

# MY VERY FIRST STUDENT CONTRIBUTION

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And a very good one, too. And much quicker than I would have imagined. Yesterday, when I was writing about how male authors have persisted in belittling women through the ages, I hesitated as I was trying to go from Procopius to Alberti. I had just written a few sentences about the former's hatred for Empress Theodora and her companion Antonina (married to the general Belisarius). At this point an immediate comparison with the "Sultanate of Women" or "Reign of Women" in Ottoman history suggested itself. This is a cliché invented by Ahmet Refik (Altınay). He published his *Kadınlar Saltanatı* in 1916, and the title immediately caught on, made its way into popular culture, and became the starting point for an entire genre of blaming especially Kösem Sultan (1589-1651) and Turhan Sultan (1627-1683) — stereotyped, as in my favorite Alberti quote, as "bold and forward females" who went where they should not have gone — for the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Initially I wrote a sentence or two about these parallels, too, but then deleted them, preferring to leave such comparative inferences to my readers' knowledge and intuition.

I am so glad that I left this gap, for it has elicited a pertinent comment from Mehmet Kara, one of our History undergraduates. Below you may find the first half of his letter, devoted to various Islamic and Ottoman cases, to which I have made only some linguistic and stylistic corrections. I am saving the second half of Mr Kara's letter, which revolves around Emma Hamilton or Lady Hamilton, for the near future.

I like your historical examples of misogyny, and I would like to provide a few others for future exploration.

Raziye Begüm Sultan (\*), Şecerüddür (\*\*), and Kösem Sultan are some other women intensely disliked by men. They all rose to political power in different sultanates, then came to various tragic ends due to patriarchal systems deeply rooted in religion and tradition.

On the other side of the coin, we do have some little-known examples of women's success from the Muslim world, such as El-İcliyeye binti el-İcliy (also known as Mariam al-Aşturlābiyya) and Fatima al-Fihri. Meryem el-Asturlabiyya was known for her astronomical studies, while in 850 Fatima al-Fihri founded the al-Qarawiyin mosque in Fez, Morocco, which became the core of a university. Lubna of Cordoba is another great Muslim woman, famous not only for having led the way in creating a massive library, but also as a poet, grammarian, translator, and mathematician.



Comparing them with Kösem, Raziye Begüm or Şecerüddür, it is clear that while women enjoy a degree of freedom in non-political activities, they stand out as more of a threat more when they intervene politically in patriarchal systems.

My footnotes. (\*) Raziye Begüm Sultan (r.1236-1240) was the only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), a typical praetorian state founded by Islamicized military slaves, ghulams, of Turkish ethnic origin. After various internal divisions and dynastic mixtures, it was eventually overrun by the Mughals (or Baburids) in 1526. (\*\*) Şecerrüddür was for two months the de facto, and perhaps also the de jure ruler (and the only female ruler) of another praetorian state: the newly emerging Mamluks in Egypt. Originally a slave woman (possibly of Turkish, Circassian, Greek or Armenian ethnic origin) exported from Caucasia to Egypt, she was first bought as a concubine and later taken in lawful marriage by Salih Ayyub, the last Ayyubid sultan. In the confused circumstances of the Seventh Crusade, when first Salih Ayyub died and then his son and designated successor Muazzam Turanşah was assassinated, Şecerüddür as Salih Ayyub's widow appears to have been proclaimed sultan by a convention of Mamluk emirs on 2nd May 1250. This triggered hostile reactions from elsewhere in Islamdom, including a harsh letter by the Abbasid caliph, who offered to "send men from Baghdad if you don't have any men among you capable of becoming sultan." Şecerüddür then married Aybeg, one of those Mamluk emirs, who thereby achieved the necessary legitimacy (deriving from the Ayyubids) to become the first official Mamluk sultan.

