

# Tree of Pearls: The Extraordinary Architectural Patronage of the 13<sup>th</sup>-Century Egyptian Slave-Queen Shajar al-Durr

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Almost any survey of medieval Islamic history will cover the figure of Shajar al-Durr (“Tree of Pearls” in Arabic), who was one of the few women in Islamic history to hold the title of Sultan, and the only one to do so who began her life as a slave. She is also well known as a pivotal figure in Egyptian politics, as she marked the transition between Saladin’s Ayyubid dynasty (1171–1250 CE) and the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517 CE). However, works that analyze Shajar al-Durr’s biography, reign, and influence often overlook her role as an architectural innovator. In *Tree of Pearls*, art historian D. Fairchild Ruggles highlights Shajar al-Durr’s architectural innovations and argues that her “architectural patronage...changed the face of Cairo and had a lasting impact on Islamic architecture” (1). The book focuses on two buildings: the mausoleum of Shajar al-Durr’s husband, al-Salih, and Shajar al-Durr’s own mausoleum. Ruggles argues that, in al-Salih’s mausoleum, Shajar

al-Durr initiated the Mamluk-era trend of placing a domed mausoleum prominently in urban space and attached to a madrasa complex. In her own mausoleum, Shajar al-Durr innovated the use of Damascus-style gold mosaic in Egypt, a trend often attributed to the later Mamluk Sultan Qalawun. Shajar al-Durr strikingly used this gold mosaic to represent herself—a tree of pearls—in the *mihrab*, thus using her architecture to make “a daring presentation of personal identity” (139). Ruggles richly illustrates her argument with color photographs and other images, and the end result is a lucid introduction to Shajar al-Durr’s career and especially her mastery of the symbolic language of public architecture.

In the Introduction, Ruggles articulates her motivations in pursuing this project and provides an overview of the main primary sources for Shajar al-Durr’s life, including the works of Ibn Wasil (d. 1298), Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256), al-Makīn Ibn al-ʿAmīd (d. 1273) and Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286). She also presents a brief review of previous scholarship on this topic, ranging from Götz Schregle’s classic study on Shajar al-Durr, to R. Stephen Humphery’s study of Ayyubid Syria, to Doris Behrens-Abouseif’s works on Islamic architecture in Cairo. Chapter One uses these primary and secondary sources to present a concise biography of Shajar al-Durr. To situate Shajar al-Durr in a broader context, Chapter Two discusses late Ayyubid history, including the confusing internal power struggles that wracked the Ayyubid family. It also provides a brief overview of two related forms of slavery practiced by the late Ayyubids—military slavery and concubinage—which would both define the contours of Shajar al-Durr’s life.

Chapter three is the first properly art-historical chapter. It introduces the layout of the medieval greater Cairo area, including Fustat, Fatimid al-Qahira, and the Citadel. It focuses on the location and architecture of the Salihīyya Madrasa complex, which is noted for being the first building in Egypt to combine the four Sunni law schools into one madrasa. While the Salihīyya madrasa was not built by Shajar al-Durr, but by her husband al-Salih, Shajar al-Durr would later add al-Salih’s mausoleum onto this madrasa after his death. This chapter also briefly explains the institutions of the *waqf* and the madrasa in a way that is accessible to non-specialists.

Chapter Four provides a gripping account of the drama surrounding Shajar al-Durr's rise to power as Sultan, including the death of Sultan al-Salih in the middle of a battle against the Crusaders, the conspiracy to hide his death, and the family feuds that ensued. This chapter highlights how precarious this moment was for Egypt and how important Shajar al-Durr was as the "human hinge" (141) between the Ayyubids and the Mamluks. It also discusses how Shajar al-Durr exercised her public authority as Sultan, even as she had to hide her body behind a screen or veil: she issued decrees, minted coins, and had her name read in the Friday *khutba*. After providing this historical context, Chapter Five focuses on the mausoleum that Shajar al-Durr added onto al-Salih's madrasa. This mausoleum was groundbreaking, as "the urban placement of the tomb, its extraordinary visibility, and its aggrandizement as a defining element in a larger commemorative complex...became the new paradigm" (101). That is, the fact that Cairo's skyline is full of soaring domes is thanks to a trend initiated by Shajar al-Durr.

Chapter Six details the three-month reign of Shajar al-Durr as sultan, her political marriage to the mamluk Aybak, and her eventual dethronement and murder. While her sultanate was short-lived, Ruggles reminds us that Shajar al-Durr was a powerful figure behind the scenes both before and after her official reign. The chapter focuses on Shajar al-Durr's commissioning of her own mausoleum, especially her use of Damascus-style gold mosaic to depict a tree of pearls in the mihrab, "an extraordinary reference to herself in the most highly charged place in any building where prayer occurs" (139). Ruggles argues that Shajar al-Durr herself initiated the trend of adding gold mosaic to buildings in Egypt, noting that she would have had ample opportunity to see gold mosaic in such buildings as the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus while traveling through Syria with her consort, al-Salih.

Finally, Chapter Seven considers the impact that Shajar al-Durr's gender had on her architectural innovations. Ruggles suggests that, because Shajar al-Durr was not allowed to be seen in public and was expected to be modest in her physical person, she instead used the symbolic language of public architecture to create larger-than-life, self-aggrandizing monuments to both herself and her husband. That is,

her gender was central to her architectural innovation in that she found creative, symbolic ways to circumvent the restrictions on her physical person. The book ends with a charming appendix with a recipe for the pudding called Umm Ali—a popular Egyptian dessert possibly named after the woman who had Shajar al-Durr killed.

I found this book quite delightful to read. Its lucid prose, clear organization, and vivid photographs bring the subject to life. Specialists will be interested in Ruggles' arguments about Shajar al-Durr as an architectural innovator, but non-specialists will also find the book accessible and engaging. I think it will prove especially useful for undergraduate students studying any topic relating to Medieval Islamic history, including political history, social history, women's history, or the history of slavery. It pushes back against those who would either dismiss Shajar al-Durr as an exception or glorify her as a romantic heroine, instead humanizing Shajar al-Durr and analyzing the opportunities and obstacles she faced as an enslaved woman. It provides excellent examples for students of how to engage in primary source analysis and historiographic debate. Finally, it demonstrates how important it is to consider the material record when studying women in medieval Islamic history, as Shajar al-Durr's material legacy tells a different story from the primary source texts written about her by men. As Ruggles says, "While the written chronicles focus on her as a political *anomaly* whose autonomous rule was rectified through forced marriage to the army commander, the material records show her to have been an *innovator* whose extraordinary tomb patronage forever changed the communicative potential of Egyptian architecture to express the identity of the patron in built form and in urban space" (141, emphasis in the original). While I have taught undergraduates about Shajar al-Durr many times before, before reading *Tree of Pearls* I had never appreciated the significance of her architectural patronage or the material legacy she left behind.

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