

SELJUQS SOCIAL HISTORY – Gender

The Great Seljuqs

While most women during the Seljuq period would have led lives centered on the home and family and whose movements and behavior would have been circumscribed by the societal norms of the Islamic Middle Ages, it is clear that some women of high social status had more freedom of movement and were more active in society and politics.

One area in which elite Seljuq women seem to have been particularly noticeable is in the patronage of architecture. Inscriptions giving the names of women as patrons for construction or renovation have been found on mausoleums, caravanserais, madrasas and even mosques. For example, the name of Zumurrud Khatun, daughter of the Seljuq sultan Mahmud, is listed as the patron for the renovation of the Ali al-Rida mausoleum in Mashhad, Iran in 1118. Later, the wife of the Seljuq sultan Sanjar, Qutlugh Balka Sayyida Türkan, is listed as the patron for the repairs and renovation of the Ribat-i Sharaf caravanserai in Khorasan (*pictured left*) in 1154-55. The fact that the names of women appear so prominently on both secular and sacred structures indicates that women's patronage of such projects was considered not only socially acceptable, but even praiseworthy.



In addition to patronage of public or pious works, some elite Seljuq women had a role in the politics of the Great Seljuq state. Perhaps the most notable example was the wife of Sultan Malikshah, Terken Khatun. After the death of her husband, Terken Khatun put her own young son, Mahmud, on the throne. Despite her lack of an official position, Terken Khatun was the effective ruler of the Seljuq state until her death in 1094.

One of the main reasons that Seljuq women were able to finance the construction of various buildings or become involved in political maneuvering was their financial independence. Noble women generally received generous financial grants from their husbands or sons and had sizeable retinues of slaves and servants. This combination of wealth and loyal servant gave them the ability to influence the course of events, political and military, distribute alms, and finance construction.

The Seljuqs of Rum

The situation for women in the Seljuq state of Rum was little different from that of the Great Seljuqs. Most women's lives centered around the home and family, but some elite women had more freedom of movement or came to prominence due to their patronage of architecture, their involvement in politics, or their knowledge. Like noble women in the Great Seljuq Empire, upper class women in the Sultanate of Rum often had considerable personal wealth at their disposal.

The freedom of movement some elite women enjoyed is attested by the account of Ibn Jubayr, a Muslim from al-Andalus who traveled the Muslim world in the late 12th century. In his account he discusses three Turkish noblewomen (*khatun*, خاتون), among them Saljuqa (or Saljuqi) bint Mas'ud, daughter of Sultan Mas'ud (r. 1116-1156), who made the pilgrimage to Mecca accompanied only by their personal servants and retinue in 1183-85. Passing through Baghdad going to and returning from Mecca, she apparently caught the attention of the Abbasi Caliph al-Nasir, because eighteen months later he asked to marry her.

They were married soon afterwards, and the surviving accounts indicate that it was a happy marriage until Saljuqa's death in 1188.

Building inscriptions indicate that a number of Rum Seljuq women were patrons of a number of different structures in the Sultanate of Rum. However, one woman stands out in particular, the wife of Sultan Kayqubad I (r. 1220-1237) and mother of Sultan Kaykhusraw II (r. 1237-1246), Mahperi Khatun (ماه پری). Also known as Mahpari Khatun (ماه پاری), Khand Khatun (خواند خاتون) or Hunat Khatun (هوناٹ خاتون), Mahperi Khatun was the sponsor for the construction of one mosque, a mausoleum, a double bathhouse and five madrasas in Kayseri, Turkey. In addition to these, she also financed the construction of two caravanserais, one near Tokat and the other near Yozgat.



The Hunat Hatun complex in Kayseri

Women noted for their learning are rare in the Sultanate of Rum, but one in particular stands out, Bibi Munajjima, “Bibi the Astrologer”. She was brought from Syria with her husband and son by Sultan Kayqubad I to the Rum Seljuq capital of Konya in 1231 and apparently served as the court astrologer. She was so respected that her son, Nasr al-Din Husayn (who later wrote the primary source for the history of the Sultanate of Rum) was known by the name Ibn Bibi (“son of Bibi”). This is unusual since names beginning with “ibn” are generally followed by the father’s name rather than the mother’s, and is indicative of her status.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. In what areas were Seljuq women most visible?
2. What factors made Seljuq women relatively independent actors in politics and society?