

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Shajarat al Durr, Queen of Egypt

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Fourteen years after Razia ascended the throne of Delhi (1236), another remarkable lady, Shajarat al Durr, became the queen of Egypt (1250). Like Razia, Shajarat al Durr was a Mamluke and a Turk. Specifically, Shajarat belonged to the family of Bahri Mamlukes, the Turkish tribe who had settled in the islands that dot the Nile.

Those were turbulent times for the world of Islam. There existed at the time a *de-facto* alliance between the Crusaders and the Mongols to wipe out Islam. Genghiz Khan had devastated Asia. His successors were knocking at the gates of Baghdad. Besides Egypt, only India had escaped the Mongols, thanks to the diplomacy and resolute stand of Altumish, father of Razia. Samarqand, Bukhara, Kabul, Herat, Neshapur, Multan and Tabriz had fallen to the Mongols (1219-1242). Persia, Khorasan, Afghanistan and Iraq lay in ruins. The Crusaders, after being ejected from Palestine, had converged on Spain and taking advantage of the internal convulsions in Andalus, had captured much of the Peninsula. Cordoba, capital of the Omayyad Caliphate in Spain, fell to them in 1236. All of Andalus had been lost except for the tract of land around Granada. The thrust of Crusader attacks had now shifted to Egypt and North Africa.

It was the Mamluke Turks who withstood the combined onslaught of the Mongols and the Crusaders. Even as the Arabs, Persians and Andalusians lay prostrate before their enemies, it was the Mamluke shield that stopped the Crusader-Mongol armies at the gates of Jerusalem and at the banks of the Indus River. The victory of Sultan Baybars at the Battle of Ayn Jalut (1261) saved Mecca and Madina from the same fate as had earlier befallen Jerusalem in the year 1096.

As a Mamluke, Shajarat al Durr was born into slavery. Like Razia of India, she rose to become the queen of Egypt. Two aspects of this rise from slavery to Sultana need re-emphasis. It is the egalitarian spirit of *Tawhid* that breaks down the barriers between master and servant, black and white, owner and owned. Within the great fold of the believing *ummah*, all human beings—men and women, rich and poor—have the freedom to realize their full existential potential. Within this fold there is no master and no slave. The transcendence of the Divine makes insignificant the petty differences between humans based on wealth, position, race and tribe. All humans become equal in the eyes of God and equal before the Law. This egalitarian spirit was lost with time as the law of despots displaced the Divine Law and as the rulers segregated themselves from the ruled and hid behind *hajibs*. Secondly, the devastation wrought by the Mongols and the Crusaders destroyed the old aristocracy in the Muslim world. The Umayyad Emirate in Spain disappeared in 1236 with the fall of Cordoba and the Abbasids in Baghdad were eliminated in 1258. The destruction of the old social and political order gave an opportunity to the former slaves, the

Mamlukes, to assert their authority and create a new social and political order. In this new order, as opposed to the old aristocratic order, there was room both for men and women, following the tradition of the Turks.

Shajarat's career bridged two dynasties. She was married to Malik al Saleh, the last Ayyubid ruler of Egypt. Al Saleh died in 1250 while Egypt was under attack by a combined French-German Crusader army led by King Louis IX. To avoid demoralization in the ranks, Shajarat worked with the army commanders to keep the news of her husband's death a secret. King Louis of France was personally in charge of his troops. Under Shajarat's leadership, Louis was soundly defeated and taken prisoner. A large number of French and German Crusaders were taken captive. During this critical time, al Saleh's son Turan Shah was absent from Cairo. Shajarat sent word to Turan asking him to return forthwith to the capital. Upon his return, she entrusted him with the reigns of power. But Turan proved incompetent. He alienated the powerful Mamluke generals who assassinated him (1250) and asked Shajarat to be the queen of Egypt.

Legitimacy of rule in Sunni Islam flowed from the Caliphs in Baghdad. Shajarat, as a Turk was a Sunni following the Hanafi *Fiqh*. Al Mustansir, 46th in the Abbasid dynasty, was the caliph in Baghdad. Shajarat sought the consent of Al Mustansir and while Baghdad was considering her application, she ruled as the sovereign of Egypt. She minted coins with her inscription and the *khatibs* at al Azhar read the Friday *khutba* in her name.

However, Shajarat was not successful in obtaining the title of *Malika* from the Caliph. Politically, there was less pressure on Baghdad to recognize a woman as a head of state in Cairo than in Delhi. To the east, in India, the presence of loyal Sultana Razia provided some insurance against the Mongols who had devoured all of the Asian provinces of the Caliphate and were knocking at the doors of Baghdad. By contrast, Cairo was far away from the Mongol front lines and was still very much in the spiritual orbit of the Abbasids. There was opposition also from the more conservative *ulema* of the Maliki School in Cairo. Al Mustansir, therefore, refused to recognize Shajarat as the Sultana of Egypt. The Mamluke guard, desperate for legitimacy of their mushrooming role in Cairo, nominated one of their own generals, Izzaddin Aibak, as the Sultan. Baghdad accepted this nomination and Mamluke rule began in Egypt. It was to last until the Ottomans captured Cairo in 1517.

Shajarat was not to be pushed aside so easily. She was a resourceful lady and a consummate political warrior. Determined to stay on the main stage in Cairo, she married Izzaddin Aibak. The two lived happily for seven years. The name of the queen was printed on the coins and blessed in the Friday sermons, along with that of the new sultan.

Shajarat was a learned lady and a patron of learning. She established several colleges in her name. She was also beautiful, witty, a good writer, a convincing speaker and an astute player in political life. However, fate was to intervene against her once again. Sharing of political power meant that the queen and the sultan remain faithful to each other in a monogamous relationship. But the geopolitics of the day required the sultan to have many wives. When Izzaddin decided to marry the daughter of the Turkish Atabeg Badruddin of Mosul, Shajarat could not reconcile the thought of sharing her husband and her power with a third party. Unable to dissuade her husband from the second marriage, she planned to murder him. Jealousy did its trick, an elaborate scheme was hatched and Izzaddin was assassinated as he visited a palace bath. Unfortunately for Shajarat, the Mamluke generals discovered her role in the murder. She was killed and her body was thrown over the ramparts of the Cairo Fort. She was later buried in the compound of one of the schools she had established.

The lives of these two remarkable ladies, Razia of India-Pakistan and Shajarat of Cairo, demonstrate how difficult it has been for women to occupy political or social space in Islamic history. We have outlined how this happened gradually in Islamic history. First, the caliphs isolated themselves from the ruled. Muawiya introduced personal guards. Harun al Rashid delegated the responsibility for the Friday *khutba* to a professional *kadi*. Later caliphs, with a few notable exceptions, appointed *hajibs* as intermediaries between themselves and the people. The *ummah* of the Prophet and of the first four caliphs became the *ammah* of later rulers. The rulers secluded themselves in their palaces and their harems. Enormous bureaucracies grew up to institutionalize the separation of the throne from the sweat of the farmer. Women felt the brunt of this political isolation in two ways. First, in accordance with the major schools of *Fiqh*, which were developed during the Abbasid period, women were excluded from the *juma'a* prayers. A woman, by definition, could not be a caliph. Second, the seclusion of women from public or social activity received sanction from the political establishment of the Fatimid, Umayyad and Abbasid courts alike. As history unfolded, there became institutionalized two levels of *hijab*. At the first level, all Muslims, men and women alike, were marginalized and subjected to a *hijab* (concealment, separation) from their rulers. At the second level, women were subjected to an additional *hijab* from public life. The separation of women from political and social life was total and complete. Finally, when the Muslims lost their military-political power and the Caliphate ended, they were caught totally unprepared to cope with the challenge of modern civilization, which forced its way onto world stage with slogans of individual rights, equality for women, freedom and responsibility.

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