



# BOOK REVIEW: Women Founders of Waqf (*Vakif Kuran Kadınlar*)

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The book *Vakif Kuran Kadınlar* (Women Founders of Waqf) is a collection of 14 scientific papers resulting from the 2018 "Waqf Week" symposium in Istanbul, which documents the strategic role of women in the Islamic philanthropic tradition of the Seljuk and Ottoman eras. Through historical, architectural, and sociological approaches, this book reveals the economic independence of women from various social strata—ranging from the Valide Sultan to the general public. The authors' analysis proves that women's waqf was a vital instrument in credible social policy through the use of primary data, such as waqf deeds (vakfiye) and accounting books (muhasabe defterleri). Overall, this book successfully portrays Muslim women as visionary drivers of civilization with strong economic sovereignty.

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Broadly speaking, this book offers a new perspective that positions women as active subjects in building civilization. The focus of the book's discussion covers contributions from various levels, from the Valide Sultan (Queen Mother) and royal princesses to the general public, who collectively acted as drivers of public welfare. This book analyzes thousands of physical works they established, such as mosques, madrasahs, *dariüşşifa* (hospitals), *imaret* (soup kitchens), caravanserais, and city water infrastructure, which not only shaped city architecture but also gave a "soul" to public spaces (Thys-Şenocak, 2006).

The authors dissect how women in the Seljuk and Ottoman eras had strong economic independence; their wealth came not only from inheritance but also from official salaries and independent business proceeds. Their expertise is evident in asset management, which divided two main functions: *bayrât* (free service facilities) and *akarât* (capital-generating assets). Through this system, income from assets was used to finance public services so that their benefits lasted for centuries (Çötelî, 2016). This legacy not only shaped the architectural identity of major cities from Istanbul to Jerusalem but also left a tangible impact that is still felt into the modern era (Sar, 2021).

As a representation of the philanthropic power of women at the sultanate level, the book opens with a paper by Arzu Terzi. In her paper titled *Haktan Aldığımız Halkına Dağıtan Örnek Vakıf İnsanı: Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan* (Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan: An Exemplary Waqf Figure in Distributing Divine Bounties to the People), the author presents an in-depth portrait of Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan, the wife of Sultan Mahmud II and mother of Sultan Abdülmecid, who was crowned as the founder of the most waqfs in Ottoman history.

Through this chapter, the author explains how Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan managed her waqf wealth. Based on research on a 399-page original document, the author reveals the Queen Mother's expertise in managing 196 productive assets (*akarât*)—including thousands of olive trees, farms, and even customs buildings—to ensure the financial independence of public services. One of her greatest works was establishing the Vakıf Gureba Hospital in 1847, which became the first modern hospital specifically for the poor. She not only focused on physical medical treatment but also built a medical science library and ensured patients were treated very humanely according to religious values. This proves that Bezmiâlem was a professional female figure in managing the economy, while also possessing sincere compassion for her people.

The next five sections are the works of women who established waqfs in Turkey during the Seljuk period. The first paper in this section is written by Aynur Durukan with the title *Anadolu Selçuklularında Vakıf Eserleri Yaptırmış Kadınlar* (The Contribution of Women in the Establishment of Waqf Works in the Anatolian Seljuk Era). Through her paper, the author reveals the crucial role of women in building the Anatolian Seljuk civilization through the recording of 83 buildings initiated by 28 female figures. This paper highlights how figures such as Ümmühan Hatun, as the founder of the first women's waqf, and Raziyye Hatun, who left the oldest waqf deed (*vakfiye*), laid the foundation of the philanthropic tradition for subsequent generations. One of the main highlights is the figure of Mahperi Hatun, who built a magnificent complex in Kayseri as well as a network of caravanserais along the Black Sea trade route to support the country's economy. These buildings stand out not only for their broad social functions but also for the aesthetic tastes of their founders, reflected in intense and diverse architectural decorations. This research proves that through economic independence, Seljuk women actively shaped the face of cities and strengthened the socio-economic resilience of the Anatolian region.

The next chapter contains a paper by Hüseyin Çınar titled *Ankara'da Hayırsaver Bir Sultan: Melike Hâtun* (Melike Hatun: A Philanthropic Sultanah Figure from Ankara). The author examines the figure of Melike Hatun, a philanthropic figure whose personal identity remains mysterious but who left a massive legacy in Ankara, and who, through court records (*ser'îye sicilî*) from 1618, was identified as the daughter of Sultan Alâeddin of the Seljuk dynasty. This paper uncovers her significant contribution to the spatial planning of Ankara through the construction of various public facilities, ranging from the Hatuniye Mosque and the Eyne Bey Hamamı bath complex to caravanserais on the Çubuk trade route. One of the most important highlights is the establishment of the Kara Medrese, which not only became a prominent intellectual center but also a place where the great spiritual figure, Hacı Bayram-ı Veli, served as a teacher before taking the path of Sufism. With a strong historical methodology, the author dissects how the economic management of the waqf, sourced from villages and urban properties, was able to guarantee the independent operation of these institutions. As a form of tribute, her legacy is now immortalized through the magnificent Melike Hatun Mosque in the center of Ankara, proving that her philanthropic dedication remains a *sadaka-i cariye*

(continuous charity) that is alive and beneficial to the community into the modern era.

Next, in the third chapter, Mevlüt Çam, in his paper titled *Huant/Huvant (Hunat) Hatun Vakıfları* (The Waqfs of Huant/Huvant (Hunat) Hatun), examines the waqf works built by Mahperi Hatun (Huvand Hatun), the wife of the Seljuk Turkish Sultan Alaeddin. Through this research, the author reveals how the construction of the Hunat Hatun complex in Kayseri successfully attracted people to live outside the walls of the old city, thus allowing the city to expand extensively to the east. Although the original waqf deed (*vakfiye*) has not yet been found, the author reconstructs its workings based on 16th-century land registration books (*Tabiri*) to find evidence of professionalism in employee salary management and the institution's operations. This paper also highlights the strategic vision of Hunat Hatun as a social entrepreneur who built seven caravanserais on important trade routes. The author proves that Hunat Hatun's dedication was an essential pillar for the resilience of the Seljuk civilization.

The next two papers examine the Divriği Great Mosque and Hospital (1228–1243) in Sivas, a world heritage site built by the Mengücekoğulları Dynasty. Through the analysis of the waqf deed and its repair records, Ahmet Demir, in his paper titled *Selçuklu Dönemi Vakıflarında Kadınların Yeri: Divriği Ulu Camii ve Darü'sşifası Örneği* (The Role of Women in Seljuk Period Waqfs: The Case Study of the Divriği Great Mosque and Hospital), reveals that this complex was the result of the synergy of the ruling family of the Mengücekoğulları Dynasty, where Ahmed Shah collaborated with his mother, Fatma Hatun, in building the mosque, while his wife, Turan Melek Hatun, established its hospital. The analysis of the 1243 waqf deed (*vakfiye*) reveals highly systematic asset management, where income from six villages (Bahtiyar, Hacike, Aşağı Zağur, Amuk, Savrun, and Hond) was allocated to independently finance the complex's operations. Additionally, this chapter documents the long history of maintenance and renovation of these buildings through archival records from the late Ottoman period to the early 20th century. Then, Necdet Sakaoglu, in his paper titled *Kadın Vakıfın Görkemli Mirası Melike ve Darü'sşifası* (The Magnificent Legacy of a Female Waqf Founder: Melike and Her Hospital), expresses appreciation for the Divriği Hospital as the most prominent women's philanthropic legacy in the history of Turkish-Islamic architecture. The author emphasizes the uniqueness of the main gate (*taç kapı*), which is decorated with geometric and cosmic stone carvings by the artist Hürşâd of Ahlat, whose design is considered

ahead of its time. In addition to its extraordinary aesthetics, this institution records an important history in the medical world as the first neurological and mental disease treatment center opened during the Seljuk era in Anatolia. Although it briefly underwent a change in function to become a madrasah in the 14th century, the author concludes that this building is tangible proof of the economic sovereignty and humanitarian vision of the figure of Melike Turan.

The subsequent papers in this book relate to women's waqfs and their founders during the Ottoman period. Eyüp Sabri Kala, in his paper titled *Osmanlı Dönemi Hanım Sultan Vakıfları ve Sosyal Politika Uygulamaları* (Ottoman Period Princesses' Waqfs and Social Policy Applications), begins this section by dissecting the role of 47 Hanım Sultan (Princesses) from the era of Orhan Bey to Abdülhamid II, demonstrating how waqf was used as a real social policy instrument for the community. The author uses a broad definition of "Hanım Sultan," encompassing all women of the royal family, ranging from the Valide Sultan (Queen Mother), wives, and daughters, to the granddaughters of the sultan. Their personal funds were used to build various free public facilities. In the field of education, they established elementary schools (*sıbyan mektebi*) and madrasahs that were not only free but also guaranteed the students' needs through allowances and clothing assistance. In the aspects of health and welfare, *darü'sşifası* institutions provided free medical treatment, while soup kitchens (*imaret*) became the foundation of food and social security. Even more than just cash assistance, the construction of waqf complexes like Atik Valide in Üsküdar and Eyüp proved capable of revitalizing the local economy through the presence of markets and inns. The reach of their philanthropy was not limited to the capital but expanded to Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, as well as various regions in Anatolia and Rumelia through the construction of water infrastructure, bridges, and military facilities. This chapter proves the image of palace women who built the foundation of public welfare up to the early 20th century.

A similar paper was also written by Saadet Maydaer in the eighth chapter. In her research titled *Osmanlı Toplumunda Vakıf Kuran Kadınlar ve Mal Varlıklarının Kaynakları* (Women Waqf Founders in Ottoman Society and the Sources of Their Wealth Assets), the author provides profound insight into the economic sovereignty of Ottoman-era women, covering all social strata, not just limited to the palace circles. Research data shows remarkable results, where in the

first half of the 16th century in Bursa, the percentage of female waqf founders reached 47%. The author details that the sources of their wealth came not only from property inheritance or dowries but also from active business activities, such as the silk textile industry, to specialized medical professions, such as the surgeon Saliha binti Küpeli. Furthermore, the endowed assets varied greatly, ranging from village ownership and factories for the nobility to functional household goods like cooking utensils for the lower-middle-class society. Behind this diversity of economic backgrounds, the author concludes that spiritual motivation in the form of the concept of *Sadaka-i Cariye* (continuous charity) was the main driving force for these women to manage their private property for sustainable social welfare.

İdris Akarçeşme, in his paper *Mihrişah Valide Sultan ve Vakıfı* (Mihrişah Valide Sultan and Her Waqf), examines the extraordinary contribution of Mihrişah Valide Sultan—the wife of Sultan Mustafa III and mother of Sultan Selim III—in building waqf institutions focused on education, religion, and social services. Based on the analysis of waqf deeds (*vakfiye*) from the Archives of the General Directorate of Foundations, this research reveals her philanthropic works in the form of the Külliye Complex in Eyüp Sultan, which provided integrated services, ranging from a soup kitchen (*imaret*) serving hundreds of food portions daily to a *sebil* building (a place for distributing free drinking water).

Her vision was not limited to food aid but also included the construction of large-scale civil infrastructure, such as the Valide Bendi Dam in the Belgrad Forest to ensure the supply of clean water to Istanbul, as well as the establishment of various elementary schools and libraries. This generosity even transcended the borders of the capital to reach the holy cities of Mecca and Medina through the restoration of public facilities and routine assistance for the poor. Supported by 196 professionally managed productive assets across various regions of the empire, this waqf system proved to be highly independent. The continuity of this legacy was strengthened by Sultan Selim III, who re-endowed all of his mother's wealth, proving that the benefits of the Mihrişah Sultan waqf continued to endure across eras.

The tenth chapter of this book broadens the geographical horizon to the regions of Jerusalem (Kudüs) and Damascus (Şam). In his paper titled *Kudüs ve Şam'da Kadın Hayırseverler* (Philanthropic Women in Jerusalem and Damascus), Hasan Hüseyin Güneş provides a broader perspective on the waqf networks

outside Anatolia. Through an in-depth analysis of the Damascus Evkaf and Property Register No. 602, the author uncovers the active contributions of female waqf founders, both Muslim and non-Muslim (such as the Samaritan community), in the construction of social and religious facilities. This study proves that the spirit of women's philanthropy in that era was inclusive and cross-regional.

Next is the work of Nuran Yıldırım titled *Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan Vakıfı Gureba Hastanesi* (Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan Vakıf Gureba Hospital). This chapter dissects the history of the Vakıf Gureba Hastanesi as the first waqf hospital in Turkey in the modern era. The author details that the hospital, inaugurated on March 12, 1847, was established by Bezmiâlem Valide Sultan with a specific vision to provide free medical treatment for the poor and homeless (*gureba*). The author's analysis reveals a significant medical architectural transition, where the design of this hospital departed from the classic *dariüşşifa* pattern and adopted a modern hospital model inspired by the Allgemeines Krankenhaus in Vienna. Besides the service aspect, this chapter highlights the institution's contribution to medical education as an internship venue for Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Mülkiye students, as well as a pioneer in training specialist doctors, including the first female doctors in Turkey.

Furthermore, two other influential Valide Sultan (Queen Mother) figures are also reviewed in this book. First, Nurdan Şafak, in *17. Yüzyılda Bir Valide Sultan: Hatice Turhan Sultan ve Vakıfları* (A Valide Sultan in the 17th Century: Hatice Turhan Sultan and Her Waqfs), examines the dedication of Hatice Turhan Sultan, the wife of Sultan İbrahim and mother of Sultan IV. Mehmed. The main focus of this study is her success in completing the Yeni Cami Complex in Eminönü, Istanbul, which had been abandoned, as well as the construction of two defensive fortresses in Çanakkale (Seddülbahir and Sultaniye). This contribution made her the only Ottoman woman to build military infrastructure for the state's security.

Second, Fatma Kaytaç, in *Nurbanu Valide Sultan'ın Hayatı ve Şahsiyeti* (The Life and Personality of Nurbanu Valide Sultan), examines the life and personality of Nurbanu Valide Sultan, the wife of Sultan Selim II and mother of Sultan Murad III. The author highlights her extraordinary political influence and her international correspondence with important figures like Queen Catherine de Médicis of France and the rulers of Venice. Besides her political role, Nurbanu is immortalized as the visionary figure behind the

construction of the magnificent Atik Valide Complex in Üsküdar, which is also recorded as the first women's waqf complex in the capital equipped with a *kütüphane* (library) facility.

The book closes with a paper by Ramazan Pantık titled *Atik Valide Sultan Kılıyesinde İdari ve Mali Yapı (1590-1830)* ([The Administrative and Financial Structure of the Atik Valide Sultan Complex \(1590-1830\)](#)). Through an in-depth examination of accounting books (*muhasebe defterleri*), the author reveals a professional, accountable, and transparent waqf asset management system that lasted for over two centuries. The author documents how the complex founded by Nurbanu Valide Sultan was managed systematically under the supervision of the Darüssaade Aghas (Chief Eunuch of the Palace), whose function was to ensure the foundation's economic stability and accountability in the use of funds for public services. This analysis reinforces that women's waqf institutions at that time were highly potent economic entities managed with high administrative standards ([Kızıltoprak, 2023](#)).

This book transforms into a highly credible scientific document through a wealth of primary data, ranging from the analysis of waqf deeds (*vakfiye*) to detailed examinations of accounting books (*muhasebe defterleri*). These data provide a transparent picture of women's professionalism in managing the sophisticated cyclical relationship between *hayrât* (public service facilities) and *akarât* (productive assets). However, more than just numbers and administration, this work essentially celebrates the economic sovereignty of

women as visionary architects of civilization. The authors successfully demonstrate how the spirit of philanthropy, supported by an accountable management system, has given a 'soul' to public spaces, creating a civilization whose benefits can still be enjoyed for free today. This book can serve as a reference for understanding the true power of Muslim women's inclusivity on the stage of history. Also the significance of waqf in the history ([Antonio et al., 2021](#)).

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