

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Razia, Sultana of Delhi (1205-1240)

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Islam liberated men and women from the shackles of slavery and made them masters of the world. The history of the Mamlukes illustrates this observation. In the 9th and 10th centuries, there was a brisk slave trade down the Volga River, near the Caspian Sea. The Vikings raided Europe with unrelenting ferocity in search of booty and slaves. Eastern Europe, fossilized as it was between local fiefdoms, was a particular target of these raids. Men, women and children were captured in northern and eastern Europe, brought down the Volga River and sold to Muslim and Jewish merchants. Ibn Fadlun gives a graphic picture of the deplorable conditions in the Viking slave ships.

The root word in Arabic for Mamluke is *m-l-k* (*malaka*, to own). The European slaves were in great demand in Muslim courts because the men made excellent soldiers and the women were sought for their fair skin. Young Mamluke men were trained in special camps as bodyguards, taught the precepts of Islam and inducted into the army. The Spanish court of Cordoba as well as the Fatimid court in Cairo employed Mamluke bodyguards. However, it was with the rise of the Turks that the Mamlukes came into their own. The Turks displaced the Arabs and the Persians from the centers of power in Asia during the 9th and 10th centuries and became kingmakers. As the Mamlukes were inducted into the armies and the Turks dominated the armed forces, the slaves came to be referred to as Mamluke Turks. Some of the slaves were from Turkish tribes (prior to their conversion to Islam) in which case there was both an affinity of blood with their Turkish owners as well as an affinity of profession.

According to the *Shariah*, a Muslim may not hold another Muslim as a slave. Therefore, as the Mamlukes became Muslim, they became free men and women, with full privileges accorded to all believers. In an age when the path to kingship led through the army, the Mamlukes were not only great soldiers but were in close proximity to the center of power. Through their exploits they rose through the court ranks, married the daughters of the sultans and themselves became kings and sultans. Islam had taken them from the slave ships of the Vikings to the luxurious thrones of Asia and Africa. It was from the ranks of these Mamlukes that the 13th century dynasties of India and Egypt emerged.

Razia was the daughter of Altumish, a Mamluke who was a slave of Qutbuddin Aibak, Turkish sultan of Delhi. Altumish demonstrated such extraordinary abilities as a soldier that he was rapidly promoted to be a general officer in the army. Qutbuddin gave his own daughter in marriage to Altumish. After the death of his father-in-law, Altumish ascended the throne of Delhi (1211). He proved himself to be not only a first class soldier but an outstanding statesman as well. When Genghiz Khan descended upon

Central Asia (1219), Altumish kept him out of India through consummate diplomacy and a determined military posture. Delhi and Lahore were saved from the ravages of the Mongols. Altumish had three sons and one daughter, Razia. The sons proved to be incompetent, more interested in wine and song than in the affairs of the state. Altumish therefore nominated his daughter to be his successor, against the advice of some of his courtiers and *kadis*. In accordance with her father's wishes, Razia ascended the throne of Hindustan in the year 1236.

Altumish was an exceptional monarch not only because he rose from being a slave to become the sultan of one of the most powerful dynasties of the age, but because he broke with tradition and nominated his daughter as his heir-apparent in recognition of her merit and ability over his sons who were incompetent. Razia immediately faced a challenge from her brother Ruknuddin who had killed his own brother to intimidate Razia and force her to abdicate. Razia, a consummate politician, went public and in the *Jamia Masjid* of Delhi, appealed to the general populace for justice. The common folk displayed their intrinsic love of fair play. Ruknuddin was arrested for the murder of his own brother, tried before a *Shariah* court and executed.

Razia wasted no time in establishing her authority as the sovereign of Hindustan. She ordered coins minted in her name as "Pillar of women, Queen of the times, Sultana Razia, daughter of Shamsuddin Altumish". The *juma'a khutba* was read in her name. However, her authority was not legitimate until the Caliph in Baghdad accepted it. Even though he had lost all of his dominions in Asia to the Mongols, the Caliph was still the spiritual and titular head of Sunni Islam and he carried the title of Emir ul Momineen (leader of the believers). Only he could bestow legitimacy upon a sultan. Razia, a Turk and a Sunni, declared her allegiance to the Abbasid Caliph with the following proclamation: "In the time of Imam al Mustansir, Emir ul Momineen, Malika Altumish, daughter of Sultan Altumish, she who increases the glory of Emir ul Momineen". The Caliph recognized her as the "Malika" of Delhi (1237), in part because he needed a Sunni bulwark to the east of the vast territories now controlled by the Mongols, who were closing in on Baghdad itself.

A great deal of information about Sultana Razia has come down to us through the writings of Ibn Batuta, one of the greatest world travelers, who visited and lived in India (1335-1340) a hundred years after Razia. According to him, Razia rode the horse into battle dressed like a soldier, administered justice, conquered new territories and presided over the affairs of state. But the jealousy of men knows no bounds. To the Turkish generals and noblemen, the ascension of a woman to the throne was a difficult pill to swallow. Razia was young, beautiful and unmarried. Many of the noblemen made marriage proposals to her. She spurned these proposals. Instead, she fell in love with an African slave of the court, Jamaluddin Yaqut, who was the keeper of the royal stables. The rumor mill of Delhi, fanned by the jealousy of spurned and disappointed generals, went to work. Her case was brought before the *kadis* of Delhi. Accusations were made that she had gotten too close to a man. The *kadis* ruled that Razia had violated the *Shariah* and should therefore step down, get married and retire behind the veil. They nominated a Turkish general Altuniya as her successor. Undaunted, Razia marched out of Delhi Fort to meet the general in battle. As fate would have it, she was defeated and was taken prisoner. Razia was not only a splendid monarch; she was also a beautiful young woman. The victorious Altuniya fell in love with his prisoner and married her. The two advanced together towards Delhi to recapture the city that was hers as her father's legacy. Unfortunately, once again, the combined forces of Razia and Altuniya suffered defeat. Razia fled the battlefield. Exhausted and hungry, she took refuge in a farmer's hut. As she slept, the farmer noticed that his guest, who was dressed like a man, wore a garment embroidered in gold. He killed her in her sleep but was caught by the townspeople as he tried to sell the gold ornaments.

In an obscure lot in the old city of Delhi lies buried this stalwart lady. The alleys to her tomb lead a visitor through decrepit buildings and nauseous open gutters. A simple inscription marks the entrance to her tomb, hidden from the gully. Encroachments have all but consumed the site, blocking the sun from her wistful tomb. Her husband Altuniya lies by her side and the graves of two infants of unknown origin lie near their feet. Such is the fate history has accorded to one of the most celebrated women the world has known.

Ibn Batuta records how the common folks venerated their queen. By the year 1335, when Ibn Batuta visited Delhi, her grave had become a venerated tomb and a place of pilgrimage. A beautiful mausoleum with a dome had been erected on her grave. India was by now a land influenced by Sufi movements and Razia had become a saint. No wonder!

Razia had triumphed in her tragedy. She had changed history. The common man and woman saw in her one of their own who rose from being the daughter of a slave to becoming the first Muslim queen of one of the most powerful empires in the world. She rose like a star and like a meteorite she fell, illuminating the world both in her rise and in her fall. She demonstrated in her brilliance that a woman could be the head of a Muslim state, in spite of the constraints put upon her by tradition and custom. Women throughout the ages would invoke her name in defense of their rights and her name would forever be inscribed indelibly in the lyrics and folklore of the vast subcontinent of India and Pakistan and in the languages of distant lands in all continents.

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