

Marina Rustow. *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 621 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-18952-9.

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Published on H-Africa (March, 2021)

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Marina Rustow's deeply absorbing book, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* states its main objective from the outset; namely, to lay to rest the persistent and erroneous notion that the medieval Islamic states of the Middle East were deficient in the art of statecraft. This false notion has been underpinned by an all-pervasive belief that medieval Islamic rule was either "laissez-faire to the point of indifference or despotic to the point of authoritarianism" (p. 3). The apparent lack of surviving documents has bolstered this claim but, as Rustow points out, more than 99 percent of extant Arabic papyrus and paper documents still remain unpublished. In order to debunk the misconceptions, Rustow introduces the reader to a unique cache of medieval Arabic documents dating from the period of Fatimid rule in Egypt and Syria that first came to light in Cairo in the nineteenth century. The documents, which include Fatimid state petitions and decrees, were preserved by virtue of having been re-used as a writing surface by Jewish scribes, and then some time after that by virtue of having been consigned to a geniza. The Jewish custom of geniza, which varied over time and place, was, as Rustow neatly summarizes, a process of "consigning worn-out texts in Hebrew script ... to a slow decay in dignified limbo" (p. 2). In other words, re-used Arabic state documents survived by the curious circum-

stance that they were jettisoned rather than archived.

To arrive at the point of seeing the broader significance of these discarded documents in terms of medieval Islamic history requires great aptitude in a range of disciplines. The necessary skills include philological training to decipher both Hebrew and Arabic texts; proficiencies in paleography and codicology in order to "read" the material evidence presented by the artifact; familiarity with archival science and diplomatics to understand the process by which a document is created, disseminated, deaccessioned, and disposed; and historical knowledge to place the whole material evidence into context. Let not the reader be daunted, however, for Rustow shares her expertise by writing in a clear and engaging style, by explaining difficult terms and strange concepts for the uninitiated, through the provision of beautiful illustrative plates of the manuscripts, and by way of a signposted "roadmap of the book" laid out in the introduction. The path may be long and complex but with Rustow as guide it is most happily trod.

The story of *The Lost Archive* is explained in four parts comprising sixteen chapters. The first part examines the production and storage cycle of the Fatimid documents and their afterlife. Fatimid documents have emerged in several non-Muslim repositories, including St. Catherine's Monastery

on Mount Sinai, the Italian state archives, and the archives of the Jewish community of Cairo. But the greatest number surfaced in a globally dispersed collection of around 400,000 fragments known as the Cairo Genizah. Most were discovered buried within and without the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet fragments of unknown provenance were also mixed into these collections, a complicating factor that may have implications for the interpretation of the life cycle of these documents. The idea that all provenance is unknowable is, however, rejected by Rustow, who finds the agnostic approach untenable. Documents from the Fatimid period that were written in, sent to, or concerning medieval Fustat certainly provide strong evidence of their ultimate find spot, and Rustow demonstrates how even liturgical pieces can be localized through identifying the handwriting of known Cairene scribes.

In the modern age, the Fatimid documents underwent another strange journey. In the institutions that had acquired them they lay largely undetected due to the inability of many cataloguers to decipher them. Indeed, many were simply described as “scribblings” or “jottings.” After Rustow realized this pattern of cataloguing error, her painstaking detective work led her to uncover over 1,600 state decrees. This amounts to around 4 percent of the total documentary material in the Cairo Genizah. Taken as a percentage of what was actually produced, it suggests that the medieval Middle East possessed “a robust culture of written documentation” (p. 5).

In the second part of the book, Rustow takes the reader back in time to the little-known world of the Fatimid Chancery. She examines both text and container closely to uncover chancery norms and practices. The work reveals how the Fatimids adapted the documentary habits of their predecessors, the Abbasids, and how they introduced innovations in their own statecraft through the institution of the “petition.” The petition, they dis-

covered, served the state well by providing a way to keep the general populace content and lower officials in check. By examining the language of the documents in comparison to their Abbasid predecessors and Mamluk successors, Rustow concludes that the Fatimids created a loosely consistent if not fully standardized system of documentation.

In part 3, the ecology of the documents is revealed through an in-depth investigation of supply and demand. Another Fatimid document, the “decree,” is brought under the spotlight due to its extraordinary materiality and unexpected fungibility. Written on a rotulus (a scroll written vertically), typically several meters in length, with wide spacing between each line, the Fatimid decree was a lavish affair. These written decrees not only reveal many things about themselves when regarded as individual artifacts, they also offer up meaning when considered in aggregate. As Rustow points out, historians have tended to “debone” documents by stripping them of their “boilerplate” features, but it is precisely these features that are “richest in procedure and hence institutional history” (p. 353). Documents, she asserts, will relax when treated empathetically, and rather than looking solely at their singular characteristics, they often “speak more volubly in groups” (p. 9).

In the fourth section of the book, Rustow makes a convincing case as to how such lavish decrees, the mouthpiece of the state, could end up as scrap paper. Since the decree was intended as a performance piece, to be read aloud to the recipient, it was the “humble” avatar—the original legal document that gave birth to the declarative copy—that was stored in the official archive. By contrast, the extravagant copy created for public consumption outlived its use once the public announcement was made, and so could be cut up and sent out into the market as scrap paper. The cuts, she discovered, were consistently made vertically down the center of the roll, suggesting a ritualized form of deaccession. The scraps of paper were then purchased and re-used by Jewish scribes.

The scribes, more often than not, were cantors in desperate need of writing surfaces on which to record texts as aide memoires to guide their oral performances.

The performative aspects of these documents inspired Rustow to devote a chapter to contemplating the ontological status of the decree. The audiences' reception of the decree, as well as the consistent means by which it was discarded, gave her further pause to ponder its auratic nature. In other words: to what degree was the impressive, extravagantly produced decree fetishized by its recipients and subsequent users? Using the analogy of Pete Townshend's guitar, Rustow suggests that the destruction of the instrument of performance "lent auratic weight to the performance itself" (p. 409). While this reconstruction is imaginative, well argued, and certainly worth pursuing, it is perhaps the least convincing part of an otherwise admirable book given its speculative nature. Nevertheless, this is a book that holds great value for general readers and scholars alike. Not only does it take its readers on a fascinating journey into the past, but it also teaches future historians by example how to truly *see* documents in all their complexity: as texts with multiple layers of meaning, as unique objects each with their own biography, and as members of a collective entity pregnant with social meaning.

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Citation: Rebecca Jefferson. Review of Rustow, Marina. *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. March, 2021.

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