

QARAKHANID SOCIAL HISTORY – Gender

Due to the lack of textual evidence, it can only be surmised that, as in other pastoral nomadic societies, Qarakhanid women initially enjoyed relatively free lives. However, after the Qarakhanids became Muslims, there would have been gradually increasing pressure for Qarakhanid women to adopt lifestyles more in keeping with the norms of surrounding Islamic societies. This would have meant a life that was primarily restricted to the home and family, and little involvement with events outside.

However, there is some evidence that upper-class Qarakhanid women may have been more visible and enjoyed higher social status than women from lower social classes. There is a Chinese source from the first half of the 12th century which describes the foreign envoys who came to the Northern Song imperial palace in Kaifeng to present gifts to the emperor as part of the New Year celebrations. Among the envoys were the Qarakhanid representatives, who came with their wives. The Qarakhanids were apparently the only envoys whose wives accompanied them to this official function since the presence of women in any of the other envoys is not mentioned. Whether the women in the Qarakhanid envoy were simply accompanying their husbands, or whether they conducting independent diplomatic or commercial business in the Song capital is unknown, but their presence in the diplomatic party is a clear indication of their elevated status.

The other evidence for the status of elite Qarakhanid women comes from two mausoleums located in Taraz, Kazakhstan attributed to the Qarakhanids that were constructed next to each other and mark the burial sites of two noble women. The first, the Babaji Khatun Mausoleum was constructed sometime between the 10th and 12th centuries, while the other, the Aisha Bibi Mausoleum, is dated to the 11th-12th centuries. Both structures show a high degree of craftsmanship and artistic sophistication, indicating that these women must have held highly respected positions in their society.

Readings

Barthold, W. *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. Oxford, 1928.

Davidovich, E.A. "The Kharakhanids", in Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

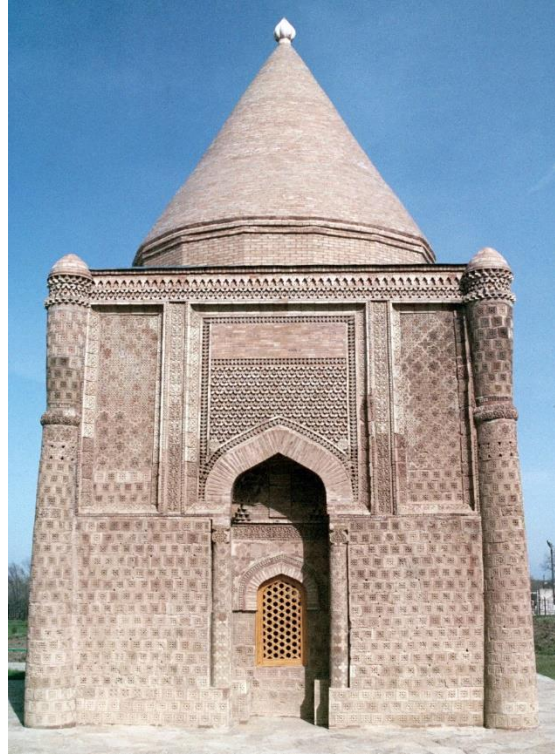
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Discussion Questions

1. Why is determining the status and roles of women in medieval societies often difficult for historians?
2. Why different types of indirect evidence can historians use to make deductions about the lives of women in medieval societies?



Babaji Khatun Mausoleum



Aisha Bibi Mausoleum