Teaching Medieval Women

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Shajar al-Durr ('Tree of Pearls')

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Exhibition object: Gold coin of Shajar al-Durr

Key information about Shajar:

- Born: c.1226 - died 28 April 1257
- Parentage: Unknown – Qipchaq Turkish ethnicity
- Spouses: 1) Sultan Salih (born 1205, ruler of Egypt, 1240-49; Damascus, 1245-49), died 22 November 1249. Children: A son, Khalil, who died a few months old in 1240; 2) Aybek, married July 1250, murdered by Shajar al-Durr, April 1257.

Key dates

1249: Sultan Salih becomes seriously ill
June: The Seventh Crusade lands in Egypt and takes Damietta
November 22: Sultan Salih dies. Shajar al-Durr leads the cover-up
1250: February: Turanshah arrives in Cairo (he is the son of another of Ayyub's wives)
2 May: Turanshah is murdered by the Mamluks (leading warriors)
4 May: The Mamluks decide Shajar will hold the sultanate
May: the *khutba* is recited in Shajar's name; coins are minted with Shajar's name
July: Uprisings in Ayyubid Damascus about Shajar as Sultana
30 July: Shajar abdicates

Brief biography

This is the story of Shajar al-Durr, a name which means 'Tree of Pearls', who went from slave-girl to sultana, the ruler of medieval Muslim Egypt. Her story can be told through visual material (buildings, coins, mosaics) and some vivid, eyewitness historical texts. We have stories of deception (medieval 'fake news'), of breaking cultural and religious gender barriers, of invading crusaders, of court intrigue with, at the centre of it all, a figure of genuine political skill.

We do not know where and when she was born – likely c.1226 in the region near the Black Sea and probably a Qipchaq Turk by ethnicity. Aged 15, she was given as a concubine to Salih, later to be the sultan (ruler) of Muslim Egypt. Soon they had a son named Khalil and the sultan freed Shajar and married her. Tragically, the baby boy survived only a few months but Shajar's standing as 'Mother of Khalil' was secure; she evidently had the confidence of her husband and looked after his lands when he went away on campaign.

Ten years later, Salih fell seriously ill and after a few months he died on 22 November 1249 during a massive invasion of French Crusaders who were intent upon capturing Egypt. To avert a total crisis of morale, Shajar hid the sultan's death by continuing to direct doctors to his tent, by having food taken in and documents issued in his name (she forged his signature). This allowed Turanshah, an older son of Salih's, to travel down from Northern Syria to Egypt to succeed him. This man proved utterly untrustworthy, not least in showing utter disrespect for his stepmother Shajar, and he was soon murdered by the leading local warriors.

Who should succeed Turanshah? The only clear link to Sultan Salih was his widow, Shajar; her role as mother of the sultan's son Khalil was crucial here, even though he had died as an infant. On 4 May 1250, the senior men of Egypt gathered and unanimously decided that because of this, and especially the abilities she had shown as regent, 'Shajar al-Durr, the mother of al-Salih's son Khalil should assume the office of sultan and rule.'

For a woman to govern a Muslim country was almost unheard of. Shajar could not hold public audiences and did not take part in public processions; plus there was a perception from the enemies of Egypt that the country was weak and should be attacked. Some contemporary attitudes saw women as easily influenced and fickle; her former status as a slave was a further problem. In spite of her obvious competence, her gender and former slave status meant rivals and enemies threatened serious trouble. Shajar was persuaded to step aside in late July 1250 and to marry a leading warrior named Aybak. Even though she had lost her title after only three months, this was far from the end of her power. Such was the strength and skill she had shown in office that Shajar remained the dominant figure in government, directing the actions of her second husband. She also built a splendid mausoleum in central Cairo to Salih, reminding everyone of her ties to him.

Aybak, seemingly, could not tolerate her power and looked to move her aside. Shajar was furious and decided to murder him. After playing a game of polo, the sultan prepared to wash, only for two of Shajar's accomplices to jump on him and strangle him. Shajar summoned an old friend who took one look at the scene before him and was horrified: 'You have got yourself in a bad situation and there is no way out.' In killing her husband, the reigning sultan, Shajar had massively overreached herself and within days, she too was murdered, beaten to death with wooden clogs by Aybak's first wife on 28 April 1257.

A few days after this ignominious death, Shajar's body was interred in the mausoleum she had constructed a few years previously. Islamic buildings avoid representations of people and animals and Shajar's mausoleum was no exception. But, in the most important part of the building, the *mihrab*, the place of prayer, stands a branch

with pearl 'fruits': a Tree of Pearls; a clever visual pun on her name visible to all who prayed there and standing as a permanent memorial to her.

Object brief

Gold coin in her name (only two survive!). Minting coins in the name of the ruler is one demonstration of an individual's publicly recognised authority over an Islamic state.

The Gold Dinar of Shajar al-Durr, British Museum 1849,1121.294

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Context and wider debates

A rare example of a woman being given full ruling authority in an Islamic state. Political skill and opportunism, coupled with great competence. Power of bloodline. Shajar uses, particularly, buildings to demonstrate her power.

Which topics could this fit into at KS3/KS4/A-Level?

Global Power, Crusades, History of Islam

Further reading

Christie, Niall. 'The Sultana of Egypt'. In *Medieval Warfare* 8 (2019): 18–23.

El-Azhari, Taef. *Queens, Eunuchs and Concubines in Islamic History, 661-1257*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

Ruggles, D. Fairchild. *Tree of Pearls: The Extraordinary Architectural Patronage of the 13th Century Egyptian Slave-Queen Shajar al-Durr*. Oxford University Press, 2020.