

*Original article*

THE LEGITIMACY OF SHAJAR AL-DURR REIGN AS REPRESENTED IN  
LIGHT OF A RARE DINAR

*Arafa, E.*

*Islamic dept., Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo Univ., Egypt*

*E-mail: [iman.arafa14@gmail.com](mailto:iman.arafa14@gmail.com).*

Received 2/2/2016

Accepted 7/6/2016

**Abstract**

*Shajar al-Durr who began her life as a slave and ended it as sultana was one of the very few women in Islamic history to ascend to the throne. Shajar's political importance comes from the period in which she reigned, which includes many important events in the Egyptian and Middle Eastern history. Despite the fact that she officially ruled Egypt for a very short period of approximately eighty days, that does not underestimate the majestic role she played in history. Also, her reign marked a turning point in Egyptian history, as the Egyptian sultanate shifted from the Ayyubid to the Mamluk. Concerning Shajar al-Durr's coins, they are all extremely rare, designed in the best Ayyubid tradition and style. Due to the rarity of her coins, every single piece of these coins has its own value and significance, specially that her coins reflect many of the important historical facts as it is going to be clarified through this research.*

**Keywords:** *Shajar al-Durr, Rare Dinar, Legitimacy, Abbasid Caliph, Titles.*

**1. Introduction**

One of the most powerful, most famous figures throughout history is Shajar al-Durr who began her life as a slave and ended it as a sultana. She is one of the very few women in Islamic history to ascend to the throne. In the course of her life and political career, the Egyptian Sultana Shajar al-Durr, played many roles and exerted great influence within the court system that she inhabited. She was a military leader, a mother, and a sultana at various points throughout her career with great success until her fall from power in 655 A.H / 1257 A.D. [1].

Shajar's political importance comes from the period in which she reigned, which includes many important events in the Egyptian and Middle Eastern history as it will be mentioned shortly. Despite the fact that she officially ruled Egypt for a very short period of approximately eighty days, that does not underestimate the majestic role she played in history, besides of course the importance of being one of the very rare women who were officially appointed for the monarchy, and reigned during the Islamic history, at a time when for a woman to reign the throne was not that

acceptable. Also, her reign marked a turning point in Egyptian history, as the Egyptian Sultanate shifted from the Ayyubid to the Mamluk. As it was mentioned, Shajar al-Durr was of Turkic origin or an Armenian one [2]. She first appeared in the historical annals in 1239 as a mamlukah in Caliph Mustasim's harem [1]. She was purchased as a slave by as-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub in the Levant before he became a Sultan and accompanied him to al-Karak during his detention there in 1239 A.D [3]. After this act of loyalty, Shajar al-Durr became as-Salih's favorite wife. Later, when he became a sultan, she went with him to Egypt and gave birth to their son Khalil who was called al-Malik al-Mansur and died very young during the life of his father [4]. In April 1249 A.D., as-Salih Ayyub, who was gravely sick in Syria, returned to Egypt after he heard that king Louis of France had assembled a crusader army in Cyprus and was about to launch an attack against Egypt [4]. After a while, as-Salih Ayyub died after ruling Egypt for nearly 10 years. And since the country was in the midst of war with the crusaders, Shajar Al-Durr decided to conceal the Sultan's death [5]. As noted above, Louis's crusades occurred at a horrible time for the Ayyubid regime. The French King's forces took over Damietta and waited for an opportunity to strike Cairo. Ayyub's death on November 23, 1249 seemed to pave the way for such an opportunity for attack [1]. However, Shajar al-Durr managed to stabilize the political and military situation until Turan Shah -her step son- arrived. With this powerful woman in command behind the scenes, the Mamluk army defeated Louis's forces. Due to the huge political turmoil the country witnessed after the death of as-Salih Ayyub, opportunity was given to the Bahri Mamluk's to appear on the scene. Thus, in turn they killed Turan Shah [6]

who was ruling al-Salihyah [2] and who was considered the last Ayyubid Sultan [2]. The Mamluks needing a link to the Ayyubids and their legitimacy elevated Shajar Al-Durr to the throne and gave her the title Umm-Khalil "Mother of Khalil", thus announcing the beginning of the Mamluk. Her Turkish origins and performance in the crisis inspired her counterparts to break from Islamic tradition and allow her to become the first female leader in Islamic Egypt [1]. As any other person who carries the title of sultan, Shajar al-Durr had coins struck under her name, and was mentioned in weekly prayers in mosques, which were considered as specific acts of sultans only. In the Friday sermons, she was mentioned with titles as: "Oh, Allah, save the queen of Muslims Ismat al-dunya wal-Din and Umm al-Malik Khalil (mother of king Khalil) al-Musta'simiyya and sahibat al-malik as-Salih (wife of al-malik as-Salih)" [5]. Also, some of these titles were struck on coins as will be mentioned, since she was embarrassed to mention her real name directly on coins [7]. Besides, even in decrees she used her title "Walidat Khalil", and not her name Shajar al-Durr [4]. All these procedures were taken by Shajar al-Durr to please the Abbasid Caliph and to gain respect and legitimacy for her reign and renounce the fact that she is a woman. Nevertheless, all of those procedures were of no help in convincing the Caliph to accept the reign of a woman [4]. Therefore, the Caliph al-Musta'sim billah, sent to the Egyptian amirs threatening them to send another man if the Mamluks could not find another male candidate, as follows: "since no man among you is worthy of being sultan, I will bring you one" [5]. The refusal of the Abbasid caliph against the reign of Shajar al-Durr [6] was considered as a great setback to the Mamluks in Egypt as the custom during the Ayyubid era was that

the Sultan could gain legitimacy only through the recognition of the Abbasid caliph [3]. Thus, to avert the crisis, Shajar al-Durr abdicated her position [1], and passed the throne to ‘Izz al-Din Aybak her new husband, who used to be her own vizier after ruling Egypt for a very brief period for about eighty days [4]. Concerning Shajar al-Durr’s coins,

## 2. Coin Significance and Analysis

Many of the former historical facts mentioned above were represented on her coins, which did not only symbolize a regime of the throne, but also were regarded as significant evidence that supports and confirms the historical events. Gold and silver coins under the name of Shajar al-durr were found, carrying the titles previously mentioned [5]. As it was mentioned before, this sultana reigned for a very brief period; for only about eighty days,

### 2.1. Obverse, fig. (1-a, b)



Figure (1) Shows Obverse of the studied coin

they are all extremely rare, designed in the best Ayyubid tradition and style [8]. So Shajar was keen to keep the same style of the former well known Ayyubid coins, so as not to face a problem in circulation, as the political problems she was integrated on were quite enough.

thus every single piece of her coins has its own value and significance. To date, research shows that only two dinars are found; one of them in Balog’s collection [8] and the other in the Catalogue of Oriental Coins in the British Museum [9]. The current study, however, presents a third consecutive dinar<sup>(a)</sup> published for the first time. Its inscriptions come in transcriptional line as follows:



**Field:** Double circular line around the legend reading:

الامام  
المستعصم  
بإله أبو أحمد عبد  
الله أمير المؤمنين

The obverse holds the name and titles of the Abbasid Caliph “al-Musta’sim billah”. As it is obvious, Shajar al-Durr attempted to satisfy the Caliph and guarantee his recognition by minting his name and titles on the obverse even before representing her

titles on the reverse. Concerning the titles struck on the obverse, they are as follows: **al-Imam**; It is a title that was known for the Prophet’s kinfolk then was taken by the Fatimid Caliphs in Egypt, and the Zaydi Imamette in Yemen [10]. This title was given to

whom was appointed as the leader of the Muslims issues since the Prophet's age "peace be upon him". It was also a common term to entitle those who are known for their righteousness, asceticism, knowledge, and Sharia [11]. As a universal title, it was inscribed on all coins in the Islamic world to refer to the caliphs throughout different eras. **Amir al-Mu'minin**; Commander (Amir) in language refers to the one who has power and dominance, and it is one of the occupational titles that were used as an honorary one [10]. Since the era of caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the title

"amir al-mu'minin" (the commander of the faithful) was the official name of who was in charge of the general role of the Muslims. Mostly, it was used as a functional title, rather than an honorary one, as was reflected in its attachment to names in the inscriptions on coins and other materials with inscriptions [11]. This title is synonymous to the caliph title, which was taken by all the Abbasid Caliphs until the Mongol invasion of Baghdad. Thus, as one of these caliphs, it was taken by "al-Imam al-Mu'tasim" as one of them, and stuck on Shajar al-Durr's coins.

**Margin:** It is represented in a circular line around the legend including the date and place of mint along with Basmalah, as follows:

"بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم ضرب هذا الدينار بالقاهرة سنة ثمان وأربعين وستماية"

*"In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, this dinar was struck in Cairo in the year six hundred forty eight"*.

Definitely, this date records a turning point in history, representing

the year Shajar al-Durr came to the throne.

## 2.2. Reverse, fig. (2-a, b)



Figure (2) Shows Reverse of the studied coin

**Field:** Double circular line around the legend reading:

المؤمنين  
المستعصمية الصالحة  
ملكة المسلمين والدة  
الملك المنصور خليل  
أمير

The reverse of the dinar under study holds several titles for Shajar al-Durr carrying very profound meanings, as follows: **al-Musta'simiyya**; as it is obvious on the dinar under study, the first title Shajar al-Durr struck on her coins was "al-Musta'simiyya", which

refers to the name of the Abbasid Caliph "al-Musta'sim", as if she is attributed to him directly for being regarded as the representative of the donor of legitimacy, since she can gain it only through his recognition. Also, this title was given to Shajar al-Durr

when she was a slave for the Abbasid caliph al-Musta'sim, so she was keen to keep this title also as an attempt to show the caliph her loyalty and subordination to him. **al-Salihiyya**; this title attributes to the name of sultan al-Malik as-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub (her husband), which represents another trial on behalf of Shajar al-Durr to gain legitimacy for her reign, after the death of Turan Shah, the sole son of al-Malik as-Salih. **Malikat Al-Muslimin**; the title/laqab "the queen of Muslims" is one among others used during the Friday Sermon referring to her in replacement to her name [2]. **Walidat al-Malik al-Mansur**; this title appears within the inscriptions struck on the third and fourth line, which means "Mother of king the triumphant Khalil", her son from sultan as-Salih, who died when he was a little child during his father's lifetime [4]. Her son took the title "al-Mansur" connoting "the triumphant", which indicates that the holder of this title is supported by God. This was also

one of the frequently used words during the Mamluk era, as one of the characteristics that relate to optimism [11]. Using the names of her late husband and dead son were attempts to gain legitimacy for her reign as an heir of the sultanate. Also, the insistence on the struck of her dead son's full name was to remind everyone of her emancipation from slavery. **Khalil amir al-Mu'minin**; the title "Khalil amir al-Mu'minin" was used to refer to Shajar al-Durr's dead son, connoting the friend of the commander of the faithful. Thus, it was used on her coins to symbolize the strong relationship with amir al-Mu'minin, the Abbasid caliph. It is apparent that Shajar al-Durr wanted to send a strong hidden message to all the parish, and Muslim rulers who aspirant to the throne; that she is very close to the Abbasid caliph, and therefore she used her coins as a means of propaganda.

**Margin:** A circular line around the legend:

"لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله أرسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله".

*"there is no deity but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God, He sent him with guidance and the religion of the truth to make it apparent above all religion"*.

### 3. Conclusion

*In conclusion to the former analytical study of this rare piece of Shajar al-Durr, it has been revealed that she used her coins not only to represent her authority as a normal sign of being the heir sultana of the throne, but also to desperately try to gain the acceptance of the Abbasid caliph from a side and to show everyone her majestic power from another side. This was clear in avoiding writing her name directly, but instead, she gave herself several titles, which were taken from the Abbasid caliph, her son, and her husband's name, as it was mentioned in details before. Moreover, this dinar is the third piece for Shajar al-Durr to be found until now, and as this woman reigned for a very short period, besides that her time was considered to be a turning point in historical events in many aspects as was mentioned in this study, accordingly, every single piece represents a highly significant value in itself due to its rarity. In addition, the analytical study of this coin, not only shed light on the historical events of that time, but also shed light on a very remarkable notice, as by having an in-depth look into the coin under study and comparing it to the other two pieces which were published before, it was noticed that the inscriptions of the filed on the obverse and reverse are typically the same, but, as for the inscriptions of the margins, there were slight differences in the shape and size of some letters. For example, the piece preserved in the British Museum was struck by a dies with fine letters, not like the piece under study which has bolder thicker letters. This may, accordingly, reflect a very important observation, that this piece was struck with a different dies. Thus, it is doubtless that an in-depth analytical study of Shajar al-Durr coins*

*does provide significant insight, not only into her rule as a sultana, but also into the turning point her reign brought upon Islamic history in general, and the ruling system in Egypt in particular.*

### **Acknowledgements**

Acknowledgement and appreciation are given to Prof. Atef Mansour and Mr. Yehia Gaafar in the United Arab Emirates for providing the coin under study in this research.

### **Endnotes**

- (a) This consecutive dinar is preserved in the private collection of Mr. Yehia Gaafar in the United Arab Emirates.

### **References**

- [1] Duncan, D., (1998). Scholarly views of Shajart al-Durr, Torreyson Library, Univ. of Central Arkansas.
- [2] Al-Maqrizi, T., (1997). Al-Selouk lime'refatt dual al-melouk, Dar al-Kotob Publishing, Vol.1, Cairo.
- [3] Shayal, J., (1266). Tarikh misr al-islamiya, Dar Al-Maaref Pub., Cairo, Vol. 2, Cairo.
- [4] Al-Mogawlath, S., (2013). Atlas tarikh al-asr al-mamluky, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Obekan Pub., Riyadh.
- [5] Ramadan, A., (2008). Al-nkoud al-islamiy wa ahmyatha fe ma'refat al-tarikh wal asar wal hadarah al-islamiya, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Zahraa El-Sharq Pub., Cairo.
- [6] Al-Nabarawy, R., (2000). Al-nkoud al-islamiya monzu bdayet al-karn al-sades ela nhayet al-karn al-tase'e al-hijri, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Zahraa El-Sharq Pub., Cairo.
- [7] Fahmy, A., (1978). Al-nkoud al-arabiya, madeha wa hadirha, Dar El-Nahda Al-Arabia Pub.
- [8] Balog, P., (1964). The coinage of the Mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria, Numismatic Studies, No.12, the American Numismatic Society, New York.
- [9] Lane-Poole, S. (1879). Catalogue of oriental coins, Vol. IV, The Coinage of Egypt British Museum, London.
- [10] Abdel Wadoud, M., (2009). Al-kitabat wal zakharef ala nkoud wal tuhaf al-madnyah khilal al-asr al-mamluky al-bahari, Al-Malik Faysal Center for Islamic Studies, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. KSA.
- [11] El-Basha, H., (1978). Al-alkab al-islamiya fe al-tarikh wal wasa'ek wal asar, Dar Al-Nahda al-Arabia, Cairo.