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https://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2020/12/fatimids.html

SPEAKERS
Zoe Griffith, Marina Rustow, Chris Gratien, Neelam Khoja, Fahad Bishara

Chris Gratien 00:08
Welcome to "The Making of the Islamic World." I'm Chris Gratien. If you're hearing this through the Ottoman History Podcast website, "The Making of the Islamic World" is a series of podcasts intended for the university classroom. With each episode, we provide a bibliography of readings associated with the topic, as well as other readings and activities great for group discussion or for simply exploring on your own.

Chris Gratien 00:33
In our previous two installments, we were in the eastern half of the Islamic world. We discussed the Imperial caliphates of the Umayyads and the Abbasids and the Turko-Persian polities that emerged out of Abbasid fragmentation. For the next two installments, we're headed west into North Africa and Iberia.

This episode is about the Fatimid Caliphate, which established its capital in Cairo during the tenth century, and presided over a large swath of the Middle East and North Africa.

Marina Rustow 01:11
When I turned in the book manuscript for my first book, I use the word "state," and I had no problem using the word "state." I thought, "Okay, this looks like a state acts like a state smells like a state, it's a state." But one of my editors said to me, "Can you really use that term for a medieval political entity?," and I realized, like, people aren't totally comfortable talking about pre-modern states as states. So I became convinced not just that the use of the term state is justified. I mean, it's a state, you know, you can kind of go down the checklist, an organization that attempts to monopolize legitimate use of force, collects taxes, like claims a certain right to people's property, extracts resources, redistributes them, you know, and so forth. But I even became convinced that you can talk about bureaucracies before 16th-century Europe, before Max Weber would tell us you can talk about bureaucracy. We would never have thought that there were bureaucracies in the medieval Islamic world unless we really had the documents staring us in the face. I mean, you can read in the chronicles all you want but you don't have a sense of the scale of the thing until you actually see the documents, how much is being produced and how much is being thrown away.

Marina Rustow 02:32
I really want historians not of the Islamicate world, historians of other parts of the world and other other times and places to be aware of this material and to understand that you can actually talk about pre-industrial societies as sharing a certain range of problems and of solutions to those problems, right. Like, one of the big problems being what's the global population, you know, in the year 1000? It's like 300 million people, which is less than the population of the United States today, spread over the globe, so what does that mean in terms of administering an empire? It means that you have to do a lot of writing because there's a lot of space to cover and there aren't a lot of people in between. You know, this, for me is like, this is how global history should be done, is deep dives, followed by comparison, as opposed to just people traversing the globe.

Chris Gratien 03:34
That's Marina Rustow, a professor at Princeton University. I recently interviewed her about her new book entitled "The Lost Archive," which embraces the challenges of studying the function of pre-modern states in the Islamic world. We often refer to the dynasties of this period as empires, even though it's not always clear how much power they wielded. We call them states but we don't always know the extent to which they functioned as a state in the modern sense. Dor the case of the Fatimids, Rustow has shown that their state apparatus was much more developed than previously assumed. She's done this using creative analysis of a rare trove of discarded documents that for centuries sat in the storage room of a Cairo synagogue, known to scholars in the field as the Genizah. Genizah is a Hebrew word signifying "storeroom" or "repository," and these are very common features of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries. But the Cairo Genizah is pretty special.

Marina Rustow 04:25
So the Cairo Genizah is a kind of collective name for a body of material that was discarded and stored in a kind of attic-ey type room of a medieval synagogue in Fustat, which is the residential core of medieval Cairo. It's built between, or rebuilt I should say, because there was something there before probably a synagogue as well, between 1025 and 1041. And so beginning in 1025, you get material that starts to be discarded in this room and continues to be discarded all the way up until 1897, when the chamber is finally emptied, and what was left there was brought to Cambridge. So 1897, about 200,000 fragments get brought to Cambridge, England. But before that another 200 fragments, more or less, had already been dispersed, largely by manuscript collectors who had come through Egypt on their journeys through the Middle East, and also local dealers, some Egyptologists, right? This is the era when Egypt is really being, ancient Egypt was being excavated. So a lot of the the Egyptologists themselves were aware of this source of manuscripts and so the stuff started to get sold off.

Marina Rustow 05:47
Starting in 1897, actually a little bit earlier starting in the 1880s, people start, you know, rummaging through these texts from the Cairo Giza and there's amazing stuff in there. There are, you know, lost books of the Hebrew Bible that didn't make it into the Hebrew Bible because they were not declared canonical. There are texts that are completely unknown. There are texts that are known but in weird versions. There are unknown texts by known people. I mean, you get the idea. It's just a complete, crazy, free for all that, you know, people just start completely rewriting the history of Jews and Judaism in a period before scholars really understood that the 10th, 11th, 12th centuries the vast majority of Jews, like an estimated 90% of Jews, lived in the Islamic world. And starting in the 1920s, it becomes clear that there are a lot of documents there. So it's not just biblical texts, rabbinic texts, weird versions of texts that we already knew, or highfalutin texts by authors who we didn't know that they wrote these texts. It's also marriage contracts, personal letters, bills of lading, accounts, just the kind of most random, everyday ephemera, and that's when the study of this stuff really gets underway.

Chris Gratien 07:06
The Cairo Genizah has normally served as a source for Jewish history. But as Rustow demonstrates, it can also tell us a lot about Islamic history. If not for this unique source base, we'd know much less about the social and economic history of the medieval Islamic world and the global connections it contained. We'll talk more about what the Genizah reveals in a bit. But first, some background on the Fatamids.

Chris Gratien 07:37
In our previous episode of "The Making of the Islamic World," we explained how the Abbasid caliphs remained caliphs but ceded considerable political power to a variety of Turco-Persian dynasties. While that was happening, in tenth-century North Africa, a new political dynasty, the Fatimids, were building a rival caliphate. Neelam Khoja and I chatted over Zoom about the legacy of that caliphate.

Neelam Khoja 08:00
So when we start thinking about what it means to have sovereign power, one of the things that you have to do is you have to have the khutbah recited in your name, which is the Friday sermon, has to be recited in your name, and you need to have the coins minted in your name. What gives you added power is if you're able to control the pilgrimage of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, And the Fatamids, for a brief period of history, we're also able to do this. And their rivals, of course, were the Abbasids, whose color was black. And so in order to show that they were not the Abbasids, the Fatimids chose the color white, right? And in Fatimid poetry you see this a lot, they really make fun of the Abbasids, and they call them ravens, black ravens, which in Islamic tradition is not a good thing, as the polemics that they've sort of used to like fight against this idea of a different competing power.

Chris Gratien 08:59
The Fatamids defined themselves against the Abbasids in every sense. While the Abbasids trace their link to the Prophet Muhammad family via his uncle, Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, the Fatamid Dynasty takes its name from Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. Fatima was also married to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Rashidun Caliph. In tracing their lineage to Fatima, the Fatamids laid claim to a rival form of political legitimacy.

Neelam Khoja 09:23
So you have the interpretation that believes in the Sunnah of the Prophet, and they believe that there needs to be a shura and a consultation in thinking through who is going to be the one that succeeds the Prophet Muhammad after his death. So they are the ones who then rallied for Abu Bakr, and then Umar, and Uthman, and then Ali. Then you have the founding of the Umayyads, and the Abbasids, and all of this.

Neelam Khoja 09:52
Another interpretation were called the Shiat Ali, which means the party of Ali, and what they believed was that the rightful successor in terms of both political and spiritual governance was Ali. And through Fatima and Ali's genealogy, so through their line, through their progeny, were then the next successors to the Prophet, to Ali, and then so it continues.

Chris Gratien 10:22
To understand how a Shia dynasty laid claim to the caliphate in the tenth century, we need to take things back to the beginning of the Umayyad period, when the Prophet Muhammad's grandsons, Hassan and Hussein, were denied their claim to the caliphate. The slaying of Hussein at Karbala in 680 remained controversial and it ultimately contributed to the Umayyad loss of legitimacy that provided room for the Abbasid revolution of 750. At the time of that takeover, however, the latest successor to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the sixth Shia Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, did not attempt to seize political power. Ja'far al-Sadiq's legacy was mainly in the realm of Islamic jurisprudence.

Neelam Khoja 10:59
Abu Bakr and Ja'far al-Sadiq, we should also note, were really important contributors to Islamic thought generally. They definitely contributed to Shi'i thought, but they also were main contributors to Islamic thought as well. So both people of all interpretations would then look to them in terms of guidance as well, because again, there was a general respect for the family of the Prophet.

Chris Gratien 11:23
Ja;far's descendants were persecuted under the Abbasids and rival lines of Shia succession also emerged. The Fatmids adhered to the Ismaili branch that considered Ismail, the oldest son of Ja'far, to have been the rightful successor to the imamate.

Neelam Khoja 11:37
During Ja'far al-Sadiq's time, the heir apparent, at least in the Shia interpretation, was Ismail. But according to some sources, Ismail pre-deceased his father, so he died before Ja'far al-Sadiq died. And therefore some people believe that the next heir would have been his son, you know, Ismail's son. Now there was disagreement here, and so you start seeing these schisms, and you have six different groups of people who believe different things. They believe different things in terms of the historical circumstances, but then there's always, with anything, there's always power at play, right? So depending on who wanted certain favors, they believe certain things and whatever. So you basically end up with six different interpretations and one of them is what would then go to found the Fatimid Empire. And that was the line that believes that the grandson of Ja'far al-Sadiq was the rightful successor and then would continue.

Neelam Khoja 12:35
But because you had the founding of the Abbasids, you also had a anti-Shia sentiment that was very pervasive across these lines. You actually have straight-up persecution of different religious, the way in which people espouse different religious traditions. So you could kind of get a sense of where people would feel unsafe if they practiced or believed in something different. So you had a lot of these groups kind of go underground. So they kind of went into hiding, where they weren't politically fighting against the state. You did have on the other hand, what would become a you know, twelver Shiism, the "'atnaa 'asharees," you did have in that interpretation, where they actually did try to either ally or rebel against the Abbasids, right? And that's a different history. But the people that would end up founding the the Fatimid Empire, they decided to just go into seclusion. You know, what was kind of pervasive in thought was this idea of a mahdi, this idea that a Messiah would come and right the wrongs of the world.

Chris Gratien 13:45
During the late eighth century, this Ismaili's did not hold political power, but rather spread their influence through a dawah or proselytization campaign. From their base in the town of Salamiyya in Syria, the

Ismaili missionaries, known as "da‘is" work to convert people from Morocco in the west to India in the east.

Neelam Khoja 14:04
So "dawah" means invitation and the person that invites is called a da‘i, and in the Fatimid context, the dawah system was incredibly hierarchical. It was incredibly organized and, as you mentioned, it was expensive. So even before the Fatamids settled in what is now Tunisia, and then later moved to Egypt to Cairo, there were da'is that we're moving around and scouting, and looking for places where they can set up the caliphate. And there were contesting sites, including Yemen, which, in Yemen, there were da'i movements that were quite extensive, and a lot of written material has also come out of Yemen. And eventually they settled on Northern Africa for political and military reasons.

Neelam Khoja 14:54
One of the ways that they were able to expand the da'i network was through these majlises, so a majlis is a gathering, and they used to have, like I mentioned it's very hierarchical, so you used to have like the chief da'i. And during the height of the Fatimid period, this the chief da'i was al-Qadi al-Nu'man , who also produce texts. And you had other really important da'is too, like Kirmani, Hamid Kirmani . You had al-Sijistani. You had Nasir Khusraw, who was the da'i that helped to convert a lot of Ismailis in Central Asia. So he died in Badakhshan and today, even today, there's an entire shrine that's devoted specifically to Nasir Khusraw. And he is the, so that's the furthest east that we can, we have actual evidence of, but there are suggestions that also in or along the Indus civilization, you also have da'i connections that were connected to Fatimid Cairo.

Neelam Khoja 15:58
So it was an incredibly expansive network, and, again, their aim was not just to convert or to have people accept the Ismaili interpretation like in the masses. They were very strategic about it, and they were actually trying to win over local rulers. And through the local rulers then they would get the, you know, the congregants.

Neelam Khoja 16:25
We also have evidence that there were a lot of females who served as da'is as well, and one of the reasons why women specifically were chosen was because they could go unnoticed. They could be traders, you know, they could move with caravans, but they could be spreading the message of Islam in this very clandestine way, where they would not be suspicious. The Caliph Imam would always, almost always, depending on who it was, would almost always endorse whatever the message was. So you used to have not only these institutions of learning, thes specifics spaces. But you also had the thoughts and the, the ideology, or the beliefs that came directly or were approved directly by the Imam Caliph that people would be trained in and then would then go and spread the message. So it was very organized, you know, it was a very organized network.

Chris Gratien 17:26
The Ismailism of the Fatimid Dynasty was one of multiple strains of Shiism in an Islamic world dominated by the Sunni Abbasid Dynasty. Shiism, in addition to nurturing many distinct interpretations of Islam, provided a powerful challenge to the political rule of any Sunni dynasty. That's why we can see groups in a number of different times and places mobilizing a Shia identity for that very purpose. It's important to keep in mind that the frequent juxtaposition of Sunni and Shia political discourses is not really the product of a single enduring political conflict. Rather, these rival frameworks have continually been invoked in different, sometimes distantly related contexts. Because Sunni rulers dominated most of the powerful states of the early Islamic period, we often see Shia claimants in a role of opposition. No dynasty occupied that role in a bolder manner than the Fatamids, who established a rival Ismaili caliphate to the Abbasids of Baghdad.

Neelam Khoja 18:21
One of the successors of Ja'far al-Sadiq was able through a vast network of people who who believed in him as the rightful Imam, so the rightful successor of Prophet Muhammad, they, they basically were surveying the land. So they went to Yemen, they went, you know, as far east as possible, and they went to the Maghreb, so they went west as well. And what they ended up doing was, in the Maghreb they were able to find people who would agree with them and who would support them.

Chris Gratien 18:53
The Fatimid Dynasty first rose to power with the support of the Kutama, a Berber community in modern day Algeria, whose leaders converted to Ismailism. They would make up the first Fatimid armies, which succeeded in overthrowing the Aghlabids, whose capital of Kairouan in modern day Tunisia, was arguably the most important Islamic center in North Africa.

Neelam Khoja 19:11
So Imam al-Mahdi, the first Fatimid imam caliph, went and founded the first sort of capital of the Fatimids. So that happened in 909, and they're in the Maghreb, so what is al-Mansuriya today in Tunisia. And if you were to go look in al-Mansuriya today, you could still see a lot of the Fatimid architecture that they actually, you know, commissioned and built. And then eventually they move in 969. They're able to come to Cairo ,and they establish their seat of power and their caliphate in Cairo.

Chris Gratien 19:48
For a time, Fatimid power was built on Aghlabid territory in North Africa and Sicily. But with the power vacuum created by the Buyid takeover of the Abbasid Caliphate, the Fatimids swept into the wealthy province of Egypt. There, they built an empire that for a time controlled much of North Africa, the island of Sicily, Syria, and the Hijaz. Their capital was the city of Cairo.

Zoe Griffith 20:11

The city that becomes Cairo is a new city after 969. But the area around it had been inhabited really since, I mean, you can go way back to 5000 BCE with Memphis, was a settlement in that area. And it was always a kind of bound to be a great city because it's the strategic point where the Delta narrows into the, you know, one branch of the Nile leading down into Upper Egypt. What was there at the time of the Arab conquest, for instance, were kind of abandoned fortresses, lightly inhabited. And the initial city, the initial settlement in 640, at the time of the Arab conquest of Egypt, is a military garrison. It was one of two styles of cities, essentially, that were initially set up by the Arab conquerors, the military, sort of camp cities, and then there were kind of palace prestige project cities. And so Fustat, the earliest settlement in what will become Cairo, settled by Amr ibn al-As, the military commander of the Arab armies, is a military city. All the subsequent cities that are going to eventually be subsumed by the city of Cairo after 969 are going to be experimental palace prestige cities, with Cairo being the final iteration.

Chris Gratien 21:39
Zoe Griffith is a professor at Baruch College working on the history of Egypt, and she's a frequent host of the Ottoman History Podcast. Cairo as a city she knows well.

Chris Gratien 21:51
Cairo has been the center of political life in Egypt for centuries. Today, its metropolitan area holds roughly twenty million people. The making of the modern city goes back to the tenth century, when the Fatimids built Cairo or al-Qahira as a new capital.

Zoe Griffith 22:11
The city of Cairo, as we know it today, takes its name Cairo from al-Qahira, the victorious, the name given to the city by the Fatimid commander, Gawhar Jawhar, the Sicilian, who is sent to conquer Egypt from the Ikhshids, one of these like Abbasid splinter groups. And so the name Cairo, al-Qahira, is given to glorify the Fatimid Caliph, al-Muizz. And really, this is, as I was mentioning before, kind of the final iteration of these elite palace cities that is built specifically to be a sort of royal city.

Zoe Griffith 22:57
One massive, like new innovation or transformation that comes out of the Fatimid establishment of Cairo is that for the first time, really in Egyptian history, the capital city, the main city is going to be built on the east bank of the Nile rather than the West Bank. And so all of the development, you know, the city as it develops, really, until the end of the 19th century, is all on the east bank of the Nile. There's very little occurring on the West Bank, and so the city is going to grow east and north of where it had been before. Because this was a palace city, the kind of original idea for it was that the masses, all of the like commercial and industrial life, all of the the non-Muslims, the Jewish population, the Coptic population of Cairo, the Sunni Arab population, really, of Egypt, would remain in Fustat. So Fustat, for years, for many generations after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, Fustat was still the kind of center of

commercial life and industrial life and al-Qahira was really meant to be this palace city, and was in fact restricted to commoners.

Zoe Griffith 24:14
So one of the first things that the Fatimids did in Cairo was to build these two really grandiose palaces. These palaces that are built immediately after the Fatimid conquest by this commander, Gawhar, the Eastern Palace, the great palace, was at the time 22 acres in size, which accounted for one fifth of the total area of Cairo. So it was really intended to be, you know, the centerpiece of the city.

Zoe Griffith 24:45
You know if you travel to Cairo today and you go to what's called Islamic Cairo, the street named for that kind of first caliph and the like primary builder of Fatimid Cairo, al-Muizz, is about a one kilometer promenade, I guess, from these two gates of the city: Bab al-Futuh and Bab Zuweila. And in between those, you had what were called sort of the East Palace or the Grand Palace and the West Palace, which was a smaller palace. And then what's significant about that was the plaza between them called Bein al-Qasrain, and the palaces don't exist anymore, there's nothing left of them. They were destroyed by the Ayyubid and the Mamluks. But Bein al-Qasrain, you know, really exists very powerfully, I think, in, you know, modern Cairene imaginations of their old city, of the Islamic city, and was a, you know, very, very high prestige site for later building.

Chris Gratien 25:46
Here, too, the Fatimids had tried to rival the Abbasids, who had built their own impressive new capital in Samara during the eighth century. Fatimid al-Qahira certainly harkened to Samara, but it ultimately lasted much longer as a city built upon by subsequent rulers for many centuries.

Zoe Griffith 26:02
I would say, because the Fatimids were this, you know, Shiite dynasty that were not very long lived and also replaced by a series of Sunni dynasties. Not a whole lot of Fatimid architecture remains in Cairo. But the examples we do have are very, very significant. I mean, so certainly one of the most significant examples we do have of Fatimid architecture and building is al-Azhar Mosque and University, founded almost immediately after the foundation of al-Qahira in 972. And this remains one of the oldest continuously functioning universities in the world. So in addition to al-Azhar, which, of course, you know, not that much of the original structure remains, it's been added to and renovated many times, the city gates and al-Hakim Mosque are some of the monuments that still exist. Al-Hakim Mosque, incidentally, known for its minarets, really ornate, sort of decorative motifs, more kind of animal imagery, and like vegetal imagery than was customary in most Egyptian architecture, which tended to be really kind of sparse and geometric.

Zoe Griffith 27:24

So around this kind of palace city, which, you know, it coexists in like a symbiotic relationship with old Cairo, Fustat, with the kind of, if you want to call it like "the living city of the masses," al-Qahira does have pretty monumental, solid system of walls and gates. There were exterior walls and interior walls and a number of gates, but the famous ones Bab al-Futuh for to like the gate of victory, or conquest, and Bab al-Nasr, the gate of victory, Bab Zuweila. These still exist today and were built, you would recognize them almost from like Crusader castles or like European fortress architecture, like roundels, that, that soldiers could stand on to either shoot at invaders or like pour boiling oil onto them, if they got real close.

Zoe Griffith 28:17
You know, you have to think about it in terms of kind of geographic continuity, but a real cultural transformation or a real sort of a shift in the importance of this city, which becomes much wealthier, you know, people are coming to Cairo, for trade and for educational opportunities, for the site of learning. It becomes a major cultural capital, really only after the Fatimid conquest. And really what winds up happening is that al-Qahira, the palace city, and Fustat, well ultimately Fustat declines and Cairo becomes the sole hegemonic kind of inhabited site in that area for a number of centuries. And that's a story that actually has to do with the Crusades.

Zoe Griffith 29:10
Because the kind of commander of Egypt in the twelfth century, hearing that Crusader armies were going to, you know, march on Cairo and sort of take over. You know, I mean, first they needed to take over the kind of living heart of the city, which was all Fustat. They burned it. So they demolished Fustat, the whole population of that kind of old city took refuge within the walled city of Cairo. And so the city really became we can call it, like I keep calling Fustat, a living city. I mean, Cairo becomes a living city out of the crusades. And it is the Ayyubid rulers who open up this whole area like al-Muizz Street and Bein al-Qasrain to the masses, to commoners, they get rid of this duality, division between, you know, the royal military parts of society and the, you know, artisans and merchants and regular people who inhabit the city.

Neelam Khoja 30:14
They also did very well with trade. So the Fatimid dinar is probably one of the most valued in terms of gold coins. They really believed in this idea of purity when it came to trade, and equity, and fairness. So it became coveted and I think because of that you had a lot of trust in the Fatimids, whether you were Ismaili or not, whether you were a believer or not. As someone who was a tradesman, you would want those Fatimid dinars because you knew it was unadulterated, you knew that it held value.

Chris Gratien 30:50
It's remarkable how scarce the traces of the Fatimids are in Cairo today, given that they founded the modern city and ruled it for centuries. One striking fact is that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Egypt are and have long been Sunni Muslims. The Ismaili Islam of the Fatimids remained marginal in

Egypt, even though they presided over the precise period in which Islam and Arabic language first became predominant in Egyptian society.

Chris Gratien 31:15
The Ayyubid Dynasty that conquered Cairo during the 12th century did much to erase the Fatimid legacy, as did the Mamluk dynasty that replaced the Ayyubids and brought the Abbasid Caliph to Cairo during the 13th century. We'll talk about both of those dynasties later on in this series.

Chris Gratien 31:32
Even though the Abbasid caliphs themselves held little political power, imperial dynasties continued to rule in their name, and as a result we've received a distorted picture of their rivals, the Fatimids. A good example of this is found in the narrative surrounding the pivotal but eccentric Fatimid Caliph, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, who reigned from 996 to 1021. In the sources we have portrayals of al-Hakim vary widely. The Druze community descends from the supporters of al-Hakim, who believe the caliph went into occultation. For the Druze, he was a supreme and infallible ruler. On the other extreme, you have the portrait of al-Hakim as a capricious despot intolerant of non-Muslims in the Fatimid realms. At the center of these narratives, we often find his older sister, who lived from roughly 970 to 1023 CE, known to history as Sitt al-Mulk.

Neelam Khoja 32:23
The person I want to get to is this really important daughter of the fifth Fatimid caliph al-Aziz, and he married a slave girl who was probably of Greek origin, and so therefore, she would be considered in Islamic context, a concubine. And he was known to just have been completely enamored by this, his concubine, they produce the woman who was later called Sitt al-Mulk and Sitt al-Mulk, that epithet means "Lady of Power." Sitt al-Mulk also enamored her father, so her, al-Aziz, was both taken by his wife and by his daughter. When the wife died, his love and affection continued on to his daughter, so his daughter was someone that had a seat at the table. She basically had the ability to give her own opinions and her opinions were taken quite seriously. She was well educated, you know, so she became kind of an important figurehead within the proximity of the imam of the Caliph. The Caliph also had two sons from other wives, and one of the sons was al-Hakim, who is known as al-Hakim. Al-Hakim was the heir apparent and would then become the sixth imam caliph.

Neelam Khoja 33:49
So the sources are really interesting in terms of what they say about Sitt al-Mulk, and I think one of the things that we need to keep in mind is that the Abbasids were really rich, right? And I think we need keep that in mind. They were really rich, and they wrote a lot of histories, and they wrote a lot of chronicles. And because the Fatimids were publicly defying them by having founded another state, right? Like they openly were rhetorically, and polemically, ideologically at war with each other. You had a lot of Abbasid writings that really skew the way in which the Fatimids are represented. And this

trickles down to the imam caliphs, and historically we could say this is true, it almost always trickles down to women. You know, women are almost always misrepresented somehow, some way.

Neelam Khoja 34:43
So when it came to their descriptions of Sitt al-Mulk and al-Hakim, you had these crazy stories about Sitt al-Mulk having affairs with men. She was never married herself, and this was something that the Fatimids generally did with their daughters. They would not marry off their daughters. So Sitt al-Mulk was this, she was not married. Her mother came from a Christian background. So they, they were not, she was half-Christian, half-Muslim, ad she also promoted her uncles who were Christians, so they were also given positions of power. But the rumors spread about Sitt al-Mulk in that she had amorous lovers because she was never married. And one of the people who believed these rumors were her own brother, al-Hakim, who often threatened to kill the people who she allegedly had affairs with. Al-Hakim himself was a very interesting character. On this side that really loves him, it's so extreme that they basically made him divine in status. And that's where the Druze religion sort of emerges, and it's through al_Hakim, and they continue to live in Lebanon, and they're still a community today.

Neelam Khoja 36:05
On the other hand, you had a group of people thinking that he was just crazy. He was very eccentric, and because he also couldn't sleep at night, it led him to do some really crazy things. If you read the Abbasid sources, you'll get a lot more of that. If you read the Fatimid sources or if you read the Mamluk sources that deal with this time period of the Fatimids, you start to see a little bit more of a balanced picture. Some of the policies that he took can be seen as very extreme and very unaligned with what you generally saw as the Fatimid policy of general tolerance, of acceptance, and pluralism, and all of this. Al-Hakim was an exception to this.

Neelam Khoja 36:49
One of the things that he did was really remove the freedoms and the mobility of women. So this was a really important thing. He basically didn't want females leaving the house at all. So he had shoemakers, for example, not produce shoes that women could wear. So his logic was that if they didn't have shoes, then they couldn't leave the house. That's how extreme his thinking had become. And, at some point, what a lot of the sources say is that his sister, and he, so Sitt al-Mulk and he, they had a big fight. And he threatened to kill someone who he thought was sleeping with her, and he threatened to kill her. And then, so everyone sort of witnessed this fight, and then later, what ends up happening is that al-Hakim disappears.

Neelam Khoja 37:43
So al-Hakim was known to, because he was unable to sleep, he had this condition that just didn't like, whether it was noise, or whatever it was, he basically didn't sleep. So he had this habit of going out into the city at night, and just exploring the city. And he usually would take two close companions with him, sometimes more, but generally two. And so one night he goes out on one of his night excursions, and

then he's not to be found. So we have no idea what happens to al-Hakim. His body is actually never recovered. But there's evidence that he might have been killed because they find his horse, and they see that the horse is wounded and injured. The saddle is, is okay, that's untouched. But the horse has been injured.

Neelam Khoja 38:28
And so Sitt al-Mulk takes advantage of the situation, and then puts al-Hakim's son on the throne, and then de facto starts to rule through him. So because al-Hakim's son was quite young, he couldn't make the decisions that were needed for an emperor to make, and so Sitt al-Mulk took it upon herself to do that. And some of the things that she started out with, which ended up becoming the legacies of her rule, were to actually reverse a lot of the policies that al-Hakim had put into place. So for example, women were again allowed outdoors, you know, they're allowed to go to the markets and live their lives like they normally would. People who had lost power, were able to come back into power and all of that, so she sort of righted the wrongs of al-Hakim's extreme measures and set the course back on, right? And so, so she ruled, it depends on the sources, between two to four years, and she then dies, and then al-Hakim's son is the one that continues on with the reign.

Chris Gratien 39:34
It can be surprisingly hard to arrive at a complete picture of figures who are wrapped up in mystery, lore, and propaganda, even during their own times. Yet the sometimes lurid stories shouldn't distract from the fact that Sitt al-Mulk presided over one of the most powerful empires of her day. That's where we come back to the Genizah.

Marina Rustow 39:52
So Oxford has a Genizah collection of about 12,500 fragments. So it's a small collection, relatively speaking. Cambridge has 200,000. But it's a very, very well-curated collection. So I was looking through a particular volume of Genizah fragments at Oxford, and in this volume, there was a petition that S.M. Stern had published in 1962. And right next to that petition was a petition to a Fatimid woman. I don't wanna say it was clearly to a woman because actually, it took me about three weeks of staring at this thing before I started to believe that the feminine endings, that that ta marbuta was actually there. Because, first of all, the script isn't that clear. But second of all, we're so trained to expect men as the addressees of these things that there was a petition to a woman, a royal woman, staring me in the face, and like, it took me a while to kind of catch up with that reality.

Marina Rustow 40:52
Once I realized that it was to a woman, then of course, I was like, totally hooked, and I wanted to figure out who this woman was. But before any of that happened, there I was at the Bodleian, sitting there in front of this volume of Genizah fragments. S.M. Stern had already published one of them, and I was looking at another, and I said, "Well, if S.M. Stern published one from this volume, then clearly he must have known about the other one, and somebody must have already worked on this." So it took me a

while, I think maybe a year, to figure out that actually, this petition to what turned out to be Sitt al-Mulk hadn't been mentioned anywhere in the literature at all, like nobody had cited it even in a footnote. And that really surprised me. The fact that you can have something as important as a petition to a, you know, the sister of a caliph, for God's sake, who herself happened to be ruling for a period of about two years, that it can just be sitting there and you know that scholars who know this material have actually looked at it, but nobody's addressed it, nobody's mentioned it, nobody's done anything with it. That was a lesson for me. And the lesson is: Don't imagine that just because nobody's talked about something in scholarship means it's not worth addressing. And don't think that anything that's worth addressing has already been addressed. You can always find something that nobody, nobody's talked about, that somebody really should have talked about.

Marina Rustow 42:18
The other thing that was significant about that petition is that while it was preserved in the Genizah and had a Hebrew script text on the back of it, it was written to Sitt al-Mulk from the Ismaili administrator of a mosque in the capital, meaning this really had nothing to do with Jews, except that it later came into the hands of some Hebrew-writing scribe. So while I thought that the petition work, when I was starting out was going to be about these stories of like, okay, here's this administrator of a mosque and, you know, poor guy, the renters of the properties that the mosque owns aren't paying their rent, and that means that the mosque doesn't have income, and the khatib needs his monthly income, and he's not getting it. Like, it's this whole story about, essentially, the financial woes of this mosque and how Sitt al-Mulk, you know, she's being asked to come in and essentially pressure the renters to pay or send people to pressure them.

Marina Rustow 43:19
You know, that's like one story. But it's a very high-level story, right? So the people who petition aren't just the powerless -- people who have no other recourse, people have no other access. But rather, this is really one of the most important points of contact between the upper echelons of the state and normal people going all the way up to elite people. But they're still normal people, right? Because they still need to petition the state in order to get stuff done.

Marina Rustow 43:46
I think what it gave me a sense of is, if you have people, you know, from like a blind guy in prison, who has no income and is worried that his wife and children are starving, to the administrator of a Ismaili mosque in the capital, if you have this whole kind of range of people who are petitioning, this is actually a type of discourse that is shared across a huge number of like echelons of people. And so in a sense what the state is doing is to create, I don't know how to call it, like trade a set of political customs, to create a feeling that anybody can access the upper echelons of the state by simply having a petition written.

Chris Gratien 44:41

Petitions are just one type of Fatimid government document to end up in the Genizah. But the story of how these documents survived at all is strange to say the least. Most did not survive because of their original content and many persist only as tiny fragments of larger documents.

Marina Rustow 44:57
There's Arabic script material that, first of all, is really hard to read, and, second of all, is extremely important. Right? So this is like two facts that work against each other. You look at this stuff and you think, "Oh my God, no way, I can't read that." And then if you actually spend the time and the effort reading it, you realize it was absolutely worth the effort, because it's official documentation from not just the Fatimids, also, Ayyubids and the Mamluks. Although, the Fatimid material is the majority of it. People in the Hebrew-script side of Genizah Studies, so people who are publishing fragmentary manuscripts of rabbinic texts, had noticed this phenomenon that nobody had tried to explain before, which is, every once in a while, you'd have a Hebrew text with a gigantic line of Arabic going across it. And the Hebrew-writing scribe had simply arranged the text around this gigantic line of Arabic, like, you know, acknowledging that it's there, but it has nothing to do with with his text, so he's just kind of like using the blank spaces on the paper. And so, you know, why one or two gigantic lines of Arabic with like ten centimeters between the lines? So it turns out, these were fragments of Fatimid decrees. It took me actually a long time to figure this out. What I began to understand, looking at these fragments with the gigantic lines of Arabic, is that there was also a lot of internal state documents. So stuff that had nothing to do with like your average everyday people, stuff that were, documents that were government documents, never intended to be seen by anyone outside of government circles. And that's when the story really got interesting to me. They were surprisingly abundant, and they were almost always fragmentary. The fragmentary documents that I started to notice where the Jewish scribes had written around the text, we're talking about, the letters are like three centimeters, four centimeters high, the line spacing is ten centimeters. I mean, these are really, really grand documents.

Chris Gratien 47:02
What Marina Rustow understood about these fragments, is that they were actually pieces of Fatimid decrees, which, as grand as they were, were seldom kept for posterity.

Marina Rustow 47:11
Most of these things didn't get preserved at all. They actually got scrapped and sold as scrap paper and then reused by lots of other scribes, not just Jewish scribes. These great big decrees at which I was looking at, you know, I was looking at fragments of them, were not actually written in response to petitions, most of the time, they were written from one administrator to another. So you're, let's say, working in the central government in Cairo, and you need to issue an order to a provincial governor in Damascus, or Ramleh, or Ashkelon, or some place that's, that's far from Cairo. You're going to do it in a very impressive and grand format because this is the way you're expressing, not just the decree, but the fact that the decree has to be obeyed, right? There's a kind of performativity to the size and splendor of these grand decrees.

Marina Rustow 48:12
But when you, the provincial governor, receive this grand decree, once you enact the order that the decree contains, you're under absolutely no obligation to hold on to it. There's already a record of this decree in the chancery archive in Cairo, and we know this because Jeffrey Kahn discovered a tiny, little modest bifolio that contained the text of a decree that he figured out, based on four pinholes at the fold, were once bound into an archive. The tiny, little unimpressive-looking, compact, modest bifolio that was kept in the Fatimid archives, that was the platonic master copy. That was actually not the, like, copy, that was like the text, the master texts from which these grand decrees were then copied by the calligrapher of the chancery. So while these gigantic decrees might look really impressive to us, and even contain the signature, the "alama," in Ottoman terms, the "tughra," of either the caliph or of the vizier, and so we think, "Oh, this is the important text," they're not the important text. They are a mere instrument. I call them an instrument of performance. I actually compare them to The Who, to Pete Townshend. You know, Pete Townshend used to like smash up his guitar after concerts, he was famous for doing that. And in a way, it's the same thing. That you have this massive, impressive-looking decree. But once the performance is over, it's no longer necessary to hold on to it. So these things get sliced in half down the middle, and sold off as scrap paper on the open market.

Chris Gratien 49:52
Even when a document can't be read, it still has a story to tell. And when trying to find clues about how the Fatimid state worked, sometimes the significance of a document can lie in it's triviality.

Marina Rustow 50:04
We have this whole incredible archive of 36 tax receipts in the hand of these two fiscal administrators in the Fayoum, so a very productive in terms of agriculture, but still provincial location in Egypt. There's this Coptic fiscal administrator. He's a cashier, who writes 34 receipts, and he happens to miss work on a couple of days, and so his son writes the other two. You know, you get the feeling that there are these like the realm, the Fatimid realm, is kind of awash in these petty fiscal transactions, all of which require, not just a receipt, but a receipt that's validated by four additional fiscal administrators. So a tiny little tax receipt, you see the cashier, you know, this Copt from the Fayoum, who's, who's the jahbadh, he's the, he's the cashier, and he's actually receiving the money. He says that he's being supervised by the Qadi so and so, and the other, you know, administrator so and so, and that he's receiving the money from a tax farmer named such and such, in this case, Abu Hassan Ibn Wahhab. And then at the top of the receipt, you see four additional hands, saying "the amount has been registered in the tax bureau," or "let the amount be registered in the tax bureau," and then "the amount has been registered in the tax bureau," and then "let the amount be registered in the Bureau of the Supervision of Taxes," "the amount has been registered in the Bureau of Supervision of Taxes." So five hands on a single tiny tax receipt, documenting the receipt of a very small amount of money. These things just proliferate like crazy, and what I realized is if each of these has five different hands on it, and eight different officials are represented here, then we're talking about a fiscal administration of a certain complexity, producing an

enormous amount of paperwork and producing it in its own code. So the fiscal administrators, they're not writing for you or me, alas. They're not even writing for the people in Cairo. They're writing for each other out there in the Fayoum, and even the person who receives the tax receipt, who's actually paid his taxes, he doesn't need to be able to read it either.

Chris Gratien 52:18
The fragments of the Fatimid Caliphate in the Genizah reveal the surprising complexity of medieval Islamic empires. But the Genizah documents also reveal the surprising level of interconnection in the medieval world. While located in Cairo, the Genizah preserved the history of lands far beyond.

Marina Rustow 52:34
The study of this stuff really gets underway. It gets a big push in the 1940s, when a man named Shelomo Dov Goitein decides that he's going to stop working on long-form Arabic texts, which is what he'd been trained to do. He wrote his dissertation on al-Baladhuri, and he discovers that there are letters from the Cairo Genizah. The story is this, kind of like this, the founding myth of like my subfield is that in 1947, Goitein is in Budapest, and he's in Budapest for reasons that nobody knows, but he is waiting for something to happen in Budapest. There's probably some kind of diplomatic mission for, you know, the, what would soon become the State of Israel. And he, he has to wait, for whatever reason, he has about six weeks to kill. So he does what you know, any scholar would do. He goes to the manuscript library, and he starts rummaging around and figuring out what's there and he discovers these letters in Judeo-Arabic, which is Arabic in Hebrew script. They're really impressive looking because they're about a meter long, and it turns out that they are letters written by traders, who are regularly commuting between Egypt and the Malabar Coast of India, via Yemen. And he realizes that this is, you know, material that's like absolutely unparalleled, from anything that we know, and he completely changes his whole career plan and spends the next forty years working on this Genizah material.

Fahad Bishara 54:06
Rather than think about Cairo as the center of this, the better place to think about the medieval world from is probably Aden in Yemen.

Chris Gratien 54:17
I spoke with UVA Professor, Fahad Bishara, about the Indian Ocean connections visible in the Genizah documents. They reveal a vibrant maritime economy that, over centuries, forged social linkages in the Indian Ocean world.

Fahad Bishara 54:34
So when we look at a map, we think of oceans as separating places from one another, when, in fact, we've come to a much keener understanding of how oceans connect different places. And the Indian Ocean is probably the best example of this. It's one of the oldest sort of world economies of its own.

And this is, in part, because there's a particular wind system that emerges in the Indian Ocean world, that sort of obtains in the Indian Ocean world, called the monsoon system. And depending on the time of the year, there are prevailing winds that blow in one direction or another, which make it easy, actually, to cross the ocean. As long as you have a sense of the rhythm, of the sort of, the nautical calendar -- when these winds are going to blow, what the prevailing winds are going to be, what the currents are going to be -- then you can sail out from a particular place and reach another port city, that if we look at it on a map seems like thousands of miles away. But you can reach it in a matter of a couple of weeks.

Fahad Bishara 55:37
So if you think about like what the known world was, in the twelfth century, or eleventh century or tenth century, there's nothing really like west of the Mediterranean. You don't really go anywhere west of the Mediterranean. You have to go east of the Mediterranean, right? And so what are the routes east of the Mediterranean? Well, there are all sorts of caravan trails, that would take you from North Africa, into say, Iraq, and from there into Iran and Central Asia. And one could plausibly take those trails all the way down to India, and then from there to China. It would take a very, very, very long time for somebody to go follow those trails, the mythical, and not just mythical, it's an actual route, the silk routes of the medieval period. But we might think of the silk route as also being a maritime one. We might think of a maritime silk road that connects the Mediterranean economy to India and to China by way of sea, which is actually a much more direct route, right? That you can carry much more. You have to, you pass through fewer territories, you have to pay fewer taxes. You can go back and forth much more quickly. There's a much quicker sort of turnover of cargo.

Fahad Bishara 56:50
And we might think, and thinking of maritime routes, then the focus of Middle Eastern economic history during the the medieval period shifts, then, from these inland centers that we know, Cairo, Baghdad, so on, to maritime centers, so you have, I mean, Aden. Aden becomes really like an incredibly important one. But then also Basra, which is at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers in Iraq. And there's a very direct route down the Persian Gulf from Basra to India. From there, of course, to China. These are the routes of the equally mythical Sinbad the Sailor. And so Basra we might think of Basra as supplying the Abbasid Caliphate and, sort of, from Basra, goods get sent up the Tigris and the Euphrates, ultimately to Baghdad. And we might think of the sort of Aden Red Sea route as being the principal sort of Fatimid route for the medieval world. So, in thinking about the medieval Islamic world, these are really like the two major imperial centers that we have: Cairo and Baghdad. And we might think of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf as corresponding to those two, those two centers, as sort of arteries that would link it, ultimately, to India and to China. Because that is the sort of, the center of gravity of the world economy. The center of gravity of the world economy is not the Middle East. The center of gravity of the world economy is India, and ultimately, actually, China.

Chris Gratien 58:25

Maritime commerce meant that key points and trade networks sometimes became more connected to one another than their immediate surroundings. Though geographically quite far from Cairo, Aden in modern day Yemen was, in many ways, the Fatimid Caliphate's main link to the east.

Fahad Bishara 58:42
Aden is really the sort of, the principal entrepôt of sort of the Arabian world, the Arabian Peninsula, or the Middle East, generally speaking, during this time period. One eleventh-century geographer calls Aden the "ante room of China." Port cities like Aden broker between the economies of the Middle East, the sort of the Muslim heartland and the Mediterranean, and those of India and China, on the other hand. There's a sizable Jewish mercantile community in Aden. There's a sizable mercantile community in Aden more generally. There are Jewish traders. There are Indian traders. There are traders from East Africa, traders from the Arabian Peninsula, all of whom congregate in Aden. And from Aden you have ships that go up and down the Red Sea, that service Egypt and from there, the goods get trans shipped to the Mediterranean. During this point of transshipment from the Red Sea to the port of Alexandria, they go out into the, into places like Sicily, North Africa, Muslim Spain, so you end up with, quote unquote, Indian goods, from India but also from China, in the Mediterranean economy.

Fahad Bishara 59:54
On the other hand, you have ships that are moving, sailing out from Aden to the ports of India. And that's actually like the critical linkage from Aden to Gujarat and from Aden to the Malabar Coast, and the Malabar Coast is the premier region for the production of pepper. And pepper is a highly sought after commodity in the in the medieval world. It's sought after not just for its sort of role as a condiment, but actually for its medicinal properties. It has, it's used in all sorts of different kinds of medicine for its anti-inflammatory properties, for gastrointestinal problems. Because pepper keeps well for a very long time, it can be transported over really great distances, and there'd be minimal damage to the product itself. So you have pepper and again Malabar pepper is considered the best pepper in the world. Malabar pepper ends up in Southeast Asia, where they also have lots of pepper of their own. Malabar pepper ends up in the Arabian Peninsula. Malabar pepper ends up in the Mediterranean. It ends up all over Europe. The Europeans buy pepper like nothing else. It's literally worth its weight in gold.

Fahad Bishara 1:01:08
And so we might think of Aden as a place in which ships from all over these places can congregate, and where these goods can be transferred to one another and sold in more distant markets. And from Aden, from the Genizeh material that we have from Cairo, a sizable chunk of it comes from the Jewish community in Aden, that's corresponding with their business partners in Cairo. And these Jewish, these Jewish traders of Aden are also corresponding with business partners in India, principally in the Malabar Coast. There's one particular Jewish trader that appears over and over and over again in the records, such that we have a reasonably complete picture of his life. Abraham Ben Yiju had moved from North Africa to Cairo to Aden and then ultimately to the Malabar Coast to Mangalore, where he appears to have taken an Indian slave woman and then manumitted her and married her. He also had a

slave agent of his and this Ben Yiju and his slave agent, who might be called Bama or Boma, insofar as we are able to effectively transliterate it, were immortal immortalized in the stories of Amitav Ghosh, told in the book "In an Antique Land."

Fahad Bishara 1:02:31
Ben Yiju is there. He is in Mangalore. He is doing all sorts of business for the Jewish traders of Aden, who are writing to him, giving him instructions to buy this, to sell that. He's sending back lots of pepper. He's sending back lots of cardamom. But he's also sending back all sorts of other goods that they're asking for him. And so they're sending letters back and forth. Eventually, at the end of a very long career in Aden, he gets news that something is going on with his family in North Africa. And then he moves back and he sort of disappears off the archival trail after that. But we have a reasonably complete picture of his business activities on the Malabar Coast, actually. Thinking through, say, somebody like Ben Yiju and then his correspondence with his business partners in Aden, we might think about the ways in which port cities like Aden were really the lifelines for Mediterranean economies.

Chris Gratien 1:03:36
Indian Ocean trade built wealth, but it also built communities.

Fahad Bishara 1:03:40
The foundation myth for the establishment of Islam in India is that a group of traders, who are sort of moving back and forth from India to Aden, doing this sort of business, and that there was a king that had come with them, and that he had seen the miracle of the Prophet Muhammad splitting the moon in half. Then he went and had an audience with the Prophet and converted to Islam, and died on his way back to India. But those who were, who were on the journey with him came back, relayed the message to everybody else, and that, you know, this is how Islam came to India. Of course, like, you know, who knows, who knows if any of that is true. We were not there. You know, it could be true, it could not be true, we have to, we can't just dismiss it because it involves splitting the Moon and Half. Otherwise, we're ascribing to a very sort of particular way of thinking.

Fahad Bishara 1:04:32
Anyway, what it does tell us at the very least, is that there's an understanding that Islam came to India by way of sea, rather than by way of land, right? That there are these traders that are moving back and forth between the Arabian Peninsula and India, and that we might think of these as the principal conduits for the spread of Islam. And, of course, you know, the first Muslim communities that we know of in India are in the Malabar Coast during the eleventh century or so. We start seeing these mosques crop up all over the Malabar Coast. And even to this day, in sort of the nation state of India, there is a very strong contingent of Muslims in the Malabar Coast.

Fahad Bishara 1:05:13

A similar myth of Muslim expansion, or similar sort of legend surrounding Muslim expansion, obtains in Southeast Asia. There's no splitting of the moon in this story, but there is a sort of an enduring notion that Islam came to Southeast Asia by way of traders. And it's not a far-fetched notion. If we think of these maritime trade routes that link the Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea to India, and from there to China, actually, one of the main routes to China from India, passes through the Straits of Malacca, to this very day. I mean, steamships have to pass through the Straits of Malacca, they have to pass through what's today Singapore, or pass by what's today Singapore, and it's one of the major maritime thoroughfares in world history. And so ships that are trading from Arabia to China, and are trading in that part of the world anyways, there are lots of different spices that are grown in Southeast Asia, these are the sort of the famed spice islands. It's not unreasonable to think of traders who are making that voyage, having to, like their counterparts in India, spend some time, a few months at a time, doing business, but then also waiting for the winds to change that they can sail back, and then gradually, you know, winning over followers. And of course, what we do know is that, certainly by the later Medieval period, there's a movement of scholars from southern Yemen to Southeast Asia, and there's a sort of a settlement of scholars, who are there to serve the needs of a growing Muslim community. And so that monsoon connection, whether or not we can move very easily from say, like trade to religious conversion, or, you know, it might be, we might think of it as like a chicken and egg situation. What we do know is that monsoonal connection was very much alive, and it's very visible in later periods.

Neelam Khoja 1:07:29
I think, one of, the position of the Fatimids as being Ismaili and a minority in Cairo, I think, led to a lot of the ways, basically set the foundation, for a lot of the ways in which Ismailis continue to function today. You know, most religious communities have this idea of a golden age. And when you talk to Ismailis who continue to live today, the golden age that they always refer to as the Fatimid age. And you will find publications that talk about a tolerant Fatimid empire, a pluralistic, you know, empire. But some of the seeds of that, I think, especially when it comes to learning, institutions of learning, this idea of acquiring knowledge and spreading knowledge, is so pervasive and Ismaili thought even today. And again, we talked about the founding of the al-Azhar University. You had the founding of public libraries, so libraries that were made available to the public. I think is another really important factor. Within the Ismaili tradition, you have this idea of giving zakat, which as all Muslims have to give 2.5 percent. But they used to give 10 percent on top of it to the imam caliph, and this continues today. And what that does is that it redistributes wealth. So you're able then to have more charitable organizations. So what it means is that the imam, the Fatimid caliphs, did not have to acquire wealth through campaign and conquest. You're able to get wealth in other ways, and that's really important in terms of sustainability in all of this.

Zoe Griffith 1:09:06
Bein al-Qasrain, you know, really exists very powerfully, I think, in, you know, modern Cairene imaginations of their old city, of the Islamic city. This is where if you, if you visit Cairo today, al-Muizz Street and Bein al-Qasrain, in particular, are the sites of the most, you know, monumental complexes. Al-Hakim Mosque was 1000 years old by the time we get to the 20th, 21st centuries, at which point,

most of what you see if you visit that part of Cairo today, was renovated by the Ismaili community. So the renovation is very, very beautiful, marble and gold, sort of structure now with some of the original elements. But the money for that came from the Bohra Ismaili community

Marina Rustow 1:10:00
So I think what surprised me the most after I had immersed myself in the material that I found for a number of years, was that a lot of the, the kind of shape of Islamic statecraft was in place under the Abbasids. So sort of like, you know, ninth century, tenth century, this is really the era when some of the kind of stamps that you see persisting for the next thousand years come into being. I mean, just to take one really graphic example, if you think about the boat shaped lines that you see in a lot of Ottoman documents, especially the firman's, that's something that begins in the tenth century in Iraq. And, you know, we actually have a couple of surviving documents that suggest that that's going on there. But we also have descriptions of what Abbasid documents looked like. And then the first actual tangible documents where we can see this happening are the Fatimid ones.

Marina Rustow 1:11:02
I mean, you don't really have a complex documentary culture and archival culture unless you also have differentiated, bureaucratic roles and a complex administration. In other words, the idea is that you have not just bookkeeping, but also bookkeeping in such a way that there is, there's a recourse to it, right? So an archive is not just about the preservation of information. But it's also about preserving it in such a way that it can be accessed. So that was kind of the first thing that I had to, to wrap my mind around is that all of this is earlier than even I as a medievalist expect it to be.

Chris Gratien 1:11:42
The Fatimids helped build an Ismaili diaspora that lived throughout the Islamic world. The mercantile communities that thrived under Fatimid rule also expanded the boundaries of what that Islamic world was. The capital they built, Cairo, is one of the world's largest cities today. And though only fragments of its archives survive, the state that the Fatimids built created new practices of governance that continued to develop under subsequent Islamicate empires.

Chris Gratien 1:12:07
In the next installment of the "Making of the Islamic World," we're taking these themes of loss and legacy even further by exploring Muslim Iberia, a territory comprising modern day Spain and Portugal, remembered as al-Andalus. It's been centuries since Christian kingdoms completely overtook the Muslim dynasties of al-Andalus, expelling or forcibly converting the Muslims and Jews who once lived in Iberia. But as we'll learn, the shadow of al-Andalus, and its legacies for the modern world, were enormous.

Chris Gratien 1:12:37

That's all for now. But if you want to explore more about the Fatimid world, visit our website, where you'll find my full interview with Marina Rustow about her book, "The Lost Archive," as well as plenty of visual material and suggestions for further reading. I'm Chris Gratien. Thanks for listening, and talk to you soon.