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Shajarat al-Durr: Biography of a Female Ruler and the Legitimacy Crisis in the Ayyubid-Mamluk Transition Period

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Abstract

This study analyzes the biography, political strategies, and unique reign in Islamic history of Shajarat al-Durr, who rose from slavery to sultanate in 13th-century Egypt. Entering the palace of the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Şalih Najm al-Din Ayyub as a slave concubine, Shajarat al-Durr gained the sultan's trust through her intelligence and strategic abilities and rose to the position of political advisor. Her true political genius manifested during her husband's sudden death in 647/1249. By concealing the sultan's death during the critical phase of the Seventh Crusade, maintaining the state apparatus without interruption, arranging for her stepson Turanshah to be brought from Hishn Kayfa, and delaying the Crusaders' awareness of this situation, she demonstrated her extraordinary crisis management skills. After the Ayyubid sultan Turanshah was killed by the Bahri Mamluks, Shajarat al-Durr ascended to the throne in 648/1250, becoming the first female sultan in Islamic history to have the khatba read in her name. However, her reign conflicted with the religious-legal norms of the period and faced harsh criticism from the Abbasid caliph al-Musta'lim, based on the hadith of the Prophet. Due to opposition from the Ayyubid maliks in Syria and internal pressures, Shajarat al-Durr was forced to marry 'Izz al-Din Aybak and transfer her sultanate to him, though she continued to intervene in state affairs in subsequent years. Having Aybak killed following his attempt at a second marriage, Shajarat al-Durr ultimately lost her life tragically in 655/1257 as a result of Aybak's former wife's revenge. Based on comparative analysis of period sources, particularly al-Maqrizi, Ibn Iyas, Ibn Wasil, and al-Nuwayri, this study reveals the tension between Shajarat al-Durr's actual power and legal legitimacy, the structural obstacles to female rule, and her role in the Ayyubid-Mamluk transition process.

Keywords: Shajarat al-Durr, Ayyubids, Mamluks, al-Malik al-Şalih, Legitimacy, Seventh Crusade, Turanshah

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Introduction

The visibility of women in the political sphere in Islamic history has generally been shaped through behind-the-scenes influence and indirect impact mechanisms. However, a development in mid-13th-century Egypt departed from this general trend and opened the issue of female rulers in the Islamic world to debate. Shajarat al-Durr's ascension to the throne in 648/1250, having the *khutba* read in her name and coins minted, not only constituted a critical moment in the Ayyubid-Mamluk transition process but also brought forth profound discussions on female sovereignty and the concept of legitimacy in the Islamic political tradition. This brief but intense reign of approximately eighty days took its place in history as one of the rare examples of a woman officially bearing the title of ruler in the Islamic world.

Shajarat al-Durr's life presents a striking example of how a slave concubine could become a political actor within the socio-political structure of the period. Entering the palace of Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Şāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb as a concubine, Shajarat al-Durr quickly gained the sultan's trust through her extraordinary beauty and superior intelligence and rose to a position not merely as a spouse but as a political advisor. The turning point of her political career began with her not leaving her husband's side even during his difficult days in the Kerak prison and subsequently giving birth to a son named Khalīl in 638/1240-41, thereby attaining *umm al-walad* status. This status change not only meant legal freedom but also marked the beginning of her ascent in the palace hierarchy.

Shajarat al-Durr's true political genius manifested during al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's sudden death in 647/1249. During a critical phase of the Seventh Crusade, her success in maintaining army morale by concealing the sultan's death, operating the state apparatus without interruption, and taking the necessary measures to bring her stepson Tūrānshāh from Ḥiṣn Kayfā revealed her extraordinary crisis management skills and strategic thinking capacity. However, after Tūrānshāh was killed by the Baḥrī Mamluks and she herself ascended to the throne, this directly conflicted with the prohibition on female rule in Islamic law and the political-religious norms of the period, creating serious legitimacy problems both with the Abbasid caliphate and the Ayyubid maliks. The insulting letter sent by the Abbasid caliph al-Mustaʿsim, referencing the hadith of the Prophet, clearly demonstrates the dimensions of the religious-legal opposition Shajarat al-Durr faced.

The decisions Shajarat al-Durr made during her brief reign and the political maneuvering ability she displayed reveal that she was not merely a symbolic figure but rather an active decision-maker. Her negotiation of a peace treaty with the Crusaders, ensuring the recovery of Damietta, distributing iqṭā'as to emirs to consolidate their support, and implementing tax reductions to gain legitimacy among the populace demonstrate that she was a pragmatic and calculated ruler. However, being forced to marry 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak and transfer her sultanate to him in the face of internal and external pressures also reveals the structural obstacles a female ruler faced in the Islamic world.

This study aims to examine Shajarat al-Durr's life story from a holistic perspective, analyzing her extraordinary rise from slavery to sultanate, her political strategies, the legitimacy crises she faced, and her eventual tragic death. The study will comparatively examine the narratives about Shajarat al-Durr in period sources, particularly al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Iyās, Ibn Wāṣil, and al-Nuwayrī, and attempt to understand the political, social, and legal dynamics of 13th-century Egypt through her biography. Additionally, by analyzing the critical decisions she made from al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ's death to Tūrānshāh's killing, from her own reign to having Aybak killed, her qualities as a political actor will be evaluated. Methodologically, the study is based on critical reading of primary sources and aims to interpret Shajarat al-Durr's life in the context of the period's gender norms, power struggles, and legitimacy discourses.

1. Shajarat al-Durr's Pre-Reign Life and Activities

Shajarat al-Durr's ethnic origin is debatable. Some researchers have claimed that she was of Armenian origin (Runciman, 2008, p. 225). However, the dominant view in historiography is that Shajarat al-Durr was of Turkic origin. The prominent Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī recorded that she was the daughter of a Muslim Turk named 'Abdullāh and characterized the claim of Armenian origin as a weak narration (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 459). Shajarat al-Durr was the concubine of the last great ruler of the Ayyubid state, al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb. Characterized in sources by her extraordinary beauty and superior intelligence, Shajarat al-Durr quickly gained the sultan's love and trust through these qualities and assumed a role as political advisor. Indeed, she accompanied him in most of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ's military campaigns (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 459; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, p. 332; al-Ṣafadī, 1420/2000, Vol. 16, p. 70).

The first information about Shajarat al-Durr relates to her not abandoning her master al-Malik al-Şāliḥ during his difficult days imprisoned in Kerak (Tomar, 2010, p. 404; Amman, 1997, p. 176). It is even mentioned in sources that despite being pregnant at that time, she did not leave al-Malik al-Şāliḥ to be a source of strength for him, but suffered a miscarriage due to the harsh conditions she faced (Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, p. 273; al-Nuwayrī, 2004, Vol. 29, p. 172). A year later, in 638/1240-41, she gave birth to a child named Khalīl by al-Malik al-Şāliḥ (al-Ḥanbalī, 1978, p. 431). Thus she attained her freedom as umm al-walad and shortly thereafter was sent by her husband Malik Şāliḥ with her son to the Cairo sultanate center (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 404). From then on, she began using the kunya Umm Khalīl as Queen of Egypt, in attribution to this son who would die at age six (Üçok, 2001, p. 376).

Shajarat al-Durr's emergence as an influential figure in the political arena began with her husband al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's death in 647/1249. With the critical decisions she made during this period, she both delayed a potential Crusader attack and ensured that power remained in the hands of the Ayyubid dynasty. She concealed the death of her husband al-Malik al-Şāliḥ, who died in Manşūra. She shared this secret only with the vizier Fakhr al-Dīn ibn Shaykh al-Shuyūkh and the leader of the Baḥrī Mamluks, Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥsin. These three confidants took every precaution to prevent the sultan's death from being known. The sultan's body was secretly washed and funeral prayers were performed. The sultan's doctor Faṭḥ al-Dīn ibn Abī al-Ḥawāfir was assigned to these procedures. Subsequently, the body was placed in a coffin and sent by ship to the fortress of al-Jazīra, later to be transported to Cairo (Ibn Wāṣil, 2004, pp. 101-102). As if the sultan were alive, written orders with the sultan's signature were issued daily from the royal tent, and meals were sent to the sultan's room every day. To those wishing to meet with the sultan, they turned away their requests, saying the sultan did not wish to meet with anyone due to his illness. Meanwhile, Shajarat al-Durr sent Fāris al-Dīn Aqṭāy, one of the leaders of the Baḥrī Mamluks, to Ḥiṣn Kayfā so that her stepson Tūrānshāh, who was deputy of Ḥiṣn Kayfā, would come as soon as possible and take control of the administration.

Meanwhile, Shajarat al-Durr gathered the emirs and said: "Your sultan commands you to take an oath of allegiance to himself and after him to his son Malik Ghiyāth al-Dīn Tūrānshāh who is in Ḥiṣn Kayfā, and to accept Fakhr al-Dīn ibn Shaykh al-Shuyūkh as Atābak al-'Asākir" (Abū al-Fidā', 1119, Vol. 3, p. 218; Ibn al-Wardī, 1285 AH, Vol. 2, p. 181). She also arranged for Malik Tūrānshāh to be given the title al-Mu'azzam (al-Dawādārī, 1972, Vol. 7, p. 373). She

requested the same oath of allegiance through a letter from al-Malik al-Şālih's Cairo deputy Ḥusām al-Dīn ibn 'Alī and through him from the emirs in Egypt (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 102; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 444). She had sent the letter to Cairo with the signature of Ayyūb ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Ayyūb, which was the sultan's seal. In fact, she had personally written the letter (Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 2013, Vol. 22, p. 409), or it was written by Suhayl, one of the servants whose handwriting closely resembled the sultan's (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 102; Ibn al-Wardī, 1285 AH, p. 181). Ḥusām al-Dīn, who did not doubt the authenticity of the letter arranged by Shajarat al-Durr, took the oath of allegiance in the name of the sultan and his son as requested in the letter. Thus, by quickly taking the reins of power into her hands and conducting state affairs with Emir Fakhr al-Dīn as if the sultan were alive, Shajarat al-Durr not only prevented a crisis that could have arisen from the sultan's death but also secured the allegiance of the emirs and soldiers both in the camp and in Egypt to Tūrānshāh, who would soon ascend to the throne (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, pp. 101-102).

Meanwhile, Europeans, unable to achieve the success they desired in the Sixth Crusade, had organized the Seventh Crusade under the influence of the heavy defeats the Franks suffered in Jerusalem and Ḥirbiyā in 642/1244. Egypt became the first target of the Seventh Crusade, led by the fanatical Christian French King Louis IX. The Crusaders, understanding that they could not take Jerusalem without occupying Egypt, the center of logistical and military aid provided to the Islamic army, had quickly captured Damietta, which they called the "key to Egypt." The Crusaders stationed in Damietta did not learn of al-Malik al-Şālih's death for a long time as a result of the measures taken by Shajarat al-Durr and her confidants. When they learned of it, they became excited. They fell into the expectation that chaos would break out in Cairo, their target, upon the sultan's death and the city would easily fall into their hands. For this reason, they accelerated their march on Cairo (Kanat & Burçak, 2013, p. 184). However, the void created by the sultan's death was filled by the measures taken by Shajarat al-Durr, and Emir Fakhr al-Dīn had reorganized the army (Saydem, 2010, p. 134). About three months later, with al-Malik al-Mu'azzam Tūrānshāh arriving in Manşūra on 21 Dhū al-Qa'da 647/25 February 1250 (Abū al-Fidā', 1119, Vol. 3, p. 218) and taking command of the army, the uncertainty created by al-Malik al-Şālih's death was eliminated. Meanwhile, Shajarat al-Durr, upon hearing that Malik Tūrānshāh was approaching Manşūra, moved to Cairo and did not meet with her stepson (Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 2013, Vol. 22, p. 417). In fact, through her successful administration, she had ensured that this

three-month interim period was passed without problems and had contributed to achieving important successes against the Crusaders. During this interim period, she had also prevented a civil war, which the Crusaders strongly desired, from breaking out among the emirs of the Egyptian army (Strayer, 1969, pp. 501-502). With Malik Tūrānshāh's arrival in Manşūra, the Crusaders' expectations were completely disappointed (Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, p. 322).

On the other hand, having achieved a decisive victory against the Crusaders, Tūrānshāh, upon ascending the throne, began to restructure the state, purging the cadres that were influential during his father's period and building the administrative system upon the cadres he brought from Hışn Kayfā. However, these changes he made before establishing his dominance in Egypt disturbed the Baḥrī Mamluks, who were an important power element during his father's period and showed important successes in the elimination of the Seventh Crusade (Ḥasan, 1996, Vol. 4, p. 111). Tūrānshāh also sent a letter to Shajarat al-Durr in Cairo, demanding the property and jewels left by his father and threatening her. Frightened by this, Shajarat al-Durr wrote a letter on 7 Muḥarram 648/11 April 1250 to the Baḥrī Mamluks, who were her khushdāshes (Aghīr, 2010, p. 12; Ayalon, 1989, pp. 241-242; Kızıltoprak, 2004, p. 89) and from the same lineage (Tomar, 2010, p. 404), encouraging them to kill Tūrānshāh (al-Dawādārī, 1972, Vol. 7, p. 382; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 457; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, p. 329; Kaḥḥāla, 1959, Vol. 2, p. 287). The Baḥrī Mamluks, receiving support and even encouragement from the wife of their true master al-Malik al-Şāliḥ in this matter, saw no obstacle before them to kill Malik Tūrānshāh ('Āshūr, 1976, p. 10), and a group of them took action on Monday, 29 Muḥarram 648/3 May 1250 and killed Tūrānshāh (Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 2013, Vol. 22, p. 417; Ibn Wāşil, 2004, pp. 128-130; Abū al-Fidā', 1119, Vol. 3, pp. 219-220; al-Dawādārī, 1972, Vol. 7, pp. 382-383; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 458; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, p. 329; Ḥalabī, 1988, Vol. 2, pp. 220-221). With Tūrānshāh's killing, while the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt faced a serious crisis, Shajarat al-Durr ascended to the throne as the new sultan.

2. Shajarat al-Durr's Reign Period

The emirs who organized the assassination of Tūrānshāh had carried out their coup d'état not in the name of any member of the Ayyubid dynasty, but in their own name. Since they did not see themselves as the legal heirs to the throne, the person they would put on the throne had to be someone who would value them and whom they could make do what they wanted when necessary. The emirs gathered in the royal tent decided that the most suitable name was Shajarat

al-Durr, the widowed wife of their master al-Malik al-Şālih. The respect the Mamluks had for their master was also an important factor in their consensus on the name Shajarat al-Durr. Also, being both khushdāshes with Shajarat al-Durr and from the same lineage was influential in this choice. From this date onwards, the khuṭba was read in her name and coins were minted. Thus, a woman was officially ascending to the throne in the Islamic world. The famous historian Ibn Wāşil states that before Shajarat al-Durr, there had been no other woman in Islamic history who ascended to the throne and had the khuṭba read in her name on pulpits (Ibn Wāşil, 1977, p. 240; Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 133).

During this period, Shajarat al-Durr, like other Egyptian sultans, needed an Atābak al-‘Asākir (Üçok, 1981, p. 64). This appointed atabeg would assist Shajarat al-Durr when necessary and also command the army. The first offer for this position was made to Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Hazbānī, an influential and respected figure from the al-Malik al-Şālih period. But he refused this position and suggested Shihāb al-Dīn Rashīd al-Kabīr, one of al-Malik al-Şālih's ustādh al-dārs (Ayaz, 2012, pp. 393-395). When Shihāb al-Dīn also refused, it was unanimously decided to appoint ‘Izz al-Dīn Aybak al-Turkmānī al-Şālihī as the sultan's deputy and Atābak al-‘Asākir (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 132; al-Manşūrī, 1993, pp. 8-9; al-Nuwayrī, 2004, Vol. 29, pp. 234-235; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 459; al-‘Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 29; Kaḥḥāla, 1959, Vol. 2, p. 287). Aybak was a mamluk who was purchased by al-Malik al-Şālih while he was a mamluk of one of the Rasulids who had established a state in Yemen (Kopruman, 1989, p. 444), and rose to the position of chāshniġir (Uzunçarşılı, 1988, p. 36) in his service and was in the middle rank (Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 7, p. 4). Presumably, the council of emirs had chosen him because they thought they could direct him more easily.

After Shajarat al-Durr ascended to the throne and sent ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Rūmī al-Şālihī to Cairo to proclaim her sultanate, her first action was to resolve the Crusader problem still in Damietta. For this purpose, she sent Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Hazbānī to French King Louis IX, who was being held prisoner in al-Manşūra, and made a peace treaty with him. According to this, the Crusaders would evacuate Damietta in exchange for their release, completely withdraw from Egypt, and pay eight hundred thousand dinars, half of which was to be paid in advance (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 460; Joinville, 2002, p. 144). After Damietta was taken over, Shajarat al-Durr returned to Cairo with the army on Thursday, 9 Şafar 648/13 May 1250 (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 135; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 462).

Although she was sultan, Shajarat al-Durr, not wearing the royal robes as was customary (Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, p. 332), moved to the Citadel of the Mountain in Cairo. Atabeg ʿIzz al-Dīn Aybak also came there from the barracks. He would submit daily reports to her about the work done and decisions made, and would not do anything without her knowledge and consultation. In the decrees issued from there and all other official correspondence, the phrases "al-Mustaʿşima al-Şālihiyya, Queen of the Muslims (Malikat al-Muslimīn), Mother of al-Malik al-Manşūr Khalīl, Commander of the Faithful (Wālidat al-Malik al-Manşūr Khalīl Amīr al-Muʿminīn)" were written. The same phrases were also on the khuṭba and coins. On Fridays, prayers were made for her on pulpits after the Abbasid caliph of the period, with the above attributions and using the titles "ʿIşmat al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn" and "Şāhibat al-Malik al-Şāliḥ (Wife of al-Malik al-Şāliḥ)" (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 459; Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 73).

Shajarat al-Durr gave important ranks to the emirs and distributed many valuable iqṭāʿs under her control to the Baḥrī Mamluks. She also made many other benefactions to them, winning their hearts. She also abolished some taxes that were burdensome to the people and reduced many tax items. Thus she had also won the hearts of the people (Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 73; Tomar, 2010, p. 404). In fact, Shajarat al-Durr had made all these concessions so that her rule could gain legitimacy in society. Because she was, first and foremost, a woman. Since female rule was quite rare in Islamic history, Muslims were not accustomed to this situation. Aware of this, Shajarat al-Durr made generous gifts and benefactions as above so that her rule would be accepted as legitimate governance by society. For this reason, she used attributions that would not bring to mind that the ruler was a woman, both in official correspondence and in the khuṭba and coins. She emphasized the name of her late husband al-Malik al-Şāliḥ or her deceased son Malik Khalīl for this reason. She used the title al-Mustaʿşimiyya in reference to the caliph of the period, al-Mustaʿşim, as an indication of her allegiance to the Abbasid caliphate. However, Shajarat al-Durr's initiative could neither soften the Ayyubid maliks nor the Abbasid caliph (Kopruman, 1989, p. 442).

This revolution in the sultanate center of Egypt had rapid and profound effects on South Syria, causing chaos in this region, which was administratively linked to Cairo. The first effects of Shajarat al-Durr's ascension to the throne were felt in Jordan. When Tūrānshāh came to Egypt, he had begun to see his uncle al-ʿĀdil's son al-Malik al-Mughīth ʿUmar, who was imprisoned in the Cairo fortress, as a potential rival, and had exiled him from Cairo to Shawbak to prevent him

from entering a possible power struggle (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 457; al-‘Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 32). At this time, Shawbak was under the control of Badr al-Dīn al-Şawābī, who was al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's deputy in Kerak. When Badr al-Dīn learned that Tūrānshāh had been killed, he wanted to take advantage of al-Mughīth's presence in Shawbak to separate from the new Egyptian administration and secure his independence. Al-Mughīth was secretly brought from his prison in Shawbak to Kerak and was proclaimed there as lord of Kerak on 13 Rabī‘ al-Ākhir 648/15 June 1250. Badr al-Dīn also became the real holder of power under the title of his deputy. Thus, while Kerak was reconstituted as an autonomous Ayyubid principality, the political unity that al-Malik al-Şāliḥ had created with intense effort had disintegrated (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 137; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 462; al-‘Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 32; Humphreys, 1977, p. 300).

Meanwhile, developments threatening Shajarat al-Durr's authority also occurred in Damascus. After Shajarat al-Durr came to Cairo, she sent ‘Aşīl al-Dīn al-Is‘irdī, one of al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's imams, to Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Yaghmur, the royal deputy in Damascus. ‘Aşīl al-Dīn had come to take an oath of allegiance to the new administration in Cairo. However, Jamāl al-Dīn, who was loyally attached to the Ayyubid dynasty, stalled ‘Aşīl al-Dīn and refused to recognize the new administration. At this time, the Kaymarī emirs Nāşir al-Dīn and Ḍiyā‘ al-Dīn al-Kaymarī, who were in Damascus and could not accept Shajarat al-Durr's ascension to the throne, invited al-Nāşir Yūsuf, lord of Aleppo, to Damascus and informed him that they would hand over the city to him (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, pp. 135-136; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, pp. 462-463; al-‘Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 33).

Al-Nāşir Yūsuf, after receiving the news of Tūrānshāh's killing and also receiving an invitation from the Kaymarī emirs, left Aleppo and headed for Damascus. On Saturday, 8 Rabī‘ al-Ākhir 648/10 July 1250, he surrounded the Damascus walls. Nāşir al-Dīn al-Kaymarī, who was responsible for the security of Bāb al-Şaghīr on the southern side of the city, opened the city gate to the Aleppo army on Monday, 10 Rabī‘ al-Ākhir/12 July. Al-Nāşir entered the city without encountering any resistance (Sibt Ibn al-Jawzī, 2013, Vol. 22, p. 413; Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 137; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 463; Kılıç, 2019, pp. 71-72). Thus Damascus, which al-Malik al-Şāliḥ had obtained after long struggles, passed effortlessly into the hands of al-Nāşir Yūsuf. On the other hand, the Cairo administration, learning that Damascus had passed under al-Nāşir's control, became anxious. Emirs and soldiers gathered at the Citadel of the Mountain and renewed their oaths of allegiance to Shajarat al-Durr (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 138), and fearing a similar coup might

be carried out in Cairo, began arresting people they suspected. They particularly arrested the Kaymarī emirs and those close to them (Ibn Wāṣil, 2004, pp. 137-138; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 463; al-‘Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 33). Additionally, the Ayyubids of Hama, Homs, and Kerak also united around al-Malik al-Nāṣir (Humphreys, 1977, p. 307; Şeşen, 1995, p. 23; Kuşçu, 2018, p. 295). Thus, al-Malik al-Nāṣir, who was able to unite important forces in Syria around himself under his authority, was in a quite important position compared to Egypt.

We had mentioned that Shajarat al-Durr's elevation to the sultanate position was not accepted by the Ayyubid dynasty or the Baghdad caliphate center. Particularly the last Abbasid Caliph al-Musta‘şim, based on the Prophet's hadith: "A people who entrust their affairs to a woman will not prosper" (al-Bukhārī, 1400 AH, Maghāzī 83, Fitan 18; al-Tirmidhī, 1998, Fitan 75; al-Nasā‘ī, 1421 AH, Quḍāt 8), far from recognizing Shajarat al-Durr's rule, in his sarcastic letter addressed to the Egyptian emirs, reproached them by saying "If you have no men left to put at your head, we will send you a man." He even threatened them and ordered them to abandon this immediately (Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 73; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, pp. 463-464).

When Shajarat al-Durr did not receive allegiance from the Ayyubid maliks and faced objection from the Abbasid caliph of the period, uprisings against her also began in Cairo (Tomar, 2010, p. 404). Thus she became an unwanted ruler both internally and externally (Kopruman, 1989, p. 442). Frightened by these pressures, the Baḥrī Mamluks, while on the one hand arresting emirs whom they thought were inclined toward al-Nāṣir, on the other hand began seeking a new sultan candidate to replace Shajarat al-Durr. Thus they would both take away the trump card from the hands of the Ayyubid maliks and appease the caliph. On the other hand, they also wanted to keep their much-loved queen in power (Üçok, 1981, p. 69). In the meeting they held for this purpose, they agreed on the decision that Shajarat al-Durr should marry Atabeg ‘Izz al-Dīn Aybak and transfer the sultanate to her husband. Shajarat al-Durr, understanding that she could no longer endure the internal and external pressures, also approved this decision, through which she could continue her power even from behind the scenes, and abdicated the sultanate in favor of her husband (al-Nuwayrī, 2004, Vol. 29, p. 235; al-‘Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 34).

3. The Reign of al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā and the End of the Egyptian Ayyubids

When ‘Izz al-Dīn Aybak, to whom Shajarat al-Durr transferred the sultanate, ascended to the throne, the political changes in Syria had come to directly threaten his power, and it had

become a matter of time before al-Nāşir Yūsuf, who had taken Damascus, would organize an expedition to Egypt. The emirs in Cairo, not feeling secure in the face of the rapid developments, changed their decision again within a week of Aybak's selection and decided that someone from the Ayyubid dynasty should ascend to the throne. For this purpose, on 5 Jumādā al-Ūlā 648/4 August 1250, they put al-Kāmil's grandson, al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā ibn Şalāh al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn al-Malik al-Mas'ūd, on the throne (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, pp. 141-142; al-Dawādārī, 1972, Vol. 8, p. 13). By placing al-Ashraf, who was less than 10 years old at the time (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 464 states 6 years; Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 142 states around 10 years; Hirschler, 2007, pp. 29-46), on the throne, the emirs wanted, on the one hand, to forestall the opponents who wanted to see someone from the Ayyubid dynasty on the throne in Egypt; on the other hand, to eliminate the reactions of the caliphate center and the Ayyubids who objected to Shajarat al-Durr's sultanate. But what really worried the emirs was the possibility of al-Nāşir Yūsuf gathering many supporters from within during an Egyptian expedition. To prevent this possibility, they considered it unavoidable to put someone from the Ayyubid family on the throne, even if only nominally.

Ibn Wāşil states that prominent Baĥrī Mamluks Fāris al-Dīn Aqtāy, Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdārī, Sayf al-Dīn al-Rashīdī, and Şunqur al-Rūmī could not swallow their pride at 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak becoming sultan, and therefore brought a child from the Ayyubid dynasty to leadership. According to Ibn Wāşil, the real purpose of the emirs in choosing al-Ashraf was to run the country's affairs under his name and benefit from worldly pleasures (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 141). But the emirs who succeeded in deposing Aybak from the throne with these ambitions could not break his influence in state affairs. After al-Ashraf Mūsā was chosen as sultan, 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak was appointed as his atabeg (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 141; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 7, p. 4); however, Aybak possessed more than the powers an atabeg had and shared the sultan's powers. Documents began to be issued in the name of al-Ashraf and al-Mu'izz, and both their names were read together in the khuṭba (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 141; al-Dawādārī, 1972, Vol. 8, p. 14; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, pp. 464-465). Al-Maqrīzī, pointing to Aybak's strong position, states that al-Ashraf Mūsā was nominally sultan, and all affairs were conducted by al-Mu'izz Aybak (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 464).

'Izz al-Dīn Aybak's seizure of the administration as an independent sultan only became possible after he killed Fāris al-Dīn Aqtāy, one of the leaders of the Baĥrī Mamluks. Aqtāy,

whose influence was gradually increasing, had married the daughter of al-Malik al-Manşūr, lord of Hama, and had taken a position in favor of al-Ashraf Mūsā remaining as sultan. Aybak, fearing Aqtāy's gradual strengthening, invited him to his palace in the Citadel of the Mountain, conveying that he desired to make peace with him. When Aqtāy climbed to the citadel, he was ambushed in one of the citadel streets and killed. After Aqtāy's killing in 652/1254, Baḥrī emirs like Rukn al-Dīn Baybars, Sayf al-Dīn Qalāwūn, and Şunqur al-Ashqar, thinking their turn had come, fled from Cairo to Syria with soldiers who joined them, hoping to take refuge with al-Nāşir Yūsuf (al-Yāfi'ī, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 99; Ibn Kathīr, 2010, Vol. 15, p. 286; Ibn Khaldūn, 2000, Vol. 5, p. 420).

Having largely neutralized the opposition against him internally with Aqtāy's killing, Aybek, with the emergence of the Mongol threat, seized a good opportunity to ascend to the throne as Egypt's sole ruler. Immediately after having Aqtāy killed, he deposed al-Ashraf Mūsā from the throne and sent him to his aunts. He himself organized a procession through the streets of Cairo accompanied by the royal banner and ghāshiya, proclaiming his sultanate. He ascended to the throne with the title al-Malik al-Mu'izz (27 Sha'bān 652/12 October 1254). Thus, while al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā went down in history as the last Ayyubid sultan in whose name the khuṭba was read in Egypt, al-Malik al-Mu'izz 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak took his place on the historical stage as the first Mamluk ruler (Ibn Khaldūn, 2000, Vol. 5, p. 420; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 7, p. 11; Ayaz, 2015, pp. 27-28; Hirschler, 2007, p. 40; Can, 2023, p. 29)).

4. The Death of Shajarat al-Durr

'Izz al-Dīn Aybak, who married and to whom Shajarat al-Durr abdicated the sultanate in favor after facing violent opposition internally and externally, passed through the Cairo streets with a quite magnificent royal procession as Egypt's new sultan with the title al-Malik al-Mu'izz (Kaḥḥāla, 1959, Vol. 2, p. 286) on 29 Rabī' al-Ākhir 648/31 July 1250 and ascended to the royal palace in the Citadel of the Mountain (al-Manşūrī, 1993, p. 9; Abū al-Fidā', 1119, Vol. 3, p. 145; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 464). Shajarat al-Durr, who had always played an active role in state administration since al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's rule (Kaḥḥāla, 1959, Vol. 2, p. 286), continued to intervene in state affairs and issue decrees in her own name during the period of her current husband Aybak. She also played important roles in Aybak's elimination of powerful emirs who could be his rivals (al-Nuwayrī, 2004, Vol. 29, p. 293; Tomar, 2010, p. 404).

Possessing a dominant and jealous character (Ibn Wāşil, 2004, p. 141), Shajarat al-Durr dominated Aybak in everything. She would constantly remind him that she was the one who enabled him to become sultan, and by saying "If it weren't for me, you could not have become sultan," she would put him under obligation. Based on this, she had completely forbidden him from seeing his former wife and son, and even pressured him to divorce his former wife (Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 75). After Aybak, with her support, got rid of powerful rivals and settled alone on the throne after dealing with a co-sultan like al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā, Shajarat al-Durr's dominant personality and overshadowing of his power began to weigh heavily on him, and for this reason he began looking for ways to get rid of her. Al-Maqrīzī, stating that a fatalistic belief also lay in the background of Aybak's distancing from Shajarat al-Durr, says that one day an astrologer informed Aybak that he would be killed at the hands of a woman and that woman was none other than Shajarat al-Durr. Aybak was so influenced by these words that he refrained from going to the Citadel of the Mountain and began staying at Bāb al-Lūk by the Nile River (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 493; Üçok, 1981, p. 75). The move that overflowed the cup was Aybak's engagement to the daughter of Badr al-Dīn Lu'lu', the ruler of Mosul. With this move, he wanted on the one hand to strengthen his position in Egypt against the Baḥrī emirs by gaining the support of the ruler of Mosul, and on the other hand to break Shajarat al-Durr's influence in the palace and mamluk barracks by bringing a noblewoman to the palace. Aware of this, Shajarat al-Durr could not accept the ingratitude of the second person whose ascension to the throne she had enabled, and sought ways to get rid of Aybak. For this purpose, she sent some gifts to al-Malik al-Nāşir, one of the Ayyubid maliks, and sent word that she intended to kill Aybak, and if al-Nāşir would marry her, she would put him on the Egyptian throne. However, al-Nāşir, fearing this might be a trap, did not respond. Although she made offers of viziership and taking charge to some other names, they also did not accept. In fact, some emirs with whom she consulted about these plans tried to dissuade her. However, she could not bear this betrayal by Aybak and assigned a group of her loyal eunuchs to kill him. According to the plan she made, she succeeded in bringing Aybak, who had been staying at Bāb al-Lūk for some time, up to the Citadel of the Mountain through sincere invitations. That day Aybak had played polo and was sweating. For this reason, he entered the bath to wash. The powerful eunuchs that Shajarat al-Durr had previously placed in the bath attacked Aybak with knives or drowned him in the water and killed

him (Ibn al-‘Ibrī, 1994, pp. 455-457; al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 493; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, pp. 333-336).

After Aybak was killed, Shajarat al-Durr sent word to many people that night, offering them to come and take over the administration. However, no one agreed to this. Not knowing what move to make, Shajarat al-Durr wanted to extricate herself from the situation by saying that Aybak had suddenly died that evening. However, Aybak's mamluks did not believe it, saying that when they left him there yesterday evening, he was in good health. Before long, it was understood that he had been killed by Shajarat al-Durr. The assembled emirs put Aybak's son Malik Nūr al-Dīn ‘Alī, who was still about fifteen years old, on the throne. Shajarat al-Durr had taken refuge in the palace with her accomplices. Aybak's mamluks wanted to storm the citadel and punish them. However, the Baḥrī emirs did not consent to this. But because she had committed such a crime, Shajarat al-Durr had no possibility of remaining in the palace. In the end, they could not prevent Shajarat al-Durr from being taken to the Red Tower (Burj al-Aḥmar) and imprisoned there. Because Aybak's mamluks had sworn not to do her any harm. Shajarat al-Durr, whose accomplices were executed, knew that good days were not waiting for her. She particularly sensed that Aybak's former wife would take revenge on her. For this reason, so that it would not fall into her hands, she handed over part of her late husband al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's treasures and jewels, whose location she had not even told Aybak, to the former vizier al-Şāḥib Bahā’ al-Dīn, and destroyed the part that remained with her by pounding it in a mortar. Finally, Aybak's former wife had her brought from the Red Tower to her side and handed her over to her slave girls. They beat her to death in a horrific manner all day long with the wooden clogs they wore on their feet and with bath bowls. After killing her, they pulled her by her feet and threw her half-naked body from the walls into the moat at the base of the palace (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 494; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 6, pp. 335-337). Thus the life of this ambitious woman also ended at the hands of women. After remaining in the moat where she was thrown for days, when her body began to rot, she was buried in the private tomb inside the Shajar al-Durr Mosque near Sayyida Nafīsa in Cairo, which she had previously prepared for herself (Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 76; Kaḥḥāla, 1959, Vol. 2, p. 290).

Shajarat al-Durr was pious, charitable, compassionate by nature, and possessed an intellectual accumulation (Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 76). It is recorded that she was also the first sultan to

initiate the organization of the Surra processions for the pilgrimage and the tradition of sending the covering called burqu' to the Ka'ba (Üçok, 1981, p. 83; Tomar, 2010, p. 405).

The issue of whether Shajarat al-Durr's reign, which lasted approximately eighty days, should be evaluated within the Ayyubid or Mamluk period is disputed among historians. While the famous Mamluk historian al-Maqrīzī considers her the first sultan of the Mamluk state (al-Maqrīzī, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 459), another Mamluk historian Ibn Iyās accepts her as the ninth sultan of the Ayyubids (Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 73). Although it may be claimed that considering her origin and status as close to the mamluks, it would be more correct to include Shajarat al-Durr's sultanate in the Mamluk period, the fact that five days after she transferred the sultanate to Aybak, al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā from the Ayyubid maliks had to be brought to the throne in Egypt confirms Ibn Iyās's view. From a legal perspective, it is also more appropriate to accept the beginning of the Mamluk state after the deposition of al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā, who belonged to the Ayyubid family (al-Nuwayrī, 2004, Vol. 29, pp. 235-236). Indeed, the famous historian Ibn Khaldūn accepts al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā as the last ruler of the Ayyubids in Egypt (Ibn Khaldūn, 2000, Vol. 5, p. 420), and many historians accept Aybak as the first sultan of the Mamluk state (al-'Aynī, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 34; Ibn Taghrībirdī, 1992, Vol. 7, p. 3; Ibn Iyās, 1960, p. 74). Essentially, this debate reveals the methodological differences regarding political legitimacy and state classifications in Islamic historiography. The ambiguity of Shajarat al-Durr's position actually shows how complex a structure power transitions in medieval Islamic states had. When the determining role of caliphal approval in political legitimacy is taken into account, it is inevitable that Shajarat al-Durr's sultanate be evaluated as an exercise of actual power but fail to achieve full legal-religious legitimacy. Indeed, the harsh reaction shown by the Abbasid caliph with his insulting letter, far from giving approval, reflects both the controversial position of a female ruler in terms of Islamic law and the political dynamics of the period.

Conclusion

The life story of Shajarat al-Durr constitutes a concrete example of how a woman in the 13th-century Islamic world could become an active actor in the political arena and at the same time what structural obstacles she faced. Her journey from slavery to sultanate is a product not only of individual talents and strategic intelligence but also of the opportunities created by the political conjuncture of the period. The loyalty she showed during al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's difficult

days in Kerak prison, her attainment of umm al-walad status by giving birth to her son Khalīl, and especially the extraordinary crisis management skills she displayed following the sultan's sudden death demonstrated that Shajarat al-Durr was not an ordinary slave concubine but rather a figure with the capacity to influence the course of political events.

Shajarat al-Durr's greatest political success was preventing the power vacuum that could arise at a critical moment of the Seventh Crusade by concealing al-Malik al-Şāliḥ's death and operating the state apparatus without interruption. The decisions she made during this period revealed that she was competent not only in palace intrigues but also in military-strategic matters. Her obtaining allegiance from the emirs using the sultan's seal, having her stepson Tūrānshāh brought from Ḥiṣn Kayfā, and delaying the Crusaders' awareness of the sultan's death during this process are proofs that she was a pragmatic and calculated politician. However, in the face of Tūrānshāh's conflict with the Baḥrī Mamluks after ascending to the throne and his threatening her, Shajarat al-Durr's sending the letter that prepared the ground for her stepson's killing also showed that she was a ruthless player in political life.

After Tūrānshāh's killing, Shajarat al-Durr's reign, to which she was elevated by the Baḥrī Mamluks, became an unprecedented experiment in Islamic history. In Ibn Wāsil's words, before her there was no other woman in the Islamic world in whose name the khuṭba was read. However, this experiment could not avoid conflicting with the religious-legal and political norms of the period. The harsh letter sent by the Abbasid caliph al-Mustaʿsim based on the Prophet's hadith clearly revealed the legitimacy crisis of female rule in Islamic law. The caliph's sarcastic expression "If you have no men left to put at your head, we will send you a man" carries the nature of criticism and threat directed not only at Shajarat al-Durr but at the Baḥrī Mamluks who put her on the throne.

The measures Shajarat al-Durr took during her sultanate show that she was aware of this legitimacy crisis and developed various strategies to overcome it. Her emphasizing the name of her late husband al-Malik al-Şāliḥ or her son Malik Khalīl in official correspondence and the khuṭba, her using the title al-Mustaʿsimiyya in reference to the Abbasid caliph, and her trying to secure support by distributing generous iqtāʿs to the emirs are indicators of the search for legitimacy. However, the Ayyubid maliks in Syria refusing to recognize her, particularly al-Nāşir Yūsuf's seizure of Damascus and creating a threat toward Egypt, and al-Malik al-Mughīth ʿUmar's declaration of independence in Kerak also revealed the geographical limits of Shajarat

al-Durr's authority. Ultimately, being forced to marry 'Izz al-Dīn Aybak and transfer her sultanate to him when internal and external pressures became unbearable showed that the structural obstacles a female ruler faced in the Islamic world were insurmountable.

Shajarat al-Durr's life after abdicating the sultanate reveals that she did not completely lose her political influence. Her continuing to intervene in state affairs during Aybak's period, issuing decrees in her own name, and playing a role in Aybak's elimination of his rivals show that she was in a position to influence power even from behind the scenes. However, her dominant and jealous character, her constant reminders of obligation to Aybak, and her oppressive attitudes such as forbidding him from seeing his former wife led to the gradual increase in tension between the two. Aybak's engagement to the daughter of Badr al-Dīn Lu'lu', the ruler of Mosul, was the last straw for Shajarat al-Durr and pushed her to the decision to have Aybak killed. This decision brought the end of her political career. Her being handed over to the vengeful former wife by Aybak's mamluks and being killed in a horrific manner by slave girls constituted Shajarat al-Durr's tragic end.

The disagreement among historians about whether Shajarat al-Durr's sultanate should be evaluated within the Ayyubid or Mamluk period essentially stems from the ambiguity of her position. While al-Maqrīzī's considering her the first sultan of the Mamluk state seems logical in terms of origin and status, Ibn Iyās's acceptance of her as the ninth sultan of the Ayyubids and particularly al-Nuwayrī's legal analyses rest on more consistent grounds. For the fact that five days after Shajarat al-Durr's sultanate, al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā had to be brought to the throne shows that even the emirs and Bahrī Mamluks acknowledged that a woman's sole sultanate was not sustainable. Therefore, accepting the legal beginning of the Mamluk state as Aybak's ascension to the throne as an independent sultan with the deposition of al-Malik al-Ashraf Mūsā, who belonged to the Ayyubid family, as Ibn Khaldūn also indicates, provides a more solid periodization.

In conclusion, Shajarat al-Durr's life offers important lessons regarding the political role of women in Islamic history. Her extraordinary political talents and crisis management skills showed how effective women could be in the political sphere when they had appropriate conditions and sufficient social capital. However, at the same time, the rigid attitude of the religious-legal norms of the period and the patriarchal political structure in refusing to accept a female ruler also revealed the existence of structural obstacles beyond individual talents. Shajarat

al-Durr's eighty-day sultanate took its place in history as a concrete example of the tension between actual power and legal legitimacy; her tragic end revealed the merciless nature of power struggles and the destructive consequences of revenge politics.

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