



BEYOND CHARITY: ISLAMIC PHILANTHROPY, SACRED INFRASTRUCTURE, AND FEMALE AGENCY IN THE ABBASID ERA

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary studies on Islamic philanthropy predominantly focus on economic redistribution, social welfare, and poverty alleviation, while paying limited attention to philanthropy's role in developing religious infrastructure and sustaining spiritual life. The philanthropic activities of elite women during the Abbasid period provide an important historical perspective that broadens the understanding of Islamic philanthropy beyond socio-economic functions. This study examines the patronage and philanthropic contributions of prominent Abbasid women, particularly Al-Khayzuran and Zubaidah, in shaping religious infrastructure and socio-religious institutions. Employing a qualitative literature review and historical analysis, the study draws on Douglass North's historical institutionalism to explore institutional dynamics. It draws on the feminist Islamic historiographical perspectives of Leila Ahmed and Fatema Mernissi to analyze women's agency in classical Islamic society. The findings reveal that Abbasid philanthropy extended beyond charitable assistance to encompass the development of religious infrastructure that facilitated worship, enhanced spiritual experiences, and strengthened communal religious life. Major projects initiated by Al-Khayzuran and Zubaidah, most notably the Darb Zubaydah water and pilgrimage network, demonstrate the integration of public service, technological innovation, religious commitment, and political legitimacy within a single institutional framework. Building on these findings, the study proposes the concept of spiritual-infrastructure philanthropy as a complementary dimension of Islamic philanthropy practice, emphasizing the interconnectedness of material development, spiritual sustainability, and the formation of enduring socio-religious institutions in Muslim societies. This concept contributes to the expansion of contemporary Islamic philanthropy discourse by highlighting the historical significance of religious infrastructure as a form of long-term philanthropic investment.

Keywords: Islamic Philanthropy; Abbasid Queens; Women's Patronage; religious infrastructure

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, research on Islamic philanthropy has expanded significantly, with particular focus on zakat, productive waqf, infaq, and diverse models of economic empowerment for contemporary Muslim communities. Contemporary scholarship generally conceptualizes Islamic philanthropy as a mechanism for economic redistribution, poverty alleviation, and the enhancement of social welfare among Muslims (Singer, 2008; Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2003). This perspective is reflected in the institutional practices of modern Islamic philanthropy, which prioritize community-based economic development, social assistance, health services, education, and reducing social inequality. In Indonesia and across the broader Muslim world, Islamic philanthropy has become increasingly institutionalized through national zakat management, productive waqf, and community-based empowerment initiatives.

The predominance of this welfare-oriented perspective has consequently narrowed the definition of Islamic philanthropy to material redistribution. Philanthropy is primarily interpreted through the lens of economic assistance and social welfare, while its symbolic, spiritual, and religious infrastructure dimensions have received comparatively less scholarly attention. Historically, philanthropic practices in Islam extended beyond direct aid to the poor and included the development of socio-religious spaces that facilitated worship and religious life. For instance, historical waqf was used not only to support mosques and education but also to construct roads, canals, trade routes, hospitals, and facilities for Hajj pilgrims (Çizakça, 2000). Therefore, the historical scope of Islamic philanthropy is considerably broader than that of contemporary charitable activities.

Scholars have shown that philanthropic practices within the Islamic tradition are intricately connected to community formation, the legitimization of authority, and the creation of socio-religious spaces. Singer (2008) frames Islamic philanthropy as a social practice deeply embedded in power relations and the moral development of Muslim communities. Benthall (1999) contends that giving in Islam constitutes financial worship, representing an economic act with both ritual and spiritual significance. Despite these insights, most scholarship continues to treat philanthropy primarily as a socio-economic institution, without explicitly examining the development of religious infrastructure as a distinct form of Islamic philanthropy. Consequently, historical projects such as the construction of water facilities for Hajj pilgrims, the preservation of holy sites, or the establishment of pilgrimage routes are frequently interpreted as conventional political or public works, rather than as manifestations of religious philanthropy.

Classical Islamic historiography demonstrates a masculine bias, resulting in the underrepresentation of women's contributions to the public sphere. Historical studies of Islam typically emphasize caliphs, bureaucrats, male ulama, and formal political institutions, while elite women are often depicted as domestic figures or as secondary to palace narratives. Ahmed (1992) critiques this tendency, highlighting the passive and subordinate portrayal of women in Islamic historiography. Mernissi (1993) further argues that many influential Muslim women have been deliberately "forgotten" within patriarchal historical narratives. Nevertheless, during the Abbasid period, several elite women exercised significant political, social, intellectual, and religious influence, particularly through public patronage and philanthropy.

Within this context, figures such as Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah warrant renewed scholarly attention. While they are frequently portrayed as court women exerting political influence over the Abbasid caliphs, especially in accounts concerning Harun al-Rashid and dynastic succession (Abbott, 1946; Kennedy, 2004), historical sources also document their substantial involvement in philanthropic activities.

Recent scholarship has begun to reassess Zubaidah's role as a visionary female leader in the development of the Hajj route and water infrastructure (El-Cheikh, 2015; Baihaqi, Waqi, and Miskiyah, 2025; Ulfah, Syafitri, and Hafis, 2025). Nevertheless, the majority of these studies remain biographical and descriptive, without situating the philanthropic practices of these figures within the broader context of the formation of socio-religious institutions in Islamic history.

In response to these issues, this article seeks to reconstruct the concept of Islamic philanthropy by examining the patronage and philanthropic activities of elite women during the early Abbasid period. It contends that the philanthropic practices of Al-Khayzuran and Zubaidah should not be viewed merely as acts of individual charity or aristocratic generosity, but as forms of spiritual infrastructure that facilitated worship, religious experience, and socio-political legitimacy in classical Islamic society.

Analytical Framework

Contemporary research on Islamic philanthropy predominantly addresses zakat (alms), infaq (donations), sadaqah (charity), and waqf (endowments) as mechanisms for economic redistribution and social welfare. Philanthropy is conceptualized as a means of empowering Muslim communities through economic support, poverty alleviation, educational services, and the enhancement of communal welfare (Singer, 2008; Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2003). In the modern era, Islamic philanthropy has also become an integral component of Islamic economic governance, facilitated by national zakat institutions, productive waqf, and transnational humanitarian organizations.

Although this approach has significantly strengthened Muslim economies, it often promotes an economistic interpretation of Islamic philanthropy. Philanthropic practices are frequently regarded as instruments of charity and welfare, with limited attention to their spiritual, symbolic, and cultural dimensions. Benthall (1999) demonstrates that almsgiving in Islam encompasses aspects of worship and religious morality that extend beyond economic activity. Nevertheless, most contemporary studies continue to prioritize the socio-economic impacts of philanthropy, rather than its role in shaping religious spaces and the spiritual experiences of Muslim communities.

Conversely, Çizakça (2000) demonstrates that the waqf institution in Islamic history fulfilled functions far beyond social assistance. Historical waqf was instrumental in the development of public infrastructure, including roads, water facilities, hospitals, and mosques. This perspective enables a broader understanding of Islamic philanthropy as integral to the socio-religious architecture of Muslim societies. Waqf supported not only mosques and education, but also the construction of hospitals, water canals, accommodations for travelers, and transportation routes (Çizakça, 2000). Yaacov Lev further argues that medieval Islamic philanthropy laid the foundation for public services and the social welfare of Muslim communities.

Despite these insights, most historical analyses of waqf and Islamic patronage have concentrated on legal and institutional dimensions, without explicitly connecting them to philanthropic theory. Public infrastructure in Islamic history is frequently interpreted as a result of political authority or urban development, rather than as an expression of religious and philanthropic values. As a result, projects such as the construction of Hajj routes, water distribution systems, and the preservation of holy sites are seldom recognized as manifestations of Islamic philanthropic practice.

Classical Islamic historiography predominantly centers on male actors and formal political institutions, frequently overlooking women's contributions to the public sphere or confining them to domestic roles within the palace. Ahmed (1992) demonstrates that modern Islamic historiography is shaped by patriarchal interpretations that marginalize women's agency. Mernissi (1993) similarly contends that numerous influential Muslim women have been intentionally excluded from historical memory.

Nevertheless, multiple studies have established that elite Muslim women played significant roles in social, religious, and intellectual patronage. Keddie (2007) found that women in the historical Islamic world actively participated in education, economic endeavors, and various public activities. Within the Abbasid context, Abbott (1946) demonstrated that Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah were not merely symbolic palace figures, but influential political and social actors who shaped policy and public life.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized Zubaidah as a strategic social and philanthropic figure in Abbasid history. El-Cheikh (2015) and Baihaqi, Waqi, and Miskiyah (2025) illustrate that public projects such as the Darb Zubaidah and the construction of water facilities exemplify female social leadership with enduring impact. Ulfah, Syafitri, and Hafis (2025) further argue that patronage and philanthropy enabled Abbasid women to overcome patriarchal constraints and establish a sustainable socio-cultural infrastructure. Nonetheless, these studies primarily focus on biographical narratives and leadership, with limited conceptual analysis of the relationship between philanthropy, religious infrastructure, and the spiritual experiences of Muslims.

To address this research gap, the present study reframes the concept of Islamic philanthropy by examining the patronage and philanthropic practices of elite women in the early Abbasid period. Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah serve as focal historical examples of Muslim women's philanthropic engagement during this era. Employing a literature review alongside data and content analysis methods, the study reinterprets the acts of social generosity performed by these two queens. The analytical framework integrates historical institutionalism and feminist Islamic historiography to assess the role of Abbasid women in philanthropy and public patronage. North (1990) applies historical institutionalism to explain how the construction of public and religious facilities during the Abbasid period established enduring institutional traditions in Islamic civilization. The feminist Islamic historiographical perspectives of Ahmed (1992) and Mernissi (1993) are utilized to demonstrate the significant roles of women, such as Al-Khayzuran and Zuh, in the socio-political sphere of classical Islam through patronage and religious public service.

METHODS

This study adopts a historical methodology, employing a layered historiographical analysis primarily based on secondary sources. Due to limited access to primary materials in classical Arabic, the research is methodologically positioned as a historiographical synthesis, a recognized approach in historical scholarship when direct access to archives or manuscripts is restricted (Gottschalk, 1950; Tosh, 2010). Within this framework, Nabia Abbott's *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Harun al-Rashid* (1946) is employed as an authoritative corpus, comparable to critical editions in the philological tradition. Abbott, a trained orientalist and philologist with direct experience working with classical Arabic manuscripts, compiled, selected, and critiqued dispersed historical sources—including the *Tarikh al-Tabari*, the *Kitab al-Aghani*, and various Abbasid court chronicles—into a coherent analytical narrative. Consequently, a critical reading of Abbott's work is treated as a mediated engagement with the classical textual tradition, a strategy frequently utilized in medieval Islamic history when original manuscripts are inaccessible to researchers (Robinson, 2003).

In addition to Abbott's work, this study incorporates contemporary secondary scholarship on Islamic philanthropy, gender history, and historical institutionalism. All sources, whether serving as primary text corpora or as supporting secondary literature, are analyzed using historical content analysis and contextual interpretation. This approach involves interpreting texts within the broader social, political, and religious structures of Abbasid society in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, rather than relying solely on literal readings (Berkhofer, 1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Philanthropy and Political Authority in the Abbasid Era

During the early Abbasid Dynasty, philanthropy was closely intertwined with power dynamics and the consolidation of political legitimacy. Following an extensive revolution against the Umayyad Caliphate, the Abbasid rulers faced the challenge of convincing the Muslim community that their leadership would foster societal prosperity. In this formative period, later recognized as the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate, the first generation of Caliphs rapidly transitioned from revolutionary military leaders to bureaucratic administrators committed to constructing a new civilization. Given their positions and associated spiritual responsibilities, social patronage and the construction of public facilities became essential tools for reinforcing the Caliphate's legitimacy within an expanding and increasingly complex Muslim society. Benefiting from substantial state revenues, the Abbasid Caliphate invested heavily in advancing Islamic intellectual life by establishing madrasas, universities, libraries, and observatories.

The Abbasid rulers recognized the tax management failures that characterized the Umayyad period and contributed to widespread revolt, in which the Abbasids themselves participated. Upon assuming power, the Abbasids enacted tax reforms to restore the fiscal system and prevent prior abuses, thereby promoting political and social stability (Özdemir, 2018). Achieving economic and military stability enabled the Abbasids to secure both spiritual and political legitimacy among the populace.

The cosmopolitan nature of the Abbasid Caliphate facilitated the diversification of philanthropic practices during this era. The Abbasid realm encompassed various ethnic

groups, including Arabs, Persians, and Turks, the latter two of whom would later exert considerable influence on Islamic civilization. Although the Abbasid territory was less expansive than that of the Umayyad Dynasty, the Abbasids established a central role within a semi-confederation of smaller Islamic dynasties, with the Caliph recognized as the supreme authority among Muslims.

It is important to recognize that the aforementioned human development initiatives were not solely state-driven policies but also reflected the personal political will of individual Caliphs. This distinction became evident in later periods, when diminished interest and attention from the Caliphs led to the decline of educational institutions. Consequently, while these policies characterized the new Abbasid civilization, the Caliph's role as a patron should not be underestimated, as many of his actions are documented as individual philanthropic endeavors.

Baghdad, the political and intellectual center of the Islamic world and the capital of the Abbasid Dynasty, emerged as a locus where patronage of scholars and scientists, urban development, and public services attained significant symbolic importance (Kennedy, 2004). However, the Caliph was not the only figure in philanthropic practices during the Abbasid period. Given that this practice developed through the institution of waqf, which enabled Abbasid rulers and elites to allocate wealth for social and religious purposes on a sustainable basis, the waqf system thus provided religious legitimacy for the use of private wealth for public service, while strengthening ties between the political elite and Muslim society (Çizakça, 2000).

This environment also allowed elite Abbasid women to cultivate socio-political influence through patronage and philanthropy, as examined in this study. Despite the formally patriarchal structure of Abbasid politics, court women retained access to economic resources, patronage networks, and distinct social spaces, enabling them to assume significant public roles (Mernissi, 1993; El-Hibri, 1999). The philanthropic activities of Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah illustrate that, during the Abbasid period, philanthropy not only underscored the importance of the social dimension but also reflected the era's complex power dynamics.

Queen al-Khayzuran, Philanthropy and Power

Classical Islamic historiography frequently portrays women within the Abbasid power structure as marginal and confined to domestic roles. Political narratives typically focus on caliphs, male bureaucrats, and dynastic conflicts, relegating elite women to secondary positions. Nevertheless, the example of Queen Al-Khayzuran illustrates a more nuanced and complex reality.

Al-Khayzuran bint Atta served as queen consort to the third Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mahdi (r. 775-785 CE). Her transformation from a slave-concubine of the Banu Thaqafi family to a prominent and ambitious Abbasid queen is often regarded as remarkable. In addition to being the mother of two Abbasid caliphs, al-Hadi and Harun al-Rashid, she was a significant political actor with extensive patronage networks, administrative authority, and philanthropic influence (Abbott, 1946; El-Hibri, 1999). Al-Khayzuran's example demonstrates that Abbasid women could exercise active public roles through informal power, social patronage, and religious legitimacy.

Al-Khayzuran's ascent from a Yemeni slave girl to a central figure at the Abbasid court reflects the flexibility of the early Abbasid socio-political structure. This significant example of social mobility highlights Islam's transformative vision regarding the status of women, challenging both Orientalist assumptions and pre-Islamic Arab practices. Abbott contends that Al-Khayzuran directly influenced the succession process and administration of the Caliphate, accepting political petitions and managing her own patronage network independently of the Caliph's formal authority (Abbott, 1946). In addition to her political influence, Al-Khayzuran was recognized for her philanthropic activities and socio-religious patronage. She established waqf (endowments) and provided support to women's groups and harem members who lacked power within the Abbasid elite.

Al-Khayzuran's influence extended to her patronage of religious and historical sites in the Hijaz. She purchased the property, believed to be the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, and converted it into a mosque, and also preserved Dar al-Arqam, a site of major importance in early Islamic da'wah (Islamic propagation) (Abbott, 1946). These buildings, revered by Muslims, became closely associated with her legacy. Such actions indicate that religious patronage involved not only physical construction but also the creation of collective memory and sacred spaces. By associating her name with these sites, Al-Khayzuran established symbolic legitimacy and reinforced her socio-political standing within the Abbasid hierarchy (Kennedy, 2004; El-Hibri, 1999). Al-Khayzuran also played a role in developing public infrastructure that supported the social life and religious practices of the Muslim community. In Mecca, she supported the construction of wells, canals, and water distribution for both the local population and the Hajj pilgrims. In the arid Hijaz, water infrastructure was strategically important not only for social well-being but also for the continuity of religious rituals. Support for water facilities demonstrates that Abbasid philanthropic practices were not simply charity in the modern sense, but were intimately connected to the development of material conditions that enabled a viable and sustainable religious experience.

Al-Khayzuran's patronage extended beyond the Hijaz to regions such as Iraq and Palestine, where several infrastructure projects, including aqueducts and public properties known as the "Khaizuraniyyah," bear her name. This indicates that elite Abbasid women's philanthropy possessed significant spatial and institutional reach (Abbott, 1946). Al-Khayzuran's philanthropic activities thus represent the strategic use of economic resources to establish social and religious authority in the public sphere. However, unlike Queen Zubaydah, whose legacy is more widely recognized, Al-Khayzuran's contributions remain relatively obscure, likely due to the limited preservation and publicity of her heritage sites in the modern era.

Queen Zubaidah's Water Infrastructure Project

Zubaidah bint Ja'far bint Abu Ja'far Al-Mansur, an Abbasid princess and granddaughter of Caliph al-Mansur, is best known for her monumental philanthropic projects benefitting the Islamic community. Her marriage to her cousin, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, strengthened the dynasty's political and religious legacy. As Harun al-Rashid's wife and an Abbasid, Zubaidah held vast resources and influence. Her historical significance lies not only in her aristocratic status but also in directing wealth toward public infrastructure that supports Muslim religious practices, notably the Hajj pilgrimage (Abbott, 1946; Kennedy, 2004).

Zubaidah's most famous achievement was establishing a water supply system and public amenities along the Hajj route from Kufa to Mecca, known as Darb Zubaydah. This development supported the Hajj and fostered a socio-economic network, with facilities including wells, dams, water pools, waymarks, forts, and rest stops (UNESCO World Heritage Center 2022). The construction of Darb Zubaydah is a prime example of Abbasid philanthropy, with advanced infrastructure that serves religious needs. By addressing the critical need for water, Zubaidah ensured pilgrims' safety and enabled sustainable Hajj practices, blending spiritual duty with practical technology.

The project, also known as the Ain Zubaidah Spring in Mecca, included a water channel from the Hunayn Spring to Mecca, the construction of a large reservoir, underground canals (which are tunnels built below the ground to transport water), and a water distribution network for pilgrims and residents of the holy city. The project's technical complexity demonstrates the high administrative and hydraulic engineering capabilities of the Abbasid period (with 'hydraulic engineering' referring to the design and construction of systems that move and control water) (Petersen, 1994; Low, 2015). In fact, several studies have suggested that the system served as a model for water supply projects in the Ottoman and modern Saudi periods (Low, 2015).

The enormous construction costs also underscore the project's extraordinary scale. Classical sources state that Zubaidah spent approximately 1.7 million dinars on water infrastructure and Hajj facilities (Petersen, 1994). This figure confirms that Abbasid philanthropy was not merely symbolic charity, but a major public investment designed to sustain the long-term religious life of the Muslim community. Beyond water systems, Zubaidah helped preserve mosques and historical sites, including the Ta'if mosque (Abbot, 1946). She also used waqf (Islamic endowments) to sustain the infrastructure. Waqf-funded facility upkeep and related services, ensuring lasting public benefits (Çizakça, 2000; Singer, 2008).

When viewed through a historical institutionalism approach, Zubaidah's projects demonstrate how philanthropy can produce enduring socio-religious institutions. The Hajj infrastructure she built shaped patterns of Muslim religious mobility for centuries and created spiritual pathways connecting various regions of the Islamic world. Pierson refers to this phenomenon as increasing returns, where established institutions become stronger through continued use and social reproduction (Pierson, 2000).

The Darb Zubaydah project shows that classical Islamic philanthropy created the infrastructure that enabled the Hajj. Zubaidah's spiritual-infrastructure philanthropy exemplified how material investment shaped collective Muslim experience. As a result, Queen Zubaydah is known and remembered as the most influential Muslim woman in Abbasid history. Together with her husband, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the Abbasid Caliphate reached its pinnacle of civilization during her reign, before finally reaching its peak under her son, Caliph al-Ma'mun. To this day, the Darb Zubaydah sites remain of interest to archaeologists and historians and are tourist attractions that draw visitors from around the world. This activity demonstrates that religious patronage is not only oriented towards practical utility, but also towards preserving the historical memory and religious symbolism of Muslims.

Reframing: Philanthropy as Spiritual Infrastructure

The limited examples of the dynamics of the philanthropic practices of the two Abbasid queens mentioned above demonstrate that Muslim women's role in the public sphere has long been ongoing. From the perspective of feminist Islamic historiography, this phenomenon is important because it demonstrates that women were not completely marginalized from classical Islamic political space, as is often assumed in Orientalist readings and patriarchal historiography (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1993).

However, we must consider the social position of Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaydah. Their public freedom cannot be separated from their status as authoritative rulers. Although Queen Al-Khayzuran was initially enslaved, she achieved upward mobility. As her status grew, so did her space in the public sphere.

Table1. Philanthropic Practices in the Abbasid Era

Aspect	Abbasid Philanthropy	Modern Islamic Philanthropy
Main focus	Religious infrastructure and worship services	Social assistance and poverty alleviation
Main form	Waqf/Endowments, road construction, water, mosques, Hajj routes	Zakat, cash assistance, economic empowerment
Dominant actor	Political elite and royal patrons, including women	Formal institutions, NGOs, zakat institutions
Orientation	Public piety and socio-political legitimacy	Welfare and social development
Main impact	Enabling mobility of worship and the production of sacred space	Economic redistribution and social assistance
Basis of legitimacy	Religious and symbolic patronage	Social accountability and program effectiveness
Spiritual dimension	Very powerful and integrated into the infrastructure	Tends to be indirect
Institutional character	Long-term through endowments and public facilities	Programmatic and administrative

Source: table processed from narrative data in the book *Two Queens of Baghdad*, by Nabia Abbott (1946)

From Table 1, this position can be read and compared within a broader context (social participation), in which the marginalization of women in public welfare is based on at least two factors. These two factors are fear (*khawf al-fitnah*) and excessive restrictions (*sadd al-dharī'ah*) that only target women. These factors are further supported by interpretations that are neither valid nor equivalent to the texts (verses and hadith) addressing women's public participation (Kodir, 2023). These factors do not appear to apply to the two figures mentioned above, who, on the one hand, already held strong political positions, and on the other, were wives of the Abbasid Caliph, a figure considered the most authoritative in Islam at the time.

If we compare this with modern philanthropy, leadership—male or female—is now assessed by contribution to social welfare rather than gender. Gender theory sees women's leadership in Islamic philanthropic institutions not as a matter of individual capacity, but as a product of power relations and patriarchal social constructs that still dominate religious institutions (Piliyanti & Alwiyah, 2025). Examining the philanthropic practices of Queen

Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah shows fundamental differences between classical and modern Islamic philanthropy.

Modern philanthropy usually focuses on welfare, poverty alleviation, and economic redistribution. It operates through formal institutions such as zakat and humanitarian organizations (Benthall & Bellion-Jourdan, 2003). In contrast, Abbasid philanthropy had a broader goal. It promoted socio-religious infrastructure that supports worship and religious mobility for the Muslim community. This comparison demonstrates that reducing philanthropy to mere modern charity can obscure its broader historical dimensions. In Abbasid society, the construction of Hajj roads, water systems, and prayer spaces was understood as a form of social piety of great religious significance. Philanthropy, in this case, serves as a medium that connects power, technology, and the spiritual experience of Muslim society.

To explain the philanthropy of the Abbasid queens, this article uses the concept of spiritual-infrastructure philanthropy. This refers to the construction and maintenance of infrastructure that supports worship and religious experience within Muslim society. This concept can serve as an alternative reading, given that modern standards of philanthropy—such as political neutrality, administrative professionalism, or welfare orientation—are not always appropriate for understanding philanthropy in pre-modern societies (White, 2018; Cunningham, 2020). As demonstrated in various historical studies of philanthropy, the practice of giving in classical and medieval societies was always closely linked to political legitimacy, social honor, religious patronage, and community building (Lev, 2007; Davis, 2014). Therefore, the projects of Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah cannot be assessed solely by modern philanthropic standards as Waqf institutions (Abdur-Rashid, 2021)

A re-examination of the philanthropic practices of Abbasid women demonstrates the need to broaden the conceptual framework in the study of Islamic philanthropy. Philanthropy has traditionally been understood in terms of economic redistribution, social assistance, and poverty alleviation. While this approach is important, it is insufficient to explain historical philanthropic practices oriented toward the development of religious spaces and infrastructure. The cases of Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah demonstrate that philanthropy in classical Islam also served as a mechanism for enabling worship, namely by creating the material conditions that made it possible. Water infrastructure, Hajj routes, mosques, and the preservation of religious sites were not merely public facilities but also media that shaped Muslims' spiritual experience.

From this perspective, philanthropy can be understood as a process of producing sacred space. Patronage of religious spaces creates a spiritual landscape that fosters collective worship practices and religious memory. Sacred space does not exist naturally but is produced through material investments, technology, and social power. Thus, the development of religious infrastructure is integral to shaping the religious experience of Muslim communities. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this type of philanthropic practice also shaped long-term institutional patterns in the Islamic world. As North (1990) explains, social institutions are formed through historical practices that are continuously reproduced and gain legitimacy over time. Thus, the construction of religious public facilities during the

Abbasid period not only served a practical function but also shaped the tradition of religious public service in Islamic civilization.

At the same time, the patronage of the two queens was also linked to the legitimacy of power and aristocratic representation. As emphasized by Singer (2008), philanthropic practices in historical Islamic societies were always linked to the formation of community morality and the socio-political legitimacy of rulers. Therefore, charitable activities and public development during the Abbasid period were not merely acts of individual piety but also part of a power strategy. This motive, of course, cannot be viewed as negative and is a common practice in power relations and the formation of authority, both ancient and modern. The projects initiated by both queens are nevertheless viewed as public policies that yielded tangible social and religious benefits for Muslim society. Consequently, the tension among piety, power, and social prestige is not an aberration but an inherent characteristic of philanthropy in its historical context.

Ultimately, the concept of spiritual-infrastructure philanthropy proposed in this article attempts to bridge these material and spiritual dimensions. Philanthropy is no longer understood solely as an act of giving, but as an institutional practice that builds religious connectivity, maintains the mobility of worship, and creates a continuity of spiritual experience within Islamic society. This approach also broadens the understanding of women's roles in Islamic history. Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah appear not merely as domestic or symbolic figures, but as actors who contributed to the formation of socio-religious institutions in the Islamic world. Through their patronage and philanthropic projects, Abbasid women helped shape the spiritual architecture of Muslim society across generations.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Islamic philanthropic practices in the Abbasid period fundamentally extended beyond charity, becoming agents of religious and social change. Through Queen Al-Khayzuran and Queen Zubaidah, it is evident that philanthropy was systematically used to create lasting religious infrastructure, foster worship and spiritual mobility, and solidify collective Muslim memory. The cases of Al-Khayzuran and Zubaidah reveal elite female patronage as integral to public facility construction and religious legacy, with Zubaidah's large-scale projects uniting public service, technological advance, and religious piety in a single institutional vision. The public works sponsored by al-Khayzuran and Zubaidah should not be automatically interpreted as formal waqf institutions, as surviving historical sources rarely mention legal waqf deeds (*waqfiyyāt*) or explicit endowment arrangements. Rather, these initiatives are better understood as manifestations of elite Islamic philanthropy and public patronage. Nevertheless, many of these projects exhibit characteristics that later became central to the institutionalization of waqf, including the establishment of enduring public infrastructure, the provision of continuous public benefits (*ṣadaqah jāriyah*), and the organization of maintenance for religious and social purposes. Thus, while they cannot always be classified as waqf in the strict juridical sense, they contributed to the historical evolution of waqf as an institutional form of Islamic philanthropy.

By applying historical institutionalism, this article contends that Abbasid philanthropic practices fundamentally redefined socio-religious institutions, with enduring impacts that extended well beyond temporary assistance. Their infrastructure became central to worship practices for generations. Furthermore, the feminist Islamic historiography approach clarifies the extent to which Abbasid women deliberately exercised political and social agency in shaping these legacies. Drawing on these findings, this article asserts that 'spiritual-infrastructure philanthropy' best defines this era's distinctive approach. This framework reframes Islamic philanthropy as an intentionally institutional, symbolic, and spiritual project that transcends traditional charity. The study ultimately argues for re-centering power, religion, technology, and social space in the historical narrative and urges a critical rereading of Abbasid women's philanthropy to expand both historical understanding and theoretical perspectives.

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