

# SEVERAL DISTINGUISHED WOMEN IN THE HISTORY AZERBAIJANI ATABAY, AQ QOYUNLU AND SAFAVID STATES

*Sara Khatun. Artist Altay Hajiye*



Considering the issue on women's role in the medieval history of the Azerbaijani state allows making a conclusion that women have always held a special place in Azerbaijan's political history. These included diplomats, warriors, politicians and poetesses, as well as ordinary personalities who carried out grand palatial schemes, which at times altered or influenced the course of history to some extent. Perhaps, these long-standing traditions of Azerbaijani women's contribution to the political life of the state largely explain the fact that Azerbaijan became the first country in the East in 1918 to grant women suffrage.

The ten most prominent female personalities in the national history and culture would probably include, among others, Momine Khatun, Inanj Khatun, Malika Jalaliyye, Sara Khatun, Tajlu Begim, Peri Khan Khatun (Shah Ismail's daughter), Peri Khan Khanim (Shah Tahmasib's daughter), Hajar Khanim, as well as poetesses Mahsati Ganjavi and Khurshidbanu Natavan. Some of them are referenced in this article.

Sara Khatun, an outstanding 15th century politician and the first female diplomat of an Oriental state, was known during that time period not only in the region but also far beyond, in Europe. Sara Khatun, who was the wife of Ali Bay Bayandur, a son of Osman Qara Yoluk and the mother of Uzun Hassan of Aq Qoyunlu, governed the city of Harput (10, p.210) at a certain time, Turkish scholar Faruk Sumer concluded. In addition to her dip-

*Sultan Mehmet II officially receives Sara Khatun.  
Contemporary drawing*

omatic skills, that epoch, itself, apparently stipulated the development of her career in this field. In fact, the period of the Aq Qoyunlu dynasty's rule in Azerbaijan saw rampant development of diplomatic relations with Europe. This tradition shaped up as early as during the tenure of Uzun Hassan's grandfather, Osman Qara Yoluk (Note 1), i.e. long before the cross upon the dome of the Constantinople church Hagia Sophia was replaced by a crescent. These ties were particularly boosted during Uzun Hassan's tenure, given that "European monarchs began to utterly beware of the growing threat of Ottoman expansion" (24, p.175) following the Ottoman state's conquest of Constantinople in 1453, which is rightly acknowledged by Western pundits. Although "the idea of a non-Christian union was largely unpopular in the West" initially, soon thereafter "the rising Aq Qoyunlu state and its ruler, Uzun Hassan, became a natural ally for them" (17, p. 38). The latter's success was certainly due to "his outstanding personal qualities that distinguished him not only as a charismatic military leader but also as a statesman" (19, p.62).

The Empire of Trebizond, a remainder of the Byzantine Empire, which had a long-standing relationship with Aq Qoyunlu, acted as a mediating party in the East-West relations. Frequent military campaigns of the Aq Qoyunlu confederation into Trebizond back in the 1340s were widely referenced in the descriptive materials of Byzantine chroniclers. One of those materials refers to Ali Bay, the head of "the Amid Turks" under Ilkhan Ghazan Mahmud Khan (1295-1304), who led the troops that reached the Trebizond walls in 1348 again. Although Ali Bay's attempt to seize the city was a failure, the young Alexei III was evidently frightened to an extent that he arranged the engagement of his sister, Maria Despina, with Fakhraddin Kutluk Bay (25, p.57-60), a decision made mostly for political considerations. In 1352, this wedlock resulted in the birth of Qara Yoluk Osman Bay, the founder of the Aq Qoyunlu dynasty, who subsequently married a Trebizond princess. This tradition was furthered by Uzun Hassan, who wedded in 1458 with Katarina, Kalo Ioann's daughter, known mostly as Despina Khatun. Unlike his predecessors, Ali Bay, Uzun Hassan's father and the son of Osman Qara Yoluk, chose the well-known *Sara Khatun* (9, p.272), a representative of the noble Turkic Bayandurlu dynasty, to be his spouse (19, p. 35-36, 63). It was Sara Khatun who was instrumental in the strengthening of diplomatic ties (note 2).



Abu Bakr Tikhrani, a well-known historian and chronicler of the Aq Qoyunlu court, refers to her as Sarai Khatun in his academic paper titled "Kitabi-Diyarbakriya". According to F. Sumer, "Sarai" was a fairly common feminine name in the Turkic world. Thus, one of the influential "khatuns" of Emir Timur was called Sarai Mulk Khanum and the name of one of the daughters of Iskander Karakoyunlu was Shah Sarai (5<sup>a</sup>, 221). On the one hand, European countries were interested in forging an alliance with Aq Qoyunlu to counter the Ottoman Empire; on the other hand, they were seeking to foment stand-off between the two Islamic powers (Note 3). At the same time, Y. Mahmudov notes that Sara Khatun's name was reportedly mentioned in nearly all letters delivered from Venice whereby instructions were also issued to pay special attention to her (5, p.48-49).

In 1461, the integrity of Aq Qoyunlu, Trebizond and a number of European countries came under a direct threat. Under these circumstances, this extraordinary woman played a paramount role in the negotiations with Mehmed II shortly before his attack on Trebizond. Having wisely evaluated his capabilities and the political

situation that had emerged, Uzun Hassan delegated a diplomatic mission led by Sarai Khatun to the camp at the Yassychemen summer range. Though the delegates did not succeed in saving Trebizond from harm, Sarai Khatun was welcomed with a great deal of hospitality and convinced Mehmed II to drop his plans to launch a war against Aq Qoyunlu. A peace treaty was concluded owing to her efforts as well as the Sultan's being interested in peace to a certain extent. During the talks, which proceeded in an amicable environment of mutual understanding, Sarai Khatun and Mehmed II addressed each other using the words "mother" and "son" (18).

Following the capture of Trebizond by the Ottomans, Sarai Khatun used the right to inheritance of her daughter-in-law, Despina Khatun, achieved division of the Trebizond treasury with the Sultan and returned with expensive gifts she received from Mehmed II (17, p.54).

Having lost Trebizond, Uzun Hassan was certainly deprived of not only a committed ally but also his only access to the Black Sea. However, German scholar G. Riomer concluded while summing up the outcomes of these developments that in fact, the Sultan had not succeeded in defeating Uzun Hassan, while the Komnenos empire retained its presence in Trebizond after 1458 and many of the neighboring states continued to reckon with it (19, p. 63). As for internal political conflicts, it is worth mentioning the strained relationship of two brothers, namely, Uzun Hassan and Mirza Jahangir. Abu Bakr Tikhrani pointed out that the latter was allied with Jahan Shah Karakoyunlu, Uzun Hassan's foe, which was unacceptable. Nevertheless, repeated attempts to negotiate a deal, which were vested in Sarai Khatun, finally allowed the parties to reach an agreement. Mirza Jahangir accepted all of Uzun Hassan's demands and delegated his son, Ali Khan Mirza, to see him. Moreover, the agreement indicated that the Diyarbakir territory was under Uzun Hassan's control, while Jahangir retained possession of Mardin (Tehrani A. *Kitabi-Diyarbakriyya*. Translated from Persian by R. Shukurova, p.152).

Sarai Khatun's peacekeeping mission in Egypt was just as successful. In early 1466, Sarai Khatun headed to Cairo and managed to employ her diplomatic prowess to strengthen ties with the Mamluks and iron out the differences during the talks with Sultan Khoshgedem (5<sup>a</sup>, 230). All these achievements indicate Sarai Khatun's advanced negotiating skills. While referring to her diplomatic charisma and its role in the country's destiny, it is worth mentioning her great contribution to the prevention of assistance that the Shirvanshahs planned

to provide for the Timurids in defiance of Aq Qoyunlu. Having learned about the hostile military plans of the Timurid rulers, the allies of Qara Qoyunlu, Sarai Khatun was delegated to a Timurid camp to negotiate with Abu Sa'id, in a bid to convince him to relinquish his intention to attack Aq Qoyunlu. Though these efforts did not yield fruit, further talks with the Shirvanshahs were more successful. As is known, following Abu Sa'id's launching his military campaign against Uzun Hassan, the latter prompted Sa'id's troops to travel deep into Azerbaijani territory, reaching the Mugan Steppe, which is located between the Kura River and the Caspian Sea. Sa'id, who was weary of the lengthy trip, sought assistance from Shirvanshah Farrukh Yasar, citing the long-standing friendship between their dynasties. Farrukh Yasar was expected to provide the Timurid troops with food supplies and military reinforcement. This support, which appeared rather insignificant at first glance, actually could have been one of the deciding factors for the outcome of the forthcoming battle.

Earlier, Sarai Khatun addressed the Shirvanshah with heartfelt remarks, saying that they were brethren and a time had come for them to join effort to counter a common enemy. Thanks to the diplomatic efforts of Uzun Hassan and Sarai Khatun in particular, the Shirvanshah unexpectedly declined to support Abu Sa'id by rendering assistance to the Timurids. Sa'id's army, doomed to succumb to cold weather and starvation, failed to withstand the forces of Uzun Hassan, which was an important precursor of the latter's victory and the Timurids' defeat (10). Most of these developments were vividly described in the scientific paper of Y.M.Mahmudov titled "The relations of Aq Qoyunlu and the Safavids with Western European countries".

The exact date of Sarai Khatun's death has not been determined (Note 4), but her name was embedded in the history of the development of Azerbaijani diplomacy.

It is also worth mentioning the amazing Tajlu Begim (Tajli Khanim or Shah Begim), who was the wife of Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Azerbaijani Safavid state. As for her descent, several theories are available to that end. According to Qazi Ahmad Kumi's "Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh" (the Tehran edition, 1971, p.290), she hailed from the Turkman Mosullu tribe and was considered a granddaughter of Hamza Bay Bektashi and a daughter of Mahmud Bay. For example, German scholar Hinz believes that she was a daughter of Yaqub Aqqoyunlu, but this conclusion has not been substantiated despite a reference made to Angiolello (8, p.78).

*Negotiations between Sultan Mehmet II and Sara Khatun. Contemporary drawing*

According to "Alem-Ara-yi Shah Ismail", an anonymous scientific paper, she came from the Turkman Shamlu tribe and was a daughter of Abedin Khan. Tajlu Begim, who stood out with her extraordinary beauty, was extremely courageous and frequently took part in competitions, managing to defeat even her brother, Dirmush Khan. According to the source, she agreed to marry Ismail despite her young age, provided that he would beat her in an archery competition and she would be allowed to fight on the battlefield. Turkish researcher T. Gunduz drew a parallel between this scene and the story about Banu Chichek and Beyrek from Kitab-i Dede Gorgud (The Book of Dede Gorgud) (7, p.144). This conclusion is substantiated if the following content of the third verse of the Oghuz epos is taken into consideration.

*"Listen, you, man of courage!" (Banu Chichek–N.A.) said, "No one has ever passed my horse or crushed my arrow. Let's have a belt fight with you!"*

*The astounded Beyrek didn't know what to do. "If*

*I am defeated by a girl, I will be disgraced among the great Oghuz people and they will be laughing into my face!" Beyrek thought (16, p.67).*

As for her stay in Ottoman captivity (Chaldiran, 1415), no specific information is available in this regard, since the data of scientific historiography boils down to the fact that the most substantial works of Hassan-Bay Rumlu (2) and Iskandar Bay Munshi (1) have absolutely no mention of her involvement in the Battle of Chaldiran; likewise, Haydar Chelebi did not cite the name of the woman from the harem who had been captured.

Tulun Degirmenci, another Turkish scholar, rightly noted that this has long been one of the controversial topics of the Azerbaijani and Turkish historiography. Since the referenced time period was marred by quite a belligerent relationship between the Ottomans and the Safavids, Turkish sources sought to present the Safavids unfavorably to the greatest possible extent and the other way around. Therefore, the information provided by the Ottoman sources (Note 5) is largely biased, while



*Sara Khatun. Sculptor Chingiz Ismayilov*

the Safavid sources have no reference to Tajlu Begim's involvement in the Battle of Chaldiran altogether. However, this is a separate topic that is beyond the gist of the issue currently being studied. One way or the other, Tajlu Begim hailed from a Turkic (Turkman) Kyzylbash family and went down in history as a legendary woman possessing enormous courage and intelligence, which, in fact, allowed her to put together heroic female detachments and fight bravely on the battlefield. This was Tajlu Begim's main merit. In addition, Tajlu Begim exerted certain influence in the country and enjoyed particular confidence of the loving great Shah Ismail Khatai.

According to "Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh" (p.290), Tajlu Begim died in Shiraz in 1539-40. O. Afandiyev narrated while referring to the developments regarding a rebellion masterminded by Alqas Mirza against his brother, Tahmasib I, that "in the spring of 1546...Alqas Mirza, having learned about the approaching Shah and his troops, sent his mother, Khanbegi-Khanim, and his eldest son...to Cherendab, the seat of the Shah's court. Khanbegi-Khanim told the Shah that her son had re-

pented and requested forgiveness, pledging that this would never happen again" (20, p.83). However, the name of Khanbegi (another wife of Ismail I) is not related to Tajlu Begim as it was the name of the mother of Alqas Mirza, who was a paternal half-brother of Shah Tahmasib. ✦

**to be concluded in next issue**

## NOTES

**Note 1.** Hungary was the first country to have established diplomatic ties with Aq Qoyunlu. See L.Tardy. Beyond the Ottoman Empire. (14th –16th century Hungarian Diplomacy in the East). Szeged, 1978, p.169. See N.F.Akhundova. Azerbaijani states in the 15th-16th centuries. Baku, Turkhan, 2015, p. 39-41.

**Note 2.** According to F. Sumer, Sara Khatun was a daughter of Pir Ali Bayandur (a son of Fakhraddin Kutluk Bay and a brother of Qara Yoluk – N.A.) See F.Sumer. Akkoyunlular. Istanbul, 2 p.,1989, p.272. Another theory, which was put forward by German Orientalist F. Babinger (1891-1967) suggests that Sara Khatun hailed from a family of the Aramaic Christians from Diyarbakir. See F.Babinger. Mehmed the Conqueror and his time. Translated by R.Manheim. Princeton, 1978, p.192.

**Note 3.** The kindling of feud between the two Islamic countries had been characteristic of Europeans even much later, i.e. at all times. In May 1583, British Ambassador to Turkey W. Harbory stated as he sent a letter to London from Istanbul that the Ottoman war with the Safavids was "much more devastating for the Turks than wars with Christian nations". He said further, "May God make their challenges last forever as their challenges are the source of our joy" (17, p.203).

**Note 4.** According to the sources dating back to that time period, Sarai Khatun was still involved in Aq Qoyunlu's talks with other countries in the 1470s. See T. Najafli. "The Azerbaijani states of Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu", p. 221.

**Note 5.** Major Turkish sources are based on accounts regarding the one-day stay of Shah Begim in captivity provided by Ottoman chronicler Ahmet Dede Munajimvashi (1631-1702), although his writing was released 150 years after the referenced time period.

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