



BRILL

MEDIEVAL ENCOUNTERS 28 (2022) 105–127

Medieval  
*Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture*  
Encounters  
*in Confluence and Dialogue*  
brill.com/me

## *Book Reviews*



Marina Rustow. *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xvii–598 pages. ISBN 9780691156477

Since their discovery at the end of the nineteenth century, the documents and manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza have attracted numerous scholars who continue to dig through its hundreds of thousands of fragments. Geniza studies, as they are rightly called now, have produced hundreds of books and articles mainly dealing with the core of the collection, which is now divided between several places around the world: texts in Hebrew (and sometimes in Judaeo-Arabic, i.e., Hebrew written in the Arabic script). Less known are the hundreds of Arabic documents produced by the Fatimid state that ruled over Egypt between 969 and 1171, documents that were reused by the Jewish community of Old Cairo as scrap paper once they were discarded voluntarily or not. Some of these Arabic documents first drew the attention of the prominent scholar Samuel Miklos Stern in the 1960s. Stern's contribution to the field would certainly have been more significant would his life have not ended so abruptly. His successor, Geoffrey Khan, followed in Stern's footsteps by publishing and studying several otherwise unknown specimens. Since then, very little has been done to continue their work. No doubt, the arduousness of the task of editing Arabic documents from this period has kept most Arabists at bay. Another reason for the lack of scholarship certainly lies in the nature of the majority of these documents: their fragmentary state. There is indeed nothing more frustrating than editing, translating, and studying a few lines of what, one assumes, had to have been a larger text. Yet, these fragments bring their share of information on the way the state administered its subjects and this is perhaps their most enlightening function nowadays, at least for historians.

Rustow's book is presented as a companion volume to a forthcoming volume that will be dedicated to the edition, translation, and study of petitions submitted to the Fatimid state chancery and identified in the Geniza documents. It aims precisely at tackling some of the questions surrounding the way

the Fatimid administration functioned to draw a better image of the way the state managed its documentation and to try to understand how documents came to be discarded and reused at some point. The issue of the deaccession and reuse of documents, not only in the Fatimid period but also in the subsequent periods until Ottoman rule, has puzzled historians and diplomatists for decades, and various hypotheses have been put forward to try to explain this phenomenon. With her book, Rustow makes her contribution to a debate that is far from being closed.

This huge book is divided into four parts, each divided into several chapters of various sizes. The first part broadly considers the issue of the survival of documents in Islam prior to the Ottoman period (essentially from the sixteenth century) by first tackling the presence of the Fatimid fragments in the Geniza and why these were mostly overlooked by scholars working on the Geniza documents and manuscripts. The author then reviews the previous attempts to explain the relative dearth of documents in medieval Islam, considering how the questions raised by these attempts correspond to or differ from those posed by the Geniza fragments. Finally, this first part ends with a survey of the categories of Fatimid documents found in the Geniza, which gives the author the opportunity to defend her theory that Fatimid rule can be characterized as a state that relied heavily on models of documents that had been developed under the administration of their Abbasid rivals.

This last argument allows the author to move to the second part, where she turns to Islamicate chancery practice and how the Fatimid chancery fits in it. To do so, she first scrutinizes the introduction of a new writing material, paper, and how it impacted chancery practice in the administrations where it came to replace other materials like parchment and papyrus. The spread of paper in the East came along with other developments that Rustow examines in detail: the layout, the curvilinear script, and the proportioning of scripts. Consideration of all these elements allows her to demonstrate that the Fatimids applied Abbasid documentary norms more closely than the Egyptian dynasties who preceded them and were loyal to the Abbasids. She also focuses on one type of document that the Fatimids contributed to completely rebuilding: the petition. Under their rule, petitioning was indeed revamped to serve the interests of their state and authority.

These elements being laid out, the author moves to the third part where she considers a category of documents for which a majority of witnesses has been preserved both in terms of originals and copies as well as normative sources: the decree. Rustow aims to map its ecology, as she formulates it, i.e. its life cycle and where this life cycle unfolded. Decrees, she argues, must have been produced in great quantities. She reaches this conclusion by examining two

surviving decrees that must have belonged to a group of fifteen items that all related to a single case. This idea that a single case led to the issuance of several official documents has recently been considered for the Mamluk period by Alessandro Rizzo who coined the expression “documentary network”.<sup>1</sup> To better understand this category of documents, Rustow then embarks on a detailed explanation of the decree and how it was produced. To reach this goal, she first focuses on the norms detailed by a member of the Fatimid chancery, Ibn al-Şayrafi (d. 1147), comparing them with items from the same period that have survived. She then moves to an essential problem that is: which of the two copies of a decree came first? In fact, examples of decrees have been preserved in two kinds of layout and shape – the roll and the bifolio – and it has been established that the roll was issued for the beneficiary while the bifolio remained in the archives. Rustow concludes that the bifolio came first and that it was on its basis that the copy was released to the person who introduced the petition. This interpretation also helps to better understand why the rolls came to be discarded and reused as fragments. This part concludes with the circulation of the decree in the provinces where the document was summarized and copied into registers, a process that led to the addition of various signatures and registration marks on them.

The last part is dedicated to the fate of these decrees handed to their beneficiaries. The author raises the issue of the archiving of such rolls, showing that they did not need to be archived since other copies of their text had been taken in registers that could be more easily archived and retrieved. The corollary of this acknowledgement can only lead to the evidence: they were reused as scrap paper. However, Rustow goes beyond this mere conclusion by arguing that they were not simply reused for trivial reasons (scarcity and expensiveness of paper), but rather that this was the result of a conscious choice made by the state officials who, in some way, contributed to further disseminating the state’s message by dismembering its decrees. The concluding chapter deals with the widespread idea that medieval middle eastern bureaucracy and institutional structures were weak. Rustow challenges this assumption by presenting the Fatimid state as a Weberian bureaucracy, a view that will, hopefully, help to counter the discourse of superiority that still prevails in Western scholarship.

All in all, Rustow has rendered a tremendous service to the scientific community. Not only did she make every effort to explain the most cumbersome

---

1 A. Rizzo, “L’ambassade florentine de 1422 et l’établissement des relations commerciales avec les Mamelouks : Les premiers documents,” in *De la guerre à la paix en Méditerranée médiévale: Acteurs, propagande, défense et diplomatie*, edited by Élisabeth Malamut and Mohamed Ouerfelli, 225–38 (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2021).

elements intrinsic to Fatimid documents and the administration that drafted them, but she also managed to do so in a pleasant and most readable manner. Chapter after chapter, page after page, Rustow enthralls her reader with her style and her art of telling intricate stories. Profusely illustrated, her book will rightly appeal to students and scholars alike interested in many subjects, such as documentary studies in general, and, more particularly, archives and their fate in Egypt; the reuse of documents; the Fatimid state; the functioning of its administration and its chancery; and the Geniza and its less known Arabic fragments.

*Frédéric Bauden*

Professor of Arabic language, Islamic studies and History of Islamic art,  
Faculty of Humanities, Liège Université, Liège, Belgium

*f.bauden@uliege.be*