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THE GEOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL MOBILITY OF SLAVES: THE RISE OF SHAJAR AL-DURR, A SLAVE- CONCUBINE IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY EGYPT

D. FAIRCHILD RUGGLES

THE PREMODERN ISLAMIC world was characterized by mobility. Pilgrims and traders traveled great distances, often in groups by caravan or ship, not unlike organized tours in the modern world. They went along well-marked routes and stayed at caravanserais and urban *khans* (inns) that offered safety for them and their goods, which might be fine porcelain imported from China or luxury textiles of fine cotton, wool, and silk made and exchanged within the Islamic world. Moreover, they could communicate with relative ease, facilitated by a common language, Arabic. Letters, goods, and people went back and forth from the Pacific coast of Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa and Europe, so that by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Muslims were connected through trade networks from Cordoba to Timbuktu, Cairo, Baghdad, Delhi, and Canton. There were some intrepid travelers, like Ibn Battuta between 1325 and 1354, who went to all those places (or so he said).¹

One object of trade was human chattel. Slaves were acquired in various ways: as conquered peoples in the aftermath of war, through the progeny of existing slaves, from sub-Saharan slave dealers, and through forced conscription or the sale of children by poor parents.² The institution of slavery in Islam was by no means benevolent or fair. But, unlike slavery in the modern global West, where the institution was tied to large-scale agricultural labor, capitalism, and racial discrimination, slavery in Islam did not divide society so thoroughly because it offered multiple opportunities for integration. The result was a Muslim society that was porous, allowing non-Muslims and foreigners to become integrated into, and invested in, Islamic society, many of them converting to the faith. Slavery allowed some people to achieve rapid social mobility.

This was especially noticeable in Egypt in the thirteenth through early sixteenth centuries, where Turkic slaves from Asia rose to become army leaders and

1 Ibn Batutah, *Travels*.

2 On slave dealers, see Hunwick, "Black Africans." On parents selling children and the general poverty of the steppe, see Ayalon, "Mamluk: Military Slavery," 3 (citing Ibn Fadl Allah al-'Umari, *Masalik al-absar*).

even sultans over Arab Egypt. Shajar al-Durr—who rose from slavery to become the legitimately appointed sultan of Egypt in 1250—is such a case. Although she was exceptional for being a woman who ascended to the highest level of authority, her rags-to-riches story was not uncommon among Egypt's slave population.

Slavery was experienced differently by different people, and it was different for men than for women. In the Ayyubid era (1169–1250 CE) and, to a lesser extent, even in the Fatimid period (969–1171 in Egypt), slaves began to be imported into Egypt not simply as a haphazard consequence of war but due to trade connections organized expressly for that purpose. In Egypt in the later Ayyubid period, children were typically purchased at a young age from destitute pagan parents or recently Christianized Turks—specifically the Qipchaq people on the steppe northeast of the Black Sea (today western Kazakhstan and southern Russia: see Map 2).³ The already poor Qipchaqs suffered from the Mongol onslaughts in the 1230s, and the ensuing social upheaval made them a prime source for slaves. Indeed, the name Qipchaq may derive from the Turkic *qivčaq*, meaning “unfortunate.”⁴ The Turkic youths were then brought to Cairo where they were educated in Islam and the military arts, the luckiest belonging to the military corps of the sultan, the less lucky being bought by amirs of lesser rank.⁵ These *mamlūks* (an Arabic word that literally means “owned”) were by definition foreigners and non-Muslim.⁶ They enjoyed status as members of the sultan's personal bodyguard and the elite army, in which they could rise to leadership positions, having been formally freed upon completion of their training.⁷

Freedom did not mean disengagement, however. A slave in Islam, even when freed, did not separate from the former master but became a client (*mawlā*) with

3 On the Qipchaqs, see Golden, “Shaping of the Cuman-Qipchaqs.” My thanks to Christian Raffensperger for steering me toward the bibliography on Rus' and the Eurasian steppe. Arabic sources confirm that the Qipchaqs were preferred as slaves; see Ibn Fadl Allah al-'Umari, *Masalik al-absar*.

4 Golden, “Shaping of the Cuman-Qipchaqs,” 318.

5 Ayalon, “Mamluk: Military Slavery,” 1–19.

6 Throughout this essay, I use the general term *mamlūk* to designate a slave, and Mamluk to refer to the slave dynasty that eventually ruled Egypt: the Bahri line (1250–1390) and the Burji line (1382–1517). According to Islamic law, a Muslim could not be enslaved (although slaves who converted to Islam did not thereby gain freedom). However, because human beings could become property from which profits could be made, the law was certainly breached many times (Hunwick, “Black Africans,” 23).

7 Although freeborn men also served in the Egyptian army, in fact slaves held the highest posts. See Ayalon, “Mamluk: Military Slavery,” 12; “Studies I”; “Studies II”; “Studies III”; and *L'Esclavage du mamlouk*. See also Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, 7–8.

Map 2. Slave Routes in the Late Ayyubid Period, 1240s CE. Map by Faezeh Ashtiani, with information derived from Malise Ruthven, *Historical Atlas of Islam*.

continuing obligations between patron and client. The *mawlā* thus remained attached to the household, adopted the family name of the former master, and derived social status from that relationship. In the case of the *mamlūk* soldiers, the circumstances of their conscription as slaves and subsequent rise through the ranks of the army to become generals show how slavery could work. For some slaves, the institution offered a means of social advancement, while for the masters it ensured steadfast loyalty,⁸ as well as a way of acquiring large numbers of people from elsewhere and “domesticating” them. These slaves were, after all, Armenians, Kurds, and, above all, Turks, not Arabs from Egypt.

Large numbers of male slaves were imported into Egypt through this strategy of creating an elite army of Turkic troops, but female slaves from the same areas were also acquired in equal or higher numbers.⁹ While it has been estimated that

⁸ Ayalon, “Mamluk: Military Slavery,” 10–11.

⁹ Ayalon, “Mamluk: Military Slavery,” 16; and “Mamluk.”

elsewhere in the Islamic world women and girls were imported at rates up to double that of men and boys—to serve as maids, nurses, cooks, laundresses, and concubines¹⁰—in Egypt, the demand for boys may have been higher, so as to stock the army. The story of how that army was created and trained, how it provided powerful support for the last Ayyubid sultan, and ultimately how its members came to rule in the Mamluk dynasty (1250–1517) has led historians to focus on military slavery. Indeed, most histories relate the transition from hereditary Ayyubid rule to the non-hereditary Mamluk rule by casting this as an exclusively male story. But the key individual in that transition was a woman who came to Cairo as one of those enslaved Qipchaq children from the steppe.

Slavery for women often meant sexual service, which is how Shajar al-Durr came to the Ayyubid court. Her date of birth is unknown, but she was certainly young—perhaps about fifteen years of age—since she had no children when she was given to Sultan al-Salih (r. 1240–49) just before 1239, and thereafter became his favored concubine. Thus we can infer a birthdate sometime around 1222–24.¹¹ The fate of one such slave girl is recounted in the *Maqamat*, a collection of short tales that became a popular Arabic genre from the tenth century onward. *Maqamat* collections were often accompanied by lively pictures, as in the version written by al-Hariri (1054–1122), a copy of which was illustrated by al-Wasiti in 1237 (Plate 1). This illustrated *Maqamat* manuscript was made at around the same time that the young Shajar al-Durr herself was for sale. The painting shows a slave market with three dark-skinned slaves from Africa in plain white and red robes, a light-skinned figure lurking behind one of the Africans, and—approaching from the left—a well-dressed man in a gold-trimmed red robe gesturing toward the slight figure of a girl, whose expression is clearly one of dismay or fear. Above, the venality of the transactions about to take place is signified by the scales on which money and human lives will be measured. The scale is positioned at the center of the picture, and its balance—indicating that the sale has not yet been made—together with the complex interplay of hand gestures, introduces an element of tension that heightens the drama of the scene.

¹⁰ Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves*, 4, 61.

¹¹ On Shajar al-Durr's Qipchaq origins, see Levanoni, "Mamluks' Ascent"; Maqriza, *Kitab al-Suluk*, 1:361. More generally, on the political rise of Shajar al-Durr, see Levanoni, "Šağar ad-Durr," in which she cites Muḥammad ibn Salim ibn Wasil's *Muffarij al-kurub fi akhbar Bani Ayyub* in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 1702–1703 (fols. 353 and 354b). See also Schregle, *Die Sultanin von Ägypten*, 43–45.

Plate 1. A Slave Market: From the *Maqamat* by al-Hariri, Painted by al-Wasiti, 1237. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France Ar. 5847 fol. 105. Reproduced with permission by Bridgeman Images.

In another version of the story, written in 1126–38 by Al-Saraqusti ibn al-Ashtarkuwi (or Ibn al-Ashtarkuni), the narrator, who is himself shopping for a girl, describes the scene.

Today, I entered the slave-market with a yearning soul and a tender heart, where a slave-girl—and what a slave-girl!—was put up for sale; one whose beauty penetrated and flowed into men’s souls; one who played with men’s passions and fantasies as *maysir* [a pre-Islamic game of chance] players do with gambling arrows, and who deposited in men’s hearts, a love for her by which they were distracted from all other loves. She left a flame in my heart and heaped affection and yearning for her in me and, indeed, had you been near her, you would have overheard her conversation, as she agreed and disagreed with her master, responding to him in rhythm and rhyme, when he said to her: “O product of my upbringing, do not forget my love and affection! O sister of my son, you are never far from my heart! O offspring of moons, how much love do I conceal for you!”

The master continues on at some length, proclaiming his affection and extolling her beauty. She then retorts, in verse:

Why do you, along with your cymbal, with the invocation of your passion,
and with the melodies of your lute and shawm, / Demand a separation
from me, and then complain of it, if Fate has precedence in the matter, as
well as its own course of action?

Shifting to prose, she castigates him:

As for your having brought me up properly, shown me kindness, out of love for me, made me second only to your son, and a dweller in your heart, a companion to ladies fair as stars and moons, and one to whom you entrusted your secrets and confidences, I reciprocated by pleasing you with my beauty and kindness, while nothing distracted me from you or made me forget you until, when Time struck you down, and a price seduced you, you exposed me to the baseborn, degraded my virtue, divulged my secret, and broached what was sealed, for you did not appreciate my value, or really gaze upon the sun or moon of my beauty. Thus, if there were a true flame in your heart, no gold coin would have tempted you to sell me—how far is a paltry silver coin from love, or water from a lizard.¹²

¹² Al-Saraqusti ibn al-Ashtarkuwi, *Al-Maqamat al-luzumiyah*, 274–75.

The story then describes the bidding war that ensues. The highest bidder, who is the narrator, delivers the money under the supervision of the market inspector, and she is handed over—an object of sale.

Of course, the girl in both the text and the manuscript painting is fictional, and one wonders if such outspoken retorts could have been tolerated from a mere slave. But the time and place parallel the beginnings of Shajar al-Durr, and it does not require much imagination to envision Shajar al-Durr herself as the protagonist and allow the tale to provide a glimpse of a key moment in the life of such a person. Although extolled by male writers for their beauty and the love provoked in the hearts or loins of their masters, the women's lives—as the character in the *Maqamat* reminds us—were valued in “paltry silver coin.” They were part of a ubiquitous exchange system in which human beings were taken by force from one part of the world and introduced into service elsewhere as soldier, servant, or concubine. Although some labor was notoriously terrible (serving in galley ships, for example), other forms of service often led to a lifelong affiliation with and loyalty to the house in which the slave performed his or her duties. The loyalty arose for many reasons: the slave had no other home, the slave and master or mistress might develop genuinely affectionate relationships, and the children that were born to the slave concubines generated certain rights that their mothers would seek to preserve.

A Muslim man could marry up to four wives but could take on as many slave women as his means allowed. Marriages to freewomen were contractual unions in which property and personal rights were guided by law and tradition. In marriage, a man had obligations to fulfill: the wives had to be treated absolutely equally, so that a house for one meant a house for the others, and a gift for one meant gifts for the others. Divorce could be expensive, since it meant returning the dowry to the wife. In contrast, union with a slave was much easier, since equity was not necessary, and if she behaved badly, she could be sold. A slave had little say in whether she was used for sex by her owner. However, it was much to her advantage to comply, because genuine loyalty and affection from the master could result, and, if she gave birth to his son, she would enjoy an improvement in status.¹³ Furthermore, the law decreed that she could not be separated from her child (male or female), could no longer be sold, and would be manumitted upon the death of her owner (although, given the loss of value that this entailed, surely there were cases where these rights were ignored). The children born of that union had the same legal status as progeny born to wives, which meant that the children could expect to

¹³ In contrast, if the child was fathered by another slave, the child inherited slave status. The social and legal status of concubines is explained in Marmon, “Concubinage, Islamic.”

inherit their percentage of the estate on the death of the father. Because Muslim law dictates that individuals cannot bequeath their entire estates according to their will, they cannot favor a particular wife, son, or close friend. Their estates are divided according to a formula found in the Qur'an, and in the formula the children are treated equally, regardless of the legal status of the mother (although, in either case, sons inherited more than daughters).¹⁴ In other words, the slave mother had status, could expect freedom, and could theoretically retire in ease, provided for by the inheritance that her son received.

Thus, through the children of slave women, social mobility occurred not only within Egyptian society but also within the Muslim family. Yet as slaves, these women were by definition non-Muslim, at least by origin. In thirteenth-century Egypt, slaves were usually Turkic and specifically Qipchaq, but this importation of foreign slaves was not an exclusively Egyptian or Ayyubid phenomenon. In the imperial harem of Ottoman Istanbul in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Leslie Peirce has found Christian women of Polish, Greek, Balkan, Armenian, and Italian origins.¹⁵ Similarly, my research on Muslim Spain shows that the slave consorts who gave birth to the royal heirs were largely Basque or Frankish.¹⁶ Ottoman Turkey was therefore ruled entirely by sultans born of concubines, and likewise Umayyad Spain. The result in all these courts was an intimate form of heterogeneity: the introduction, into politically and dynastically important families, of women whose cultural formation was very different from the dominant culture in which they now lived.

Shajar al-Durr was given to al-Salih while he was still a provincial Ayyubid governor in Anatolia. In 1239, al-Salih became ruler of Damascus, considerably more central and strategically important, but he had to fight fiercely against his own family members to maintain that position. It was a turbulent year in which he gained and lost his holdings, was abandoned by his political supporters, and was imprisoned by his cousin with only a few of his *mamlūks* (the rest deserted him) from October 1239 to April 1240. In that stressful period, when al-Salih also lost his son and heir (killed while being held as a hostage), Shajar al-Durr remained with him. She probably had little choice in the matter, but her constancy earned her the sultan's trust as well as an infant son, born while in captivity in 1240.

¹⁴ Powers, *Studies in Qur'an and Hadiith*.

¹⁵ In the Ottoman imperial era, slaves—at least those of the highest ranks—not only retained a sense of identity from their homeland but also often promoted its interests in court diplomacy, according to Peirce, *Imperial Harem*, 219–20. See also Kunt, "Ethnic-Regional (*Cins*) Solidarity."

¹⁶ Ruggles, "Mothers of a Hybrid Dynasty."

Around this moment—the sources do not state specifically when—Shajar al-Durr also became the sultan's wife. In Islamic law, this entails a shift in legal status from slave to free, but it probably did not greatly impact her social standing, which was entirely the result of her liaison with the sultan. Nor, as we have seen, did it affect the status of the child who, as the sultan's son (regardless of the legal status of the mother), was now in line for the throne. Indeed, given that the sultan had only one other living son at this point—a young man of bad character—the birth of a “back-up” heir was dynastically significant. With regards to Shajar al-Durr, whether slave or free, she earned respect and privileges as the mother of his son. She had also presumably converted to Islam, as was common among slaves. It turned out that her son, whose name was Khalil, died after three months; but nonetheless, she kept the title of *wālidat al-Malik al-Manṣūr Khalīl* (Mother of Malik al-Mansur Khalil).¹⁷

Within a few months, al-Salih's fortunes had improved. By pitting brother against cousin, in typical Ayyubid fashion, he managed to negotiate his release from captivity. Very soon thereafter, he was invited by the amirs of Cairo to rule that province, which he did beginning in June 1240, a reign that lasted until his death in 1249.¹⁸ As sultan of Egypt, al-Salih faced serious challenges: the Ayyubid political consortium had to be maintained, although the various factions were in a constant state of internecine war; the French king Louis IX's army of crusaders had to be repelled; and Cairo had to be kept under control.¹⁹ Although previous Ayyubid leaders in Egypt and Syria had employed *mamlūk* soldiers, who might be of Kurdish, Armenian, and Turkic origins, al-Salih seems to have selected only Qipchaq Turks. His strategy of employing a *mamlūk* slave army with no connection to the Arab majority of Egypt over which he ruled, and who benefitted from the education and social status that he gave them, ensured their loyalty to him. Moreover, it produced a strong, ethnically cohesive military force that was highly successful in defending Egypt at a time of constant threat.

¹⁷ The titlature varied. Abu al-Fida recorded (in his *Kitab al-mukhtasar*) that the Sultan's letters were signed with her seal; cited by Soetens, “*Šaġarat ad-Durr*,” 100. On coins, her title was *al-Mustaʿsimiyya al-Šālihiyya malikat al-muslimīn wālidat al-Malik al-Manṣūr*: Amman, “*Shadjar al-Durr*”; see also Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Suluk*, 1:362. The epithet *al-Mustaʿsimiyya*, in reference to the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustaʿsim, reflected no special loyalty: the Ayyubid rulers were nominally appointed by the caliph and acknowledged his authority in the weekly sermon in their mosques.

¹⁸ A concise political history of al-Salih's reign is given in Richards, “*al-Malik al-Salih*,” 988–89.

¹⁹ He was officially designated as sultan by the caliphate, as Humphreys explains in *From Saladin to the Mongols*, 366 (citing as evidence Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzi, *Mirʿat al-zaman*, 499–500).

When the sultan was away on military campaigns, he trusted the government to his *mamlūk* advisors and Shajar al-Durr, who had already proved her loyalty to al-Salih and whose authority in the eyes of the people came from her status as mother of the sultan's deceased son.²⁰ Thus, when the sultan died of the wounds received in battle in November of 1249, Shajar al-Durr was well prepared to serve as regent. Together with al-Salih's advisers, she made the immediate decision to conceal his death until the sole surviving heir, Turanshah (the sultan's son by a different wife), could be recalled from his provincial administrative post, a journey that took several months.²¹ During that tense time, Shajar al-Durr governed as she had previously, in the name of the sultan (whose death was kept secret) and as the regent for their long-deceased infant son.

When Turanshah finally arrived in Egypt on March 1, 1250, he was to have been guided by the deathbed testament of his father, who wrote: "O my son! I recommend Umm Khalil [Shajar al-Durr] to you [. . .] Treat her benevolently and respectfully. Put her at the highest rank, a rank which she had from me."²² Al-Salih also specifically advised his son to respect the slave army: "Without the cooperation of the *mamlūks*, I would never have been able to mount a horse, nor return to Damascus or any other city. Keep on good terms with them."²³ But flying in the face of his father's counsel, Turanshah mistreated the politically powerful *mamlūks*, and that group, having first supported the heir and maneuvered to place him safely on the throne, grew disgusted with his behavior and assassinated him on May 2, 1250.²⁴

In crisis, the *mamlūks* decided to place Shajar al-Durr herself on the throne, not as regent this time but as sultan. Her name was read in the Friday sermon, she issued coins with her titlature, and she distributed robes of honor: three key and highly public signs of sovereignty.²⁵ This was an unusual moment in Islamic political history, and it was recognized as such by the contemporary historian Ibn Wasil (1208–98), who called her the first Muslim woman sovereign (*malikat*

20 Levanoni, "Šaġar ad-Durr," 212 (translating a passage from Ibn Wasif Shah's *Kitab jawahir* in London, British Library, Or. 25731, fol. 64b).

21 Al-Salih had two other sons, but they had died before he reached Cairo: Cahen and Chabbouh, "Le Testament d'al-Malik as-Salih Ayyub."

22 *Ibid.*, 105.

23 *Ibid.*, 110.

24 Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'at al-zaman*, 520. This passage provides a vivid account of Turanshah's bad behavior, slashing his sword at candletops as though they were the heads of the *mamlūks*.

25 Maqrīzī, *Kitab al-Suluk*, 1:362, 366.

al-muslimin).²⁶ In fact, ten years earlier in distant India, a woman named Radiyya al-Dunya wa'l-Din had been first regent of Delhi for her father, and then sultan in 1236–40, although Ibn Wasil did not know that.²⁷

For many reasons having to do with Shajar al-Durr's sex, as well as with the Ayyubid submission to the caliphate in Baghdad and shifting political alliances among the *mamlūks* in Cairo itself, Shajar al-Durr's reign as sultan was brief. After ruling autonomously for three months, she was forced to enter into a co-ruling arrangement with an upper-middle ranked *mamlūk* from the army corps, a man named Aybak, and then to marry him.²⁸ The precise date of these events, and whether Aybak's rise led to a formal dethronement of Shajar al-Durr, is unclear. At some point in this period, a six-year-old child of the Ayyubid line was placed on the throne to preserve the appearance of Ayyubid rule, an arrangement that lasted until 1252, whereupon Aybak once again became sultan. He performed the public face of sovereignty, led the army, and conducted diplomacy; but all the while, out of the public eye in the Cairo Citadel, Shajar al-Durr still held considerable power, as evidenced by the fact that she continued to sign decrees. However, she was now dependent on a partner who was not of her own choosing and whom she did not trust.²⁹ A few years later, in 1257, Aybak did indeed betray her by negotiating to contract a new marriage with the daughter of a potential ally. This so enraged her, and perhaps caused her to fear marginalization as a result of the new alignment of power, that she and her *mamlūk* supporters assassinated him. Within days, Shajar al-Durr was herself assassinated in the bathhouse, in a plot instigated by pro-Aybak members of court—notably his first wife. Her body was cast ignominiously from the one of the windows of the Citadel and was quietly retrieved and buried in a tomb that she had built during her lifetime.³⁰

²⁶ See Gottschalk, "Die ägyptische Sultanin Šağarat," 45n8.

²⁷ Ali, "Radiyya," 371.

²⁸ Levanoni asserts (in "Šağar ad-Durr"), and the primary sources corroborate, that this was a relationship purely of convenience. But Max Van Berchem—on what basis is unknown—calls him "first the lover and then the husband of the sultana," reading a romantic attachment into what was clearly a cold political negotiation: Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, 113.

²⁹ Despite her marriage to Aybak, Shajar al-Durr continued to be identified in relation to her previous husband and their infant son, and to insist on the grounds of her legitimacy. This can be seen in a petition which she received in 1255 which she signed with the title *Wālidat Khalīl al-Šālihīya*, i.e., "mother of Khalil," according to the Mamluk administrator Al-Nuwairi: cited by Gottschalk, "Die ägyptische Sultanin Šağarat," 47.

³⁰ Shajar al-Durr's architectural patronage of al-Salih's tomb and her own tomb are the subject of my forthcoming book.

Shajar al-Durr died terribly, but her story is a remarkable one of a slave who rose from obscure beginnings among the Qipchaq nomads of Asia to become sultan of Egypt. Like all female concubines, she used the assets that she had: youth, beauty, intelligence, character, and courage. Certain romantic (probably invented) details that have been added to her already dramatic life by later historians reveal how powerfully her story appeals to the imagination.³¹ However, it is important to remember that, in many ways, Shajar al-Durr was *not* exceptional. She was one of many thousands of slaves purchased by the Ayyubid sultans and others for service in Egypt. Islamic law and its customary practices made it easy for such slaves to enter into society—perhaps not to assimilate in the modern (and perhaps mythical) sense of a “melting pot,” but certainly to convert to Islam, to acquire wealth and agency, to have a deep investment in that society as permanent members, and sometimes to gain freedom by purchasing it or through motherhood. History provides countless examples of female and male slaves who rose to power in such ways: from Subh, the influential Basque mother of Caliph Hisham II in tenth-century Umayyad Spain; to Ganazafer Agha, the Venetian-born captive who rose to become chief eunuch in the sixteenth-century Ottoman court.³²

If Shajar al-Durr was unique, it was only in her role as the regent for Sultan al-Salih and his infant son Khalil—ruling as an Ayyubid, without realizing that she would be nearly the last of that line—and in her place as the “founder” of the dynasty of so-called Slave Kings, the Mamluks. In the period that followed, Egypt would be ruled by freed Turkic slaves, whose numbers were replenished through sustained Mamluk sponsorship of the slave trade. Egypt would continue to exist not as a homogeneous Arab population but as a layered society of recently freed “first-generation” Turks (from various parts of western Asia and eastern Europe) who enjoyed great power, alongside their second-generation children who, despite birth as free persons and all the rights that such freedom gave them, did not enjoy the same political status and privileges of their fathers; as well as Muslim Arabs, non-Muslim Arabs, Copts, Nubians, Jews, and many others.

However, there is an important gendered dimension to this change that demands recognition. The pivotal shift from Ayyubid rule to the new Mamluk system occurred not simply because Shajar al-Durr was—like her peers in the new ruling elite—a freed slave. Retaining the designation of “al-Salihiya”—belonging

31 The reception of Shajar al-Durr through history as an increasingly romanticized legend is discussed in Shregle, *Die Sultanin von Ägypten*; and Gottschalk, “Die ägyptische Sultanin Šağarat.”

32 For Subh, see Ruggles, “Mothers of a Hybrid Dynasty”; for Gazanfer Agha, see Fetvacı, *Picturing History*, 239–40.

to al-Salih—she did of course embody a type of possession, the legal category of *mamlūk*, which for women (and men) could involve sexual servitude. But, equally importantly, she was a woman whose female body, possessed sexually by Sultan al-Salih, was capable of bearing the legitimate Ayyubid line, thus enabling her to represent him and his line, even though the potential heir that she bore did not live long enough to rule. If the political history of Egypt changed profoundly because of their union, Egypt as a whole was similarly the product of the co-mingling that occurred in the countless unions between such masters and their imported slaves, and geographic and social mobility perpetuated in medieval Muslim society.

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Abstract Large numbers of outsiders were integrated into premodern Islamic society through the institution of slavery. Many were boys of non-Muslim parents drafted into the army, and some rose to become powerful political figures; in Egypt, after the death of Ayyubid sultan al-Salih (r. 1240–49), they formed a dynasty known as the Mamluks. For slave concubines, the route to power was different: Shajar al-Durr, the concubine of al-Salih, gained enormous status when she gave birth to his son and later governed as regent in her son's name, converting to Islam after her husband's death and then reigning as sultan in her own right. She emerges as a figure both unique and typical of the pathways to assimilation and mobility.

Keywords Cairo, Egypt, Islam, Mamluks, Ayyubids, slavery, gender, Maqamat, assimilation.