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Hacı Bayram Mah. Boyacılar Sk. No: 14/1 06050
Altındağ-Ankara/TÜRKİYE • Tel: +90 (312) 310 08 60
www.fcr.com.tr • fcr@fcr.com.tr

Zubaydah bint Ja'far

The Leading Female Figure of the Abbasid Period

Remziye SEÇEN

Ankara 2025

About the Author

Remziye SEÇEN

Is a researcher in Islamic History who completed her undergraduate and graduate studies at Ankara University. She earned her master's degree with a thesis on Zubaydah bint Ja'far, one of the prominent female figures of the Abbasid period, and completed her doctoral dissertation on methodological problems in Ottoman historical studies within American Orientalism.

Her research focuses on early and classical Islamic history, the Abbasid cultural milieu, political structures, the social position of women, Orientalism, and the historical background of Ottoman–American relations. She has presented her work at international conferences and has published articles and book chapters in these fields.

Seçen has taught Islamic studies, history of religions, and Islamic civilization courses in both Turkey and the United States. She is proficient in Turkish, English, and Arabic. She continues to pursue academic studies centered on the cultural and intellectual heritage of Islamic history.

About the Book

Zubaydah bint Ja'far

The Leading Female Figure of the Abbasid Period

Islamic civilization experienced remarkable social, cultural, economic, and artistic development during the early Abbasid era, often described as the Golden Age of Islam. This transformation influenced all segments of society, including women, whose visibility in political and social life increased significantly. Among the notable women of this period, Zubaydah bint Ja'far stands out as a figure who utilized the opportunities of her time with exceptional effectiveness.

A member of the Hashimite family descending from the Prophet (pbuh), Zubaydah was a princess-the granddaughter, wife, and mother of caliphs. She possessed her own treasury and dedicated a substantial part of her wealth to charitable works. One of her most enduring contributions was the construction of the water channels supplying Mecca-known as Ayn-i Zubaydah-and the establishment of accommodations along pilgrimage routes. Through these efforts, her name was preserved in public memory for centuries.

Another aspect that sustained her fame was her celebrated relationship with Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. Renowned for her intelligence and beauty, Zubaydah influenced the caliph through her ambition, insight, and strong character. Their relationship, reflected in poetry and in the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, became an integral part of the literary imagination of later generations. The narratives of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which depict the grandeur of Baghdad and the era of Hārūn al-Rashīd, include thirteen stories that portray Zubaydah's figure.

This biographical study examines Zubaydah bint Ja'far's personality, ideas, influence on her period, and representation in Arabic literature, revealing a figure rooted not only in political history but also in the cultural memory of society.

Keywords: Abbāsīds; Islamic civilization; woman; poetry; *One Thousand and One Night Tales*; Zubaydah bint Jafar

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PREFACE

The first period of the Abbasids was a time when the State expanded its borders through conquests. This period, in which bright livelihoods began with the support of the land holdings and the tax revenues gained, also witnessed the development of its civilization to successful heights, resulting in the making of history. Baghdad, built on the banks of the Tigris River during the reign of Caliph al-Mansur (754-775 AD), appeared as a city of prosperity and abundance, the subject of fairy tales. Yakubi (897 AD) positioned Baghdad with rivers flowing through it as the center of the world and divided the world into three as East, South and North.¹ Baghdad, in the period, was a city with magnificent bastions, unique domes, large and cool courtyards, vineyards, and gardens that included date palms brought in from the city of Basra.²

In the first century and a half of the Abbasids, Baghdad became the capital of trade, science and art. With the increasing prosperity of the people, women became more visible, socially and politically. In other words, there were women who joined the army, participated in scholarly assemblies, and earned their own income and wealth through trade. However, these women who had a say in social and political aspects of the society in which they lived, were mostly the wives and concubines of the Caliph, or the participants were women of the upper class, including the sisters of *Viziers* (government officials) and sometimes, the daughters of the *Ulema* (scholars of Islam). Nevertheless, the women of the Abbasid period played very active roles until the

¹ Ya'qubî, Ahmad b. Abî Ya'qub b. Jâfer, *Book of Countries*, trans. Murat Ağarı, Kitabevi Publications, Istanbul, 2002, p.17.

² Yakut al-Hamawi, Abu Abdullah Shihabiddin, *Mu'jam'ul Buldan*, Daru Sadr, Beirut, 1957. Vol.1, p.457.

days of Caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861 AD) when women were not allowed to leave the harem, a private and domestic space reserved for Muslim women.

It was before this time period that Zubaydah bint Ja'far, one of the women of authority and prestige in the Golden Age of Islam, left a deep political and social mark in the Baghdad of her time (766-831 AD). Moreover, she was the favorite wife of Caliph Harun Rashid. Zubaydah a descendant of the Hashemite's clan, was the granddaughter of Caliph Mansur, she was the cousin and wife of Caliph Harun, and she was the mother of Caliph Muhammad al-Amin. Apart from the State treasury, Zubaydah had accumulated a large amount of wealth of her own. Furthermore, she participated in numerous charitable activities throughout her lifetime. In addition to improving the pilgrimage routes from Baghdad to Mecca, which is still practiced today by the 2 billion Muslims around the world; she also built a series of wells, reservoirs and artificial pools, to meet the needs of the pilgrims on their journey to Mecca.

Meanwhile, the love between Zubaydah and Caliph Harun became a popular legend. Zubaydah, who was famous for her intelligence and beauty, greatly influenced Harun to the point that he would be willing to give up the throne for her, place the State's treasures in front of her and make the most critical decisions of the State with her consent. While his love for Zubaydah burned bright, Harun had concubines and other wives, just as every Caliph before him and after him, traditionally did. Therefore, Zubaydah had occasional conflicts with Harun's concubines and other wives, but she always managed to be the Caliph's favorite companion.

Due to her social standing, her wisdom and gregariousness, Zubaydah was a sought-after guest at many events, including scholarly gatherings, art exhibitions, and poetic discussions. Overall, she was famous for her generosity towards scientific

explorations and scholarly studies. Zubaydah and Caliph Harun even wrote and recited poems to each other. At times, poetry helped them resolve their resentments toward one another and at other times, it offered good tidings of their children. Zubaydah was always gracious to the poets who wrote lyrical words for her and sometimes responded by filling their mouths with actual pearls.

The famous folktale of *A Thousand and One Nights* was passed down through oral transmission and Zubaydah was included in thirteen of those narratives. Thus, it is through those narratives that many generations have learned about Zubaydah's intellectuality, influence and philanthropy. Those narratives were solidified against the backdrop of The Golden Age of Islam.

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