poems about giving up wine and being very ascetic, and people try to say 'oh he had a very ascetic pious youth, but then he drunk when he was older', or vice versa, 'he gave it up in adulthood', but like, we just don't know.

[Jas laughs]

A: He writes contradictory poems.

I: Maybe he alternated all the time.

A: Yeah, maybe he–

I: Maybe he just gave up wine sometimes, for, like, religious occasions.

A: Just dry July.

I: Yeah.

A: He specifically said he didn't fast during Ramadan–

[laughing]

A: –if that's what you're arguing to.

J: We don't know anything except for the fact that that was wrong.

[laughing]

A: Yes.

[laughing]

A: Yeah, he specifically says that he would pretend to be sick during Ramadan, cause then he didn't have to fast.

[laughing]

I: That's very funny. I truly admire the fact that, like, nothing about him has come down through history except for *this one lie*.

[laughing]

A: I mean, you know, as with all things, maybe he didn't say that.

I: Yeah.

A: So, as I've kind of said, we can't necessarily get a clear picture of what Abu Nuwas' political leanings were in this Persian Arabic conflict, but we we look at his work as a whole, it seems more that he was willing to draw on all the traditions and influences around him, even when they conflicted each other, rather than that he followed one political school of thought.

So, as well as Walibah, he also studied under Khalaf al-Ahmar, who was an expert in Bedouin poetry, which is seen as the cultural predecessor to the Arabic poetry of Abu Nuwas' time; and he also studied under Abu 'Ubayda ibn ul-Mathanna, who's a Persian-Jewish scholar who taught him pre-Islamic history.

I: Huh, cool.

A: So we've got a whole load of different influences that we see in his work.

To come back to Walibah, Muhammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manzur (who wrote a biography of Abu Nuwas around 500 years after his death) has Abu Nuwas describe himself as "A brilliant poet whom Walibah ibn al-Hubab fucks."

[laughter]

J: I fully was just in the, like, Arabic Persian political conflict source, and like, had forgotten what this podcast was.

[laughter]

A: No, we're here for the gays.

[laughter]

A: So, to talk a bit about this relationship, Abu Nuwas was probably in his teens at this time, and this relationship fits into a contemporary model of pederasty, where adult men would have sexual relationships – specifically playing a penetrative role in anal sex – with adolescent boys.

The general understanding at the time was that these adolescent boys were old enough to consent to sex, and Abu Nuwas is depicted in all the quotes from primary sources which I had access to, at least, as consenting to this relationship with Walibah. Obviously we would see this relationship very differently in a modern context, and I think that's just a fact we have to live with as we talk about sexual relationships in this period, and other periods where this kind of thing happened.

So, these kind of pederastic relationships were discussed quite openly at the time – essays were written, for example comparing the relative sexual merits of boys and women, for men.

I: Why do they always do this.

[laughter]

A: Walibah is not the only man we have reference to Abu Nuwas having this kind of relationship with in his youth, but he is the one about who we know the most. Abu Nuwas would also go on to play the active role in these relationships as an adult, as well as writing about relationships with other men of his own age.

J: Oh, okay.

I: Okay.

J: So this seems to have been an ongoing thing in his life, and not something where the only sort of relationship with a man we have evidence of is him being the passive partner in a pederastic relationship.

A: Yeah no, this is definitely an ongoing theme in Abu Nuwas' life, that he is attracted to men.

I: Is there like, a middle zone in the life of an ancient mediterranean man where he's too old to be the younger partner in pederasty, but to young to be the older partner.

A: Look, you have hit on something that was a concern at the time–

I: [laughing] Oh really?

A: –in that there was a lot of discussion about the age of which a boy, or a man, became too old to be the younger partner in this kind of relationship.

I: Yeah, okay.

A: And specifically that was generally put as at the time when he grew a beard. And that's a whole genre, talking about that time when a boy grows a beard, and what that means for his life, and that kind of liminal place he's in, and all that kind of stuff.

I: That's so interesting, just because puberty happens to different people in like, wildly different quarters.

A: Mm, yeah.

J: And you said that he did have relationships with peers in his age bracket.

A: Yeah. He specifically says in a poem that opens "Don't worry when people say "that is not allowed, and that is not permitted", obey your passion. Make love to boys in their youth, when their beards begin to sprout, and in ripe old age."

I: Good for him.

[laughter]

I: I hope he had a nice time.

J: I just love that he's like [with tapping for emphasis] 'Let. Older. Guys. Be. Bottoms.'

[laughter]

J: 'I will die on this hill'.

[laughter]

J: Obviously it's translation. But I shouldn't be surprised that it's eloquently put –

I: He is a poet.

J: – he is a poet.

I: That is his whole deal.

[laughter]

A: So this open acknowledgement of pederasty, however, didn't mean that it was universally accepted. Scholar Everett Rowson describes it as being met with "mild disapproval", but for a bit more context, Islam forbade male-male sex, and in addition, non-reproductive sex – with men or with women – was often seen at this time as being wasteful, and similar attitudes are directed towards non-sexual activities like drinking, partying, and so on, which were seen as taking time and energy away from religious or productive pursuits.

J: So is this potentially something that was like, more associated with the, like, previous Sassanid, or…

A: Yes, yeah, so it's definitely the case that both in Abu Nuwas' time, or closer to his time, and in the modern day, people write about this as being something that came due to Persian influence. And we see this actually especially in a more modern context, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, some homophobic Arab scholars have specifically tried to distance themselves from Abu Nuwas' homosexuality by saying that that part of his self was due to Perisan influence, and specifically that Walibah, as a Persian, corrupted him, and caused him to go on and sleep with men.

I: Just like, slice him up like a pie, "no I don't like that part, it was Persian".

[laughter]

A: Yeah that's very much what's happening, so like, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, there was a real revival of Arabic literature from this period, and a lot of Arabic nationalism focusing around this literature as the basis for constructing Arab identity – but at the same time, a lot of the people doing that were very homophobic, and so they have to reckon with the fact that they think Abu Nuwas is this great poet and this great ancestor, but also slept with men. And so they pick and choose what they like and dislike about his poetry.

J: Mm. That's interesting that it's, like, you know, obviously we have a lot of instances of that kind of thing in all kinds of of cultures, but obviously in this case it's clear that it's so blatant that he is gay that they can't pretend he's not, instead they just have to pretend that he was, you know, corrupted into being gay.

A: Mm.

I: Persians made him gay.

A: Some of them do contend that he's not, but I would say it's much more common to say, like, "yes he is, and how do we reckon with this", and that's a very common way for them to reckon with this.

And like, in the early 20th century, they're quite open about the fact that they're struggling with this and having this conversation. So, Taha Hussein, for example, who's writing in 1923, specifically argues that you can't take part of Abu Nuwas but not all of Abu Nuwas, and he says "we did not create Abu Nuwas and his companions, and we did not inspire their whimsy and obscenity, and we did not dispatch them to frivolity and the pursuit of pleasure, but we found

them thus. Therefore we found ourselves with two choices, to be ignorant of them, or know them, and we chose the latter, as courage in the study of history is better than cowardice." So, he makes quite a compelling argument that you have to take the people in history as you find them in all the parts, those that you like and dislike.

J: Yeah. I get that, like, without context that's, you know, quite an impassioned thing –

[laughter]

J: – but then in context, it's like, you know, "I'm so brave, for being homophonic, and yet reading a gay writer."

[laughter]

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, and I think it's Taha saying as well, who– despite defending Abu Nuwas in this way– goes on to sort of say 'but we have to read him carefully, your ordinary person off the street shouldn't necessarily just pick up this book of poetry cause it might corrupt them, it's better to sort of study it in a more formal context as an educated person'.

I: Ah yes, exactly what we discussed last week!

[laughter]

J: Yeah, I was gonna say, this is just *The Captive* all over again! I guess it was also in the 20s.

I: Yeah this was just what was happening in the discourse of the 20s!

A: And this kind of way of dealing with Abu Nuwas' work continues all the way up to the end of this century at least, and I wouldn't be that surprised if it still continues today.

So in 1999, Bahraini writer al-Khatib al-Adnani – who refers to what he calls "sexual deviance" as a "the biggest social deformation and epidemic" – painted a picture of Walibah corrupting Abu Nuwas, who would go on to corrupt other youths, and he specifically hones in on the fact that Walibah is Persian, saying "Persians had a big influence in the spread of sodomy and the love of boys in Arab countries, as the most famous sodomites in the Abbasid period were of Persian origins…"

Now honestly, despite having sort of focused on this, I normally wouldn't bother to cite such blatant homophobia, but the reason that I quote al-Adnani is because this kind of attitudes get picked up by other scholars who are not necessarily this homophobic, but who pick it up quite thoughtlessly with relatively little acknowledgement of the context it comes in.

I: As in, other scholars kind of casually assume that his homosexuality is Persian culture or…?

A: Yeah, so for example, Philip Kennedy – who's a Professor of Middle East & Islamic Studies at NYU – wrote in 2005 that Walibah may have had what he calls "Erotic relations" with Abu Nuwas, and that "Whether or not this predisposed Abu Nuwas to visit this behaviour upon others when he was older can only be mooted…". So he gives this argument, while he doesn't straight out agree with it, he gives it a validity that I just don't think it deserves.

To continue on the theme of Abu Nuwas' sexuality, while in Basra, he had a relationship with an enslaved girl named Janan (Ja-*nan*). Incidentally, Kennedy says that "It has even been suggested, with only the vaguest evidence, that Janan herself was a lesbian." I assume this is linked a lesbophobic quote from Abu Nuwas, in which he comments that lesbian sex "is fat rubbed up by fat, and nothing more. Rub as one may … there is nothing to rise in response…", cause that's the only reference I found connected to this comment I found that Janan was a lesbian, so it seems to be saying that Janan was a lesbian and here's what Abu Nuwas had to say about that, but I never explicitly saw that laid out.

I: All I can say about that is that it looks like he wasn't giving Janan what she deserved.

A: No, and Janan was not particularly impressed with him.

[laughter]

J: And, you know that, to the extent that he had any observation of lesbian sex, it clearly wasn't very good. It seems pretty clear that he's doing that male writer thing of just, you know, assuming this is what lesbian sex looks like.

A: Yeah, and basically just saying, I didn't read the full quote, but what he's basically saying is how can you have sex if none of you has a penis.

I: Yeah, the old 'I can't imagine women's sexual pleasure' situation.

[laughter]

A: Yep, yeah, that's the one.

According to one account, Janan agreed to marry Abu Nuwas on the condition that he stopped sleeping with boys – but Abu Nuwas refused this condition, and so the relationship ended.

I: Good, get out of there Janan.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, there's several stories about, you know, ways in which Janan rejected him. But this particular story about how she asked him to stop sleeping with boys marks a general trend where Abu Nuwas' interest in Janan is placed in conflict with his interest in men and boys. Kennedy notes, for example, that Abu Nuwas' friends were surprised by his relationship with Janan, and suggests that this might have been because he "already enjoyed a reputation as a homosexual". So obviously that led me to ask, could you enjoy a reputation as a homosexual at this time?

I: I was just opening my mouth to ask that question.

[laughter]

A: And I would say that the answer is yes.

I: Mmkay.

A: So, one of Abu Nuwas' contemporaries, al-Jahiz, outlines his understanding of sexuality at the time, and he says that amongst both men and women, people fall into different categories of sexuality, some prefer women, some prefer men, some prefer eunuchs, and others like all three categories equally.

I: I love the fact that there's a third sexuality here for people who like eunuchs.

A: Yeah, that's a whole kettle of fish we're not gonna open in this episode. Can of worms, [laughing] is that what I meant?

[laughter]

A: There's definitely a lot to be said about eunuchs and gender at this time that we're just not gonna say in this episode, cause that's not what this episode is about.

I: Yeah.

J: Reasonable.

A: But maybe we will one day.

[laughter]

A: But yeah, it does seem that there was an understanding that people could have sexual preferences for different genders at this time, and that Abu Nuwas was generally seen as being, to put it in modern terms, a bisexual man, with a preference for men.

Janan is the only woman that I came across any real content about his relationship with – by real content I mean, like, anecdotes and so forth rather than just poems, he does write love poetry to women, but generally we don't know much about these women or they're not even named in the poem, and so we don't even know if this was a specific woman or if he was just writing in this genre.

J: Or if he was writing, like, as you said earlier, like, for a patron–

A: Yeah.

J: –and you know, catering to his audience, presumably some of whom were attracted to women.

A: There is a specific story about when he was asked by al-Amin – who will later become the caliph, who we'll meet – to write a poem about a woman that al-Amin found attractive, because al-Amin wasn't good enough at poetry, but he got Abu Nuwas to write this poem. So that definitely did occur.

[laughter]

J: Yeah.

A: I did also read a few passing references in secondary sources to him having been married, which I think stems from there being references in his poems to him having children, but since I don't have his work in English in full, who's to say.

I: And also, we're back at that 'are his poems autobiographical or not' situation.

A: Yeah, was he writing about someone else's children and they paid him to write a poem about having kids, or, you know, another point that's made is that he doesn't seem enthusiastic about his marriage whenever he does mention it – again I don't know exactly when that is, so whether this is a marriage that was arranged for him for some reason that he wasn't actually that keen on.

I: Or he was just making that up for fun, like–

A: Who's to say.

I: –writers do write fiction.

[laughter]

A: Yes.

J: Also, you know, he could've had children without being married.

I: Yeah, that's also true, yeah. Should've mentioned that option too.

A: So, around 786, Abu Nuwas moved from Basra to Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate. Literature and poetry was a big part of Abbasid court life, and so now is a good point for us to discuss Abu Nuwas' work in more detail. He wrote across many, many genres, but we'll cover just a couple of key ones – starting with wine poetry, for which he was most famous.

Abu Nuwas marked his move to Baghdad with a wine poem, writing "Faded is the mosque which brought together noble qualities and religion/ faded too are al-Sihan and al-Rahab / Abodes where I spent my youth until greyness appeared in my side whiskers …. Qatrabbul [which is a wine-growing district outside Baghdad] is now my spring residence … my mother now is the grape-vine."

[laughter]

A: So yeah, this poem is one of the examples I mentioned of how people kind of try to construct a life story for Abu Nuwas – where for example he was a very pious youth studying the Qur'ran, as we've mentioned and so forth, and then he moved to Baghdad and took up a life of wine and partying. But you know, whether that happened, who's to say. But this image of Baghdad – as a decadent city corrupting pious youths–

I: Mm.

A: –aligns with some understandings of Baghdad at the time, and ideas that urbanisation and an abandonment of a traditional, rural desert lifestyles had left the people of Baghdad decadent and degenerate.

I: Maybe they were just having fun.

[laughter]

J: I would say that aligns with every society in history–

[laughter]

I: Yes.

J: –and how they write about themselves.

I: It's true.

A: Everyone's like, 'we went to the cities and we became soft'.

J: Like, any society, anywhere in history, where someone has been like 'someone moved out to the country, and they got all weird and decadent'.

A: Is this not just that south Australian tourist ad with the Nick Cave song in the background?

I: Oh damn, you're so right.

J: Ooooo, yeah.

[laughter]

J: The only exception to the rule.

I: I just presented you with a very simplistic understanding of the culture of Baghdad. But there's a lot of tension and contradiction at play here: so Baghdad was an Islamic city, specifically it was founded – well not founded, there was a village there before – but it was really, took off as a city as the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, which is an Islamic caliphate. [laughing] I was trying to think of what to say because all caliphates are Islamic.

I: [laughing] Yeah!

A: But you know what I mean. And so, alcohol is forbidden in Islam, alcohol was ostensibly forbidden in this society – but also widely drunk.

I: I know that now there are, like, varying interpretations of exactly how forbidden alcohol is in Islam, was the same thing true at this time?

A: Yeah, look I'm sure it was, I don't have specific debates about the viability of drinking alcohol in Islam at this time, I know that there's discussion about the fact that the Qur'ran specifically forbids wine, and there's sort of talk about, 'well, if it's not wine can you drink it?' But broadly speaking, Muslims were not meant to drink alcohol at this time.

I: Okay.

A: Obviously they did, because people always do what they're not meant to do.

[laughter]

A: Wine poetry itself is a pre-Islamic tradition, and Abu Nuwas uses his poetry to consciously contrast pre/non-Islamic and Islamic attitudes to life. In particular comparing a Muslim focus on salvation in the next life, and, you know, following specific rules to achieve salvation in the next

life, with a pre-Islamic focus on drinking wine and enjoying your life as a way of spiting fate and your inevitable death.

Obviously this contradicts with everything I've just said about the court of Baghdad being this very decadent, alcohol soaked court, but you know, that's just how life is.

[laughter]

I: Okay, okay.

A: One of his wine poems on this theme ends with a quote from the poet Qays ibn Maymum al-A'sha, who famously gave up on his conversion to Islam at the last minute when he found out that wine would be forbidden.

I: I like the implication that, like, all his teachers were just like 'we'll tell him later, we'll tell him later'.

A: 'Don't tell him, just don't tell him'.

I: 'He's not ready for that'.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, I'm not sure exactly what the story is, if they were actively keeping that from him.

So that's our discussion of wine poetry, let's move on now to a discussion of Abu Nuwas' love poetry – and particularly his love poetry about men and boys, which is a genre called *mudhakkara*. Other people before Abu Nuwas had written this type of poetry, but Abu Nuwas is seen as one of the major innovators of the genre. As I've mentioned before, despite the pederastic model of the time, Abu Nuwas does write poems about both boys and adult men.

So, prior to the Abbasid period, discussions of male homosexuality in Arabic literature are relatively rare, and generally more negative. We see a shift in attitudes during the second half of the eighth century – something that's acknowledged by both modern writers and writers at the time. Some contemporary writers attribute this shift specifically to the Abbasid army's practice of leaving women at home when they went on campaign, and – without women to sleep with – turning to homosexuality. So the previous caliphate traditionally took women with them on campaign, the Abbasids traditionally left them at home, and that made them gay!

I: That just makes sense!

A: And this increasing openness about homosexuality, unsurprisingly, coincided with the rise of mudhakkara as a genre. In some ways, mudhakkara mirrored the conventions of *mu'annatha* – which is love poetry towards women, which was an older genre – and many Arabic love poems actually leave the gender of the subject ambiguous. We sometimes see the same poem of Abu Nuwas' categorised as mudhakkara by one compiler, and mu'annatha by another. So there's definitely some ambiguity at play, but to be clear, he definitely writes poems about men.

[laughter]

I: Okay. So some poems are not ambiguous.

A: Yeah, some poems are not ambiguous, but some poems are ambiguous. The first book I started reading, I can't remember which one it was, kind of took a while to clearly quote a poem that was about men, and said this first, and I was kind of reading it like, 'wait, so is this guy even gay? What's happening here!'

I: That is a weirdly common experience on Queer as Fact.

A: I feel like it's just a common experience with – I'm thinking specifically about the experience I had – with academic biographies, where they–

I: Yeah.

A: –assume when you pick up the book that you already kinda know the background. And if you've picked up this book like, I knew nothing about the Abbasid caliphate, I didn't even know there was an Abbasid caliphate.

[laughter]

A: And you have no background, and you're just like 'what's going on, who are these people?'

I: Yeah, I always find that when you read your, like, first book on a topic, you need to also read the wikipedia page. Just for, like, recognising names.

A: Yeah, I also had this problem with a lot of, like, technical terms about Arabic poetry that they were just throwing in there.

I: Yeah.

A: I was like, 'what does all this mean!'

J: Yeah, I guess often, like, the thing, if you're reading a book, they'll often be like 'okay, so I'm going to prove to you this thing' or like, 'I'm talking about–

A: Yeah.

J: –this point'. But they don't actually, like, therefore feel the need to justify all the other points that they're making, that like, have led to this.

A: Or even–

J: And it's like, 'okay, hang on, if I know nothing, and I'm trying to, like, make sure that my sources are, like, good'.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, I need to learn the facts before I learn the arguments.

J: Yeah.

[laughter]

A: I think especially with like the English scholarship about Abu Nuwas, and I can't speak to the Arabic scholarship, and there's also a fair bit of German scholarship, but the English scholarship is largely focused around his poetry, and kind of, Arabic poetry as a genre, and really specific conventions of that poetry–

I: Okay.

A: –like 'isn't it interesting how Abu Nuwas used the convention of closing his poems with a quote from another poet'. That's interesting, if you're into Arabic poetry. But if you're into queer history, it's just like 'okay that's nice, but what did he say in the poems?'

[laughter]

I: Okay, yeah, yeah.

A: So I was kind of trying to pick the queer content out of these articles about, you know, rhyme schemes of Arabic poetry.

I: Yeah.

J: Yeah, like structural things.

A: Yeah, yeah. So, coming back to the conventions of Arabic poetry, there are definitely differences, despite some of the ambiguity, between the conventions of love poetry to women and love poetry to men. In particular, Mu'annatha (so, poetry to women) traditionally depicted a chaste woman who rejects her lover, whereas mudhakkara – not bound by those conventions, or the expectations on women to be chaste – was much more likely to depict a reciprocal love, and thereofre, by extension, to be erotic.

In terms of who the subjects of Abu Nuwas' poetry were, most of Abu Nuwas' mudhakkara are written towards students – that may be students in monasteries, students in mosques, or bureaucratic apprentices in the court.

I: But like, not like his students, he doesn't have students?

A: He did at one point teach Hadith, but I don't know that he wrote any poems particularly towards those students.

I: Okay.

A: Just general students who were in Baghdad at that time.

I: Alright.

A: Students in Christian monasteries were particularly notorious for sleeping with men–

[Irene laughs]

A: –so much so that 'monk' was a common euphemism for pederast at the time.

I: That's very funny to me.

[laughter]

A: I don’t know exactly why, but kind of the impression I’ve got is that Christianity is inherently connected with wine, you know, you have to have wine in a monastery, and therefore that was where people went to drink, and therefore that was where they went to have sex.

I: Okay, okay.

A: I think that’s what’s happening there.

I: I guess that makes sense.

[laughter]

A: As I understand it. Abu Nuwas, in writing about his attraction to Christian students, especially loves to rhyme the words cross (salibi) and beloved (habibi).

[laughter]

I: Cute.

A: Yes.

J: Oh, I’m glad that we got a bit of the, like, poetry in the original Arabic.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, yeah. Talking about the subjects of Abu Nuwas’ poetry, to be a bit more serious here, I also do wanna acknowledge that while, as I’ve said, it was understood at this time that these teen boys could consent to sex, that doesn’t mean they always did. And sexual abuse, specifically while a boy was drunk and or asleep is not an uncommon theme in Abu Nuwas’ work, and in these genres of poetry more generally. Slavery, as we mentioned with Janan, also existed at the time, and no doubt some of these boys would have been slaves.

I: So when you say that sexual abuse was in Abu Nuwas’ poetry–

A: Mmhm.

I: Is it in his poetry as just, like, an element of the erotic poem, or is it something that his poetry is condemning, or…?

A: No, it’s just an element of the erotic poetry.

I: Alright, alright. He’s just like, ‘this is my drunk somnophilia fantasy poem.

A: Yeah.

J: It’s just a 90s comedies.

A: I didn’t know that’s what 90s comedies were. Well that’s no good.

J: Yeah, like, ‘hey let’s get up to some wacky hijinks’, and that wacky hijinks is like–

I: Sleeping with a drunk woman.

J: Yeah. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

[laughter]

J: I'm sorry to be replacing Eli for this episode, and come on and just be like 'so really this is like 90s comedy films'.

[laughter]

J: These are my only points of reference dear listeners.

[laughter]

A: So, as well as discussing the subjects of Abu Nuwas' poetry, I also want to talk a bit about the religious imagery in his poetry. So, as I mentioned, he was very well educated in the Qur'ran, Islamic law, and Hadith, and he uses a lot of Muslim imagery in his poetry, often in a tongue-in-cheek way. So he writes in one poem, for example, about two boys who are in love, and how they have sex five times a day, whenever they hear the call to prayer, rather than going to the mosque.

[laughter]

I: That's so funny.

A: In another example, to come back to the Arabic, he puns on the similarity between the words 'qibla' – which is the direction of Makkah that Muslims face to pray – and qubla – which means kiss, saying in one poem to a woman, "God has made your face a *qibla* for me, /So allow me to pray toward your face and have a *qubla*."

[laughter]

I: Awh, cute.

A: I like that you refer to all these, like, word plays as 'cute', because I think that–

I: I think that they're inherently cute!

A: I know, but I think at the time, they were like– word play was a big thing in culture at this time–

I: Yeah.

A: – and they were like 'oh this is such clever witty word-play', and you're just like 'Awh. Cute.'

[laughter]

J: Yeah, this is highbrow media, at the time.

[laughter]

J: I mean I guess, you know, it really makes you think of Shakespeare, right? Like in an English language context. I don't know, at least to me, you know–

A: Ah yeah.

I: Okay.

J: –Shakespeare is one of the primary exposures we get to historical poetry…

A: Yeah, like a Shakespearean sonnet has puns, and is also highbrow love poetry.

J: But what I was gonna say is, that, you know, like, one of the things you learn as you learn more about Shakespeare, is that, like, whilst English teachers, you know, like to hold him up as highbrow, you know this is the classics, like, obviously a lot of what he was writing was…

I: Was like popular media at the time.

J: Was popular media, and was not considered particularly highbrow. To then come into this, and it's like, yeah, I feel like that's the wavelength I'm on. So then when you read out that, it feels very Shakespearean in terms of, 'oh okay, so this is like, lowbrow, popular, humour, romance'.

A: I don't know the exact context which this particular poem was written for. So Abu Nuwas in the court, he's patronised by various figures in the court, including one of the caliphs, but at the same time, we do hear stories of him just reciting his poetry on the street, and crowds gathering to hear his poetry on the street. So, I don't know if there were specific poems written for these different specific contexts, or if it was the same poetry that was being appreciated by the court and by some guy walking down the street.

J: And I mean, you know, this is something that I always think about with these kinds of discussions, is like, just because it was written for the court doesn't mean it's not considered kind of sweet or funny, or whatever.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, that's true too.

I: Rich people also do like sex jokes.

[laughter]

A: Shocking.

In other poems, Abu Nuwas is more explicitly and self-conciously blasphemous – in one, for example, he demands that Iblis – which is the devil in an Islamic context – make a young man fall in love with him, with the threat that he will dedicate himself to the study of Qu'ran if he doesn't.

[laughter]

A: And he often depicts himself as leading this really, kind of, decadent lifestyle, but, kinda, thinking about, or threatening to, or joking about turning away from that lifestyle and becoming this really pious religious studious man.

I: I was really thinking, when you were like, 'it gets more explicitly blasphemous', I was like, literally the first thing you introduced us to was 'these two boys fuck instead of pray, five times a day'.

[laughter]

I: I was like, where are you going now?

A: The devils here!

[laughter]

J: That's so funny, that that like, specific genre of gay man who's like, constantly threatening to turn over a new leaf, because I feel like that's such a trope of mid-20th century, like–

I: Yeah, yeah.

J: – American, gay media.

A: That's true.

J: Like I'm pretty sure there's something like that in *The Boys in the Band*–

I: Yeah, yeah.

J: for instance, and like stuff like that, and I'm just like wow, the parallels.

I: Yeah!

[laughter]

A: So, all these themes of wine, sex, mocking religion – and generally an attitude that he should do what he wanted now and hope God would forgive him later on – were unsurprisingly controversial, and condemned by many of his contemporaries.

J: Boo.

[laughter]

A: Ultimately, the caliph – Harun al-Rashid – eventually had Abu Nuwas imprisoned for his poetry.

I: Oh.

A: The specific poem in question was one which brings many of these controversial themes together.

I: I'm so keen.

A: It opens, “Many a nagging shrew, full of good advice, seeks this impious rebel’s repentance…” Abu Nuwas goes on to describe his attraction to a Christian boy who served him wine, who he describes as “...a lithe young man … /with a curl on each temple and a look in his eye that spells disaster...”

[Jas chuckles]

I: Okay.

J: “A look in his eye that spells disaster”, that’s so dramatic, I love it.

A: The poem ends with Abu Nuwas saying that if he wasn’t afraid of Satan “I would convert to his religion”– that is, the boy’s religion, not Satan’s religion.

[laughter]

A: “I would convert to his religion, entering it knowingly and with love, / For I know that the Lord would not have distinguished that youth so unless his was the true religion.”

[laughter]

I: Oh, incredible.

J: ‘This guy is so hot that Christianity must be correct.’

[laughter]

I: I also just love the fact that Christianity is the gay religion in this setting.

A: Yeah, actually I hadn’t really thought specifically about the connotations of Christianity in this setting, but you’re absolutely right, Christianity is like, the–

I: The gay sex religion.

A: The gay, sex, drinking, really like, I was gonna say ‘Bacchic’, that’s maybe not the word, but you know.

[laughter]

A: The Bacchic religion.

[laughter]

A: I understand that it’s specifically the blasphemy which led to Abu Nuwas being imprisoned for this poem, but overall, it was a very controversial…

I: I mean, truly, what was in there that wasn’t blasphemy [laughing].

[laughter]

A: Well I think specifically the fact that he talks about Christianity being the true religion was kind of the last straw, for the caliph.

I: Yeah, okay.

A: I don't know much about his time in prison. He got out again, he continued on with his life. According to one anecdote, he turned to the Qu'ran for defence while in prison, citing its reference to poets who "say what they do not do", to suggest that his poetry didn't actually reflect what he was doing in his day to day life.

J: That's quite funny.

A: Which is, you know, interesting when you consider that that's our problem with sources, but also, that's what he was saying to get himself out of prison. So who's to say if that was true!

J: So, to go back to the early question of like, obviously we don't know in what order he wrote various poems, but we do have some idea, then, based on like, do we have poems that are clearly from after he's been in prison?

A: Yeah, yeah, so we do have poems that are from, you know, specific times in his life, will reference, for example, specific people he knew in his life or that kind of thing, but it's not like every poem we can put a date on. And especially with things like wine poems, that are less concrete, and more just say, 'I went to the tavern, and we were drinking wine and a beautiful boy served us wine, and we had a great night', like, that can happen at any point in your life.

[laughter]

A: Whereas, 'I was in prison, and I wanted to leave' is a very small window, hopefully, in your life.

[Jas chuckles]

A: He will go to prison again.

[laughter]

J: So that's, so therefore it will not be easy to determine exactly when in his life…

A: And, full disclosure, I don't know if this quote about saying what he does not do comes from this time in prison or a different time in prison. [laughing] I don't even know how many times he went to prison!

I: Do you know more of the poems that got him thrown in prison?

A: I think that's the only one that I specifically read as, like, 'this is the poem that he went to prison for'. He may have– and this isn't as concrete, I don't know exactly what the primary sources are– he may have also written a poem specifically satirising Northern Arab tribes and praising Southern Arab tribes (himself possibly being descended from a Southern Arab tribe) but the Abbasids being Northern Arabs, and so that was obviously unpopular, and that may also have got him sent to prison another time. I think there's another one where he questions whether heaven is real that also may have got him sent to prison– it's not really clear if this is one time in prison where he did a bunch of things and eventually the caliph was like 'that's it', or if this is multiple instances.

I: Okay.

J: So at least three potential reasons he could have gone to prison.

A: Yes.

I: At least two prison stays?

A: At least two prison stays, at least three potential reasons for going to prison, and we will talk about another of his specific prison stays.

I: Mmkay.

A: So I want to take a quick off-topic deviation now into another genre of poetry for which Abu Nuwas is famous: hunting poetry. This doesn't have anything to do with this podcast, I just wanted to talk about his dog.

[laughter]

I: Okay.

J: I mean, dogs are always significant to this podcast.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah! So his hunting poetry focuses a lot on the various animals that assist in the hunt. That includes dogs, falcons, also cheetahs which they trained to help them hunt and to–

I: Oh that's incredible.

A: –ride on their horses in front of them until they were ready to jump off and hunt.

I: Wait – the cheetah sat on his horse with him?

A: The cheetah sat on his horse, yes, correct.

I: You just like sit in your saddle petting your cheetah or…?

A: Yes, that's correct.

J: That's incredible. That's so amazing.

[laughter]

I: I can't believe that I have never seen this in a movie. I guess cause nobody makes movies about 800s Middle East.

A: Well maybe they should. I mean–

J: Well I guess also, like, to the extent that, like, you know, sort of historical genre movies exist, they tend to be live action, in which case, getting a cheetah into a saddle [laughing] is probably quite difficult!

A: Apparently cheetahs are quite easy to train and the biggest trouble is that they're incredibly lazy, so it's not getting them to not maul you or anything, it's literally just getting them to do stuff.

[laughter]

J: Yeah, well, cheetahs just have to rest constantly because like…

A: They go so fast!

J: They go *so* fast, that they can only do that for like 30 seconds.

A: And then they have to sleep to prepare for next time that they go fast.

I: So in conclusion, if there's a cheetah in your movie, you can do like one take per day with it.

A: Yeah.

J: Yeah.

A: And I guess that's why there aren't cheetahs in movies! So, Abu Nuwas wrote in particular, as I said, a lot of poems about the dogs he hunted with – including an elegy for his dog Hallab, who was killed by a snake–

I: Oh no!

A: –in which he writes "Poor dog! - He was a lord among hounds!"

J: Oh, Hallab!

A: That was the whole reason I told you about hunting poetry, that's it, that's the genre.

I: That cheetah digression was also cool.

[laughter]

J: Oh yeah. I would have been very upset with you if you had, like, later told me about the cheetah thing, and just like 'why did you not tell me this immediately'.

A: This is gonna be your number one takeaway from this episode.

J: Yeah, yeah.

I: Yeah, yeah.

A: Sorry Arabic literature.

[laughter]

A: So, as I mentioned before, to be successful in the Abbasid caliphate, a poet needed a patron.

I: Like we need patrons.

[Jas laughs]

A: Thank you for supporting this podcast.

[laughter]

J: Smooth as butter.

A: Abu Nuwas had several patrons throughout his time in Baghdad, but in particular he sought patronage of the Barmakids, a prominent family with the caliph's court. The Barmakids patronised many poets, but Abu Nuwas' doesn't seem to have had much success with them, something which Kennedy ascribes to the jealousy of Aban bin Abd al-Lahiqi, who was already their client poet, and had a strong connection to the family.

There are several stories about rivalry between the two poets. Notably, Abu Nuwas wrote a poem about Al-Fadl ibn Yahya – one of the Barmakids – to celebrate his return from his post as governor of the province of Khurasan. Aban, the Barmakids poet, paid Abu Nuwas for the poem, but Abu Nuwas wasn't impressed with the amount he got, and so he slapped Aban in the face, and called his mother a prostitute.

[laughter]

I: It's no wonder he didn't get a job.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, he's a pretty inflammatory guy. And Abu Nuwas would go on to write several satirical poems about Aban – in one, he writes that Aban's mother must have gotten mixed up when naming him, and meant to name him Atan, which means donkey.

[laughter]

J: Get wrecked.

I: Get wrecked, Aban.

[laughter]

I: I sort of, when you started this expected them to be, like, rivals, but they're not at all. Like this guy is just, like, a guy with a steady job and–

[laughter]

I: –Abu Nuwas is just like, 'I want your job. You suck.'

J: 'You're a donkey.'

I: 'You're a donkey, you smell. Gimme your job.'

A: So, I understand why you [laughing] interpreted that situation in this way, but satirical poetry was much more powerful in the Abbasid caliphate than it is now.

[hysterical laughter]

I: [calming down] Okay, okay.

A: So, whereas to us, writing satirical poetry about someone just sounds like a kind of petty thing, it was quite influential at the time. Poetry, as I've mentioned, was a huge part of Abbasid society, and was one of the key ways in which people were talked about in the public sphere, and in which they were remembered after their deaths. So Aban was quite concerned about these poems.

I: Okay, so I need to imagine it more like he's leaving him bad reviews on Uber Eats.

[laughter]

A: 'Aban, court poet of the Abbasid caliphate, Uber Eats driver'.

J: I guess that like– I guess really, to use a more serious comparison, this is more like writing an op-ed–

I: Yeah.

J: –in the New York Times.

A: He's been cancelled.

[laughter]

I: By woke moralists.

A: He has not been cancelled.

[laughter]

A: Aban apparently at one point offered to pay Abu Nuwas a significant amount of money to stop writing this satirical poetry.

I: Well I guess that works.

A: Yeah. It's a strategy. So in the year 803, Caliph Harun al-Rashid quite suddenly turned against the Barmakids, and had many of them imprisoned or killed.

I: Oh. Lucky he didn't work for those guys.

A: So there are various reasons given for this sudden change of heart, most often that Harun discovered that his sister was having an affair with his advisor, Ja'far ibn Yahya al-Barmaki. It's Jafar.

J: Oh my god.

I: Is it… actually the same Jafar?

A: Yeah, it's the Jafar. It's the guy in *Aladdin*.

[laughter]

I: Oh cool. Hi!

J: Ah so, Jafar in *Aladdin* tryna get with Jasmine…

A: Yeah, that's the plot, that's what's happening right now.

J: We've cracked the code team.

A: Yeah she has a tiger, it's basically a cheetah, it's coming together.

[laughter]

A: So, confusingly, with no sense of self-preservation, despite of his ongoing feud with Aban, Abu Nuwas at this point showed support for the Barmakids, and wrote an elegy to the family.

J: I am beginning to feel like this man is just contrary for the sake of being contrary.

A: I think you're right. That definitely seems to be a theme throughout in his life, that he will write whatever is gonna be the most inflammatory in the moment.

I: I mean I guess that's what gets you remembered?

A: Yeah, I mean, that might be cause that's what gets you famous as a poet. Following the fall of the Barmakids and the writing of this poem, Abu Nuwas spent some time living in Cairo, possibly because he was exiled due to supporting the Barmakids.

I: Mmkay.

A: But, could also be for other reasons, it's possible that he followed a wealthy patron there – we don't really know.

J: What's happening in Cairo at this stage of history?

A: So Cairo is also under the rule of the Abbasid caliphate.

J: Okay, cool.

A: So the stories of Abu Nuwas' journey to Cairo show that by this time in his life, he was a well-known poet beyond Baghdad itself. When he passed through Damascus, for example, people gathered in the street to hear him recite his poetry.

I: Cool.

A: Abu Nuwas was also personally very aware of his skill as a poet.

[laughter]

A: When he arrived in Cairo, he entered the court of the governer al-Khasib ibn ‘Abd al-Hamid, and there he dismissed the rest of the poets in the court, claiming that his poems would be “like Moses' staff” to their poems, and that he was the only poet the court needed.

[laughter]

I: He’s so bold.

A: He is.

J: Oh, wow.

A: There was a bit of discussion in scholarship – like, more close to his life scholarship and modern scholarship – that is basically around how did he get away with this, why was he allowed to continue being in society behaving in this way.

[laughter]

I: I mean, he went to prison at least twice, he did not get away with this.

A: That’s true!

I: Like, I think that from our thousand-years-in-the-future standpoint, going to prison seems like a much smaller deal than it would have in his life.

A: Yeah.

I: Like when you– when you hear about a historical figure spending, like, two years in prison, you’re like, ‘yeah, whatever’.

A: Yeah, you’re like, ‘oh yeah, that wasn’t a significant part of their life, then they just went back to what they were always doing’, but…

I: But like, imagine if you have a real friend that spends two years in prison.

J: Mm.

A: Yeah.

I: Like, that affects your life.

J: Yeah, I mean, you know, like, I feel like at least from a modern scholarship perspective, ‘how did he get away with it’ is a statement– I guess it depends on when exactly your scholarship was published–

I: Mm.

J: –because, I feel like in a post-2016 world, ‘how did he get away with it’ is not a statement that we really, like–

[laughter]

A: Yeah.

J: –you know, think that much about anymore.

A: That’s true.

I: Men just say words all day.

[laughter]

A: Men say whatever they want, and there are no consequences.

Abdallah ibn al-Mu'tazz, who lives around a century after Abu Nuwas – so, definitely pre-2016 – attributes the fact that Abu Nuwas continued to get away with this kind of behaviour with, essentially, his winning personality, saying that “he had an immense saving grace: he was witty and charmed people with his elegance, grace, amenity, and the diversity of his playful spirit. He was the most generous of men and unstintingly giving.”

I: I feel like this is also one of those things that’s kind of hard to see from a great historical distance.

A: Mmm, yeah.

I: Where you can completely understand somebody you know in your life who is kind of an arsehole, but is likeable and fun.

A: Yeah, yeah.

J: Mm.

I: But it’s much harder to comprehend ‘this guy has charisma’ from 1000 years remove.

J: I guess it’s also like, that’s a very specific genre of, like, creative man, right?

I: Yeah, yeah, for sure.

J: That thing of, like, being super generous, because it’s like, well, like ‘I can always just write more poetry’.

I: Yeah.

J: You know? Like, ‘I’m a genius, I can just write more poetry and make myself more money’.

A: Yeah, yeah, and definitely also some other modern scholars talked about this, kind of more specifically in the context of the Abbasid caliphate, which is a time which really focused on poetry–

J: Yeah.

A: –and arts, and where a man like this could be really successful, and also a time where the ruling classes were very confident in themselves, and very open to this kind of humorous, satirical work.

J: Mmm.

A: And they didn’t feel threatened by it I guess.

I: Yeah.

A: I mean, obviously sometimes they did because he went to prison, but, you know, they didn't feel threatened by it to the point where it ruined his career.

I: Yeah. But also, obviously what threatened them there was not criticism of the ruling family or anything, it was his whole satan deal.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, it was– it was blasphemy.

I: Yeah.

J: And I– I guess that makes sense if you, you know, like, religion is the underpinning of–

I: Mm.

A: Yeah.

J: –how your rulers legitimise.

I: Yeah, yeah, absolutely

J: That, you know, yeah, criticising the monarch, not a big deal, criticising the religion that backs the monarch…

I: Maybe a big deal.

A: A bigger deal.

I: Yeah.

A: So, Abu Nuwas came back from Egypt, he returned to Baghdad in a couple of years. In 809, Harun al-Rashid died, and his son al-Amin became caliph. Despite his less-than-great relationship with Harun, Abu Nuwas seems to have been close with al-Amin, and wrote several poems to him, which are generally less formal than normal poems written by clients to their patrons, suggesting they had a genuine friendship rather than just a client-patron relationship.

J: Presumably they knew each other before he ascended to the caliphate–

A: Yeah, yeah.

J: –and so, you know, that kind of makes sense that they didn't have like a direct client-patron relationship in the same way before, that then they subsequently did.

A: Yeah. Kennedy suggests that they may have been romantically involved. He quotes a poem by Abu Nuwas which he says is assumed to be about al-Amin, though once again cause I don't have all the scholarship, I don't know why he says that.

[laughter]

But in the poem, Abu Nuwas says "I am in love but cannot say with whom … when I think about my love for him, I feel for my head and wonder if it is still attached to my body!"

[laughter]

J: Wow, I love that. Just like, 'where is my head, where your head at'.

I: Yeah.

A: Al-Amin, for his part, was apparently attracted to men, he was also specifically attracted to eunuchs, so much so – this is a bit of a non Abu Nuwas related tangent, but I wanted to tell you it.

[laughter]

A: So much so that his mother, Zubayda, instituted a new practice amongst the servant girls who worked as entertainers in the court, where she would have them dress and perform as men, with the idea that this would entice al-Amin to find women attractive. These performers were known as ghulamiyyat – which translates as 'boylike'. So they would wear male clothes, with masculine hair-dos. Some of them would use perfumed paint to paint moustaches on their faces, or the long sidecurls which I've mentioned. Some would also use the same paint to paint verses of poetry onto their cheeks, which I just thought was cool.

J: Definitely some of those dancers were like, 'oooh this…is nice'.

A: 'This has… awakened something in me'.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, so these ghulamiyyats gender presentation is generally just discussed in relation its attractiveness to men, it being something that was designed to be attractive to men, rather than being something that reflected any personal identity. Everett Rowson, for example. argues that it was largely something enforced on enslaved people by their masters – beginning with Zubayda – and wouldn't necessarily reflect personal identity. But, on the flipside, we do see, for example, one of these ghulamiyat – who Abu Nuwas writes a poem to, and we'll talk about a bit more – named Maknun, who not only dresses and performs in this way, but also undertakes a variety of traditional masculine activities – playing polo, archery, playing the lute (which was generally done by men), and so on – suggesting that this role is one taken on in more aspects of life than just a performance in the moment at court. There's probably a lot more research to do here.

J: I'm just imagining this person's like 'wait wait, what are you doing, why are you doing all this, like, traditionally masculine stuff', it's like 'oh, no, it's–

I: 'Method acting'.

[laughter]

J: Yeah! Like, the person about to invent method acting

I: Yeah, yeah.

J: Haven't you heard?

[laughter]

A: Abu Nuwas writes about Maknun "she found that the attire of a boy best perfected her beauty, and was more appropriate for profligacy and sin".

[Irene laughs]

I: "More appropriate for sin".

A: Yes.

I: Incredible.

A: 'I am dressed for sin'

[laughter]

A: So there's obviously a lot more here to say about gender and…

I: Sin.

A: Sin. [laughing] But that's not what this episode is about unfortunately so, moving on!

I: Okay.

A: I also wanted to talk about ghulamiyyat because it helps us to talk a bit more about Abu Nuwas' own sexuality, and specifically the way he represents his sexuality in this poem that he wrote about Maknun.

So, in this poem, he writes about when he slept with Maknun, and he says "... when we were finally united, I felt myself in a tempestuous sea,/Drowning… amidst its clashing waves." But, then, in the poem, he's rescued by a boy. He says ""Help me, boy!" I cried, and he came to me…" Ibn Manzur, in his biography of Abu Nuwas, interprets this boy as Maknun, having Abu Nuwas add a note after the poem that "I became so involved in the act that I imagined her as a boy." This sea imagery, where Abu Nuwas describes women as a dangerous sea, and boys or men as kind of a safe stable land, in terms of relationships, is pretty common in his poems.

I: Interesting.

A: It's quite interesting to see it combined in the one poem about one person, but its definitely on ongoing theme for him.

I: Interesting, yeah. I'm just sort of thinking about the way that often what you see in, like, I guess, poetry or other, like, fictional, or like, prose depictions of love as well–

A: Mmhm.

I: –is that people will sort of describe, like, romantic love as the wild and dangerous kind of love.

A: Mm.

I: And platonic love as this, like, stable steady love.

A: Yeah, or like, going out and having more casual sex as the tempestuous sea, and, for example, the steady marriage as the steady land, whereas Abu Nuwas even writes one of these poems – unfortunately I don't have the poem itself, because I never saw it – but apparently he writes on of these poems on the occasion of his marriage about the woman that he marries.

J: Where the marriage is the stormy sea.

A: Yeah.

I: I don't know. What kind of love feels like a stormy sea to you guys?

[laughter]

I: I need more data.

A: So. Coming back to Abbasid politics, Al-Amin had a half-brother, al-Ma'mun, who was slightly older, but who had been named second-in-line to the caliphate after al-Amin.

I: Okay?

A: I won't go into all the political details, there's a lot going on, but a civil war broke out between the two brothers over succession, which ultimately led to al-Ma'mun besieging Baghdad itself. Throughout the civil war and its lead-up, al-Ma'mun attacked Al-Amin for his hedonism. The craziest story I read about him, which I just assume al-Ma'mun made up–

[laughter]

A: –is that he put earrings on the fish in his private pond.

[laughter]

I: They don't have ears though!

A: Yeah, I don't– I was trying to, like, understand what that meant, and I was like 'how? Where? On the fins?!'

Al-Amin was also reportedly sitting in a perfumed pavilion, drinking wine, while al-Ma'mun's armies besieged Baghdad. So that's the general image of al-Amin that's painted–

I: Mmkay.

A: –by his enemies.

J: I assume, based on the fact that we have this image being portrayed, that this does not end well for him.

A: No, it does not end well for him.

[laughing]

A: How did you guess?

But first, attacking al-Amin's hedonism, for al-Ma'mun, also meant attacking his association with Abu Nuwas, and specifically the fact that the two men regularly drank together. Following Abu Nuwas' denunciation by al-Ma'mun, Al-Amin tried to distance himself from Abu Nuwas by having him imprisoned again. This doesn't seem to have stopped him writing the kind of poetry he was always writing. In one poem penned in prison, he writes "al-Amin, I languish in the sodomites' prison and fear being buggered. Do you wish them to bugger your very own poet?"

[laughter]

I: [laughing] That's very funny.

J: I get that obviously the word bugger is not in the original Arabic. Like in an Australian context, I consider that to be a very mild swear.

A: Yeah.

J: Like, sort of on par with like, bastard.

I: I feel like that's on the level of saying, like, sugar and fudge, to be honest.

[laughter]

I: Definitely not like a real swear word.

A: And definitely not something you would expect to see in poetry, I guess.

J: It doesn't fit my picture of a 9th century court poet–

[laughter]

J: –writing to the caliph.

I: Yeah.

A: 'Bugger, I'm in jail'

J: 'Oh bother'

[laughter]

I: Yeah.

A: So, as you predicted Jason, this whole situation didn't end well for al-Amin, and he was ultimately killed in the siege of Baghdad, and al-Ma'mun succeeded him as caliph. Abu Nuwas seems to have survived the regime change and gotten out of prison.

I: Alright, so their plan worked at least.

A: I don't think *this* was their plan.

[laughter]

A: I think their plan was to defend al-Amin's reputation by distancing himself–

I: Oh, okay.

A: –from Abu Nuwas, not save Abu Nuwas.

I: But it turned out that it defended Abu Nuwas' reputation by distancing him.

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

A: Apparently – and, you know, I don't know the exact sources for this, et cetera et cetera – al-Ma'mun did actually quite admire Abu Nuwas as a poet, and liked his poetry, but it suited him at that time to paint this picture of al-Amin and Abu Nuwas leading this really hedonistic debauched lifestyle.

[laughter]

A: So now, we come to the end of Abu Nuwas' life – he passed away in around 814 or 815. Various stories are told of the cause of his death. One is that he was poisoned by his patrons, the Nawbakht family, after writing a satire about them, or possibly after being framed for writing a satire about them by a jilted lover.

[laughter]

I: Wouldn't you just fire him?

A: Another possibility is that he didn't come out of prison, that he died in prison; and a third story, probably the most apocryphal, is that he was up all night drinking in a tavern right until the moment of his death.

[laughter]

I: I don't know. That sounds just as plausible, frankly.

A: It could have happened, but it seems more to fit with, you know, the–

I: Image.

A: –image, than a real person, yeah.

J: To answer your question Irene, as to why someone would poison him, I mean, like, we've seen throughout his life that like, when he gets punished, he doesn't back down.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, if you fire Abu Nuwas, he's going to write a satirical poem about you that ruins you.

I: Yeah that is true.

A: That’s not going to stop him.

I: That’s true.

J: And like, someone else will hire him because everyone loves his poetry.

I: Okay, so poisoning him is the only option.

[laughter]

A: So, Kennedy notes that there are many stories specifically about Abu Nuwas being visited on his death bed by friends, which suggests he wasn’t poisoned or in a tavern, but was ill. So, he posits that it’s most likely he passed away from illness in the home of the Nawbakht family, and that that lead to later rumours that they poisoned him.

J: I guess they could’ve poisoned him and then, like, poison didn’t immediately kill him, like, not all poisons, like, kill you in 5 minutes or whatever.

A: Yeah, yeah. I mean I think we honestly just don’t know.

J: Yeah, that obviously is the most thing, is that we just don’t know.

A: We just don’t know, anything could’ve happened.

So, that brings us to the end of Abu Nuwas’ life. I would generally try and wrap up an episode by perhaps talking about the legacy that an individual has, but I think we’ve already addressed a lot of the conflicted legacy of Abu Nuwas among 19th and 20th century Arab scholars, which is most of the modern legacy at the moment, I’d say, and talked about the way they tried to distance themselves from, or deny, his sexuality. Unfortunately, as I alluded to when talking about having to pick through literature based sources for hints of queerness, there’s not that much scholarship in English that focuses on him being queer. I hope there’s more scholarship about that in Arabic, if people do read Arabic, but I also hope that this episode goes some way towards redressing that lack of conversation about his queerness that exists at the moment.

With that, we’ve been Queer as Fact. I’m Alice.

I: I’m Irene.

J: And I’m Jason.

A: If you enjoyed this episode, you can find the rest of our content on Podbean, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever it is you get your podcasts. If you listen to us on Apple Podcasts, or I believe uou can now do this on Spotify too, we really appreciate if you leave us a rating out of 5 stars, cause that really helps us to reach a bigger audience.

If you want more Queer as Fact content inbetween episodes, we’re on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr as Queer As Fact. If you want to support us financially, you can become a patron, just like an Abbasid poet, we need patrons to continue.

[laughter]

A: But we won’t destroy you with satirical poetry if you stop being a patron.

J: I guess we could offer that as a tier.

I: Yeah.

A: We write a satirical poem about you.

I: I'll do it, I'll do it!

[laughter]

A: Okay. Or, if you don't wanna become a patron, [laughing] you can also buy our merch on Redbubble, with no fear of retaliation.

[laughter]

A: You can find links to all of those things on our website, which is queerasfact.com.

Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.

[outro music plays]