

Book Review: The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue by Marina Rustow

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Rustow, Marina. *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. i + 598 pages. Hardcover, \$60.38.

The Lost Archive weaves together a fascinating glimpse into state documents created by the Fatimid caliphate during the eleventh and twelfth centuries for both specialists and non-specialists in the field. Neither Marina Rustow nor Princeton University Press are strangers to publishing in this field, and Princeton University is home to the Princeton Geniza Lab (with Rustow as Director). One motivating factor that prompted Rustow to engage in this project is the way in which scholars have represented the Fatimid caliphate on extreme ends of a spectrum, placing it on one end as “despotic” or on the other end as “laissez-faire.” These problematic perceptions are a point she repeatedly articulates throughout the book and attributes them to “ignoring documents” (p.4). Rustow believes such perceptions have proven to be an additional barrier to uncovering more medieval Middle Eastern state documents since academics have assumed these states “would have had little need of them” since they were “led by arbitrary and unpredictable rulers” (p. 3). However, Rustow contends an examination of the documents that were in the Cairo Geniza provides us with an image of the Fatimid caliphate that fails to fit into either of these two extreme characterizations.

Aside from recognizing the wealth of these documents both in content and quantity, she examines their lifespans and afterlives to interrogate the nature of the Fatimid state. Rustow recognizes a certain degree of change and continuity existed between documents created by the Fatimid caliphate and those of its predecessors to the point where the Fatimids even “imitated” some of their documents. This leads to the question she poses about the degree of change that comes when a new power takes over, which is a question applicable even today. Rustow provides a very detailed and nuanced analysis of these documents, and utilizes Ibn al-Şayrafi’s writing to provide an insider perspective on the activities inside the chancery, although she recognizes his

writing belies the actual number of people involved in it. Rustow devotes some attention to examining decrees and petitions: the latter being described as “rebuilt” from those of the Abbasids and served a functional purpose to mitigate the threat of rebellion by providing a mechanism to hear grievances. These petitions also allowed the Fatimid caliphate to monitor the conduct of its officials and had a symbolic purpose as she contends “by writing new-style petitions, scribes physically enacted their loyalty to the new regime” (p. 15). Rustow also devotes some focus to decrees and their structure, which allowed them to become “instruments of performance” and thus rarely destined for the archives since “they were fungible” (p. 18). What percentage of documents have survived is a question Rustow contemplates: she determines that under 15% of documents relating to a dispute between 1029 and 1034 survived, allowing her to consider the possibility that figure is indicative of the overall percentage of state documents that escaped destruction. Rustow attributes the survival of so many documents to their “pruning” while the Fatimids remained in power rather than to a sudden and disorderly release that can occur through violence against the state and the overthrow of a regime.

One of the strengths of *The Lost Archive* is the easy-to-follow way Rustow articulates her arguments as she provides a nice overview of its contents in her introduction. The chapters are laid out in a straightforward and logical manner as she introduces the reader to the Cairo Geniza and the Fatimid caliphate, and then delves into a detailed analysis of these state documents as “artifacts,” and what they can inform us as such. The images throughout the book are also very valuable as they allow readers unfamiliar with these state documents to see the forms they took, particularly some of the lengthy decrees, which help to support her claim that they were used as “instruments of performance.” Rustow also does an excellent job dissecting the arguments made by various scholars who have worked in this field, including Stern, Goitein and Khan, and

challenging some of their conclusions. Rustow's section dealing with Orientalism was brief considering the plethora of material that has been published in that field, although she certainly did a fine job linking this chapter to her overall argument.

The Lost Archive is important for the ways in which it enters a dialogue with previously published conclusions, which makes it a valuable resource for academics interested in the medieval Middle East. As mentioned above, Rustow challenges the ways in which scholars have perceived the nature of the Fatimid government, but she also challenges the ways scholars have conceptualized pre-modern governing entities as she argues Fatimid documents demonstrate that it was a "state." By surveying the criteria Max Weber used to define a state, she concludes that the term is applicable to the Fatimid caliphate and that Fatimid documents are accurately defined as "state documents." Rustow is even willing to challenge some of her previous assumptions about these documents, including the order in which they were created. Previously, she assumed "the rotulus was the original [version] and the bifolio was the copy" (p. 324), however, through analyzing Ibn al-Ṣayrafī's work and a fourteenth century manuscript, Rustow was able to determine the opposite had occurred.

The Lost Archive presents a very readable and well-researched book that challenges some of the conclusions that have been put forward by scholars examining the Fatimid caliphate. Rustow is not afraid to tackle some of the more difficult questions in this field, including one relating to the destruction of decrees even if she believes it "can[not] be answered in a historically responsible way" (p. 411). Rustow also invites readers to re-think the forms historical interpretations of the Fatimid caliphate would have taken if the wealth of its documents had been acknowledged and used earlier. Overall, Rustow wants readers of *The Lost Archive* to be motivated and inspired to

carry on more investigations into this field, particularly since more Arab documents could be waiting for discovery in the archives of various Mediterranean states.

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