

Writing History in the Medieval Islamic World
The Value of Chronicles as Archives

Fozia Bora

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Modern historians assess the Syro-Egyptian territories of the late medieval Cairo Sultanate as having undergone an ‘explosion’ of historiographical writing during the fifteenth century. Kicking things off as a ‘matrix moment’ for the rest of the century in many ways, was the chronicle of the hadith-scholar, historian and notary witness, Aḥmad ibn al-Furāt (1335–1405) whose *Tāriḫ al-duwal wa-l-mulūk* has been recognised by many scholars as a watershed for subsequent historiographical output between Tamerlane’s invasion of Syria and the ultimate conquering of the sultanate by the armies of the Ottoman sultan Selim the Grim.

Fozia Bora’s recent monograph, based on her 2010 Oxford doctoral thesis, presents specialists with a long-awaited case study of the medieval Cairene historian Ibn al-Furāt: a master preserver of long-lost historical sources (as well as original documents) who discerningly collated and consciously transmitted narratives from earlier source materials.

Students of medieval Islamic history have long bemoaned the lack of original sources surviving from the Fatimid period (909–1171) and how most of our historical narratives from the era are filtered only through the lens of later historians from the Ayyubid and ‘Mamluk’ periods of the Cairo-based sultanate. Historians such as Ibn al-Furāt and later Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (who drew heavily on his work) thus stand as repositories of source material on the Fatimid period. Bora’s work accordingly provides an assessment of Ibn al-Furāt’s utility as a late fourteenth-century source for the later Fatimid period (roughly 1107–1166). The book inserts itself into two important lacunae: 1) the pressing call (by Ulrich Haarmann and others) for modern historians to investigate individual medieval Arabic authors and their historiographical productions; 2) a lack of scholarship on Ibn al-Furāt’s work in particular, which is astonishing in light of his recognised importance among later fifteenth-century historians.

Bora sets out to rethink medieval Arabic chronicles as a form of historiographical documentation and advocates for the reading and interpretation of

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chronicles as epistemic archives (2). After explaining the benefits of the archive perspective and the archival nature of the material, Bora examines Ibn al-Furāt as an ideal case study (4). Building on Donald Little's comparative approach to sources, Bora sets out to 'identify the specific archival practices' of her chosen historian, such as Ibn al-Furāt's gathering and reorganising of sources of late Fatimid history to reveal intellectual attitudes and epistemic concerns (5–6). Bora departs from Little's well-known methodology of identifying similarities and differences between sources to identify "original" material, by using the archival model to establish the choices of the historian and the subsequent shape of the tradition (20).

The first chapter ("The Archival Function of History") begins with Bora's theoretical explanation and defense of the archival approach as a fruitful means of engagement with medieval chronicles more broadly, and with Ibn al-Furāt's *Tārikh* specifically. She looks briefly at the epistemic environment Ibn al-Furāt worked in and wrote history for as a way to frame his historiography as documentation; an 'archive' interested in preserving narratives rather than documents (although there are documents to be found preserved in its pages). While asserting her disinterest in a positivist recreation of later Fatimid history, in regard to the portions that deal with later Fatimid history, Bora sees Ibn al-Furāt's text as something of an 'anthology of extant and lost historiographical resources' (11). To her credit, Bora's approach to Ibn al-Furāt's chronicle seeks to transcend issues of historical veracity or authenticity (the main questions typically asked of such sources) and instead to observe how a medieval historian consciously shaped, preserved, and transmitted his material.

In chapter 2, after presenting Ibn al-Furāt's chronicle as an archive by ascribing signs of archivality to it, Bora examines the author's life, social network, place in the intellectual cosmos of the Cairo Sultanate, and how his chronicle influenced and was assessed by later writers particularly Ibn Khaldūn and al-Maqrīzī (29–30). She also engages with the material aspects of the text and its immediate fifteenth-century reception. Interesting insights about Ibn al-Furāt and his working methods as a historian come to the fore such as his focus on causal factors for events and his tendency to privilege court historians for the earlier periods he wrote about in his *Tārikh*. She deals with questions of text structuration, audience, and reception for the work, as well as, more broadly, with the transmission of Fatimid sources down through the Ayyubid and early 'Mamluk' periods.

The third chapter details what might be identified as an elite Fatimid corpus, courtly in nature. In light of the many Fatimid sources lost to time, Bora presents what remains to us by explaining Ibn al-Furāt's utility as a source for the Fatimid period (61). While pointing out that we do not have a so-called official 'Fatimid view' of history (67–68), she ties many of the sources preserved by Ibn al-Furāt to issues of a given Fatimid caliph or wazir's legitimacy, and about assumptions that the texts were penned by quasi-courtly historians interested in aggrandising the men who granted them agency (70). Among the interesting revelations here, is that like his Sunni contemporaries Ibn Khaldūn and al-Maqrīzī, Ibn al-Furāt's approach to the Ismā'īlī

Fatimids tends to be free of religious precommitment and his historiographical voice tends toward the non-confessional.

Moving on from the broader discussions of historiography presented above, the fourth chapter zooms in for a closer look at Ibn al-Furāt's text. In his account of late Fatimid rule, Bora claims Ibn al-Furāt uses a number of strategies (itemisation, analysis, sequencing, space management, synthesis and conservation, etc.) that can be described as 'archival' in which he is both creator and beneficiary of the historiographical archive. Ibn al-Furāt collates written materials and also curates extracts to narrate a new account to preserve knowledge of late Fatimid history (84).

As case studies on particular Fatimid caliphs and wazirs, Chapters 5 and 6 then take a closer look at Ibn al-Furāt's account of the late Fatimid caliphate and wazirate in relation to earlier, contemporary and later sources. Faithful to his historiographical project, Ibn al-Furāt demonstrates what Bora identifies as the omnivorous nature of medieval Islamic historical knowledge: historians were actively invested in exploring their craft, disagreeing over it, committing it to paper, and sharing it in a bibliophilic context in which archivality was a key *modus operandi* (126).

The final chapter restates the mission, summarises the findings, and adeptly presents the wider implications for the study of medieval Islamic archivalities.

It should also be mentioned that the book also includes three extensive appendices which help support the arguments made by the author, and which provide the reader with a range of historical sources for Fatimid history preserved by Ibn al-Furāt. The second appendix offers Bora's Arabic edition of all of Ibn al-Furāt's unique material on Fatimid historical events, followed by an original English translation of these narratives in the final appendix. In all, Ibn al-Furāt preserved around forty reports on the Fatimids, more than half of which are comprised of unique material, which alone, makes the book indispensable to current scholarship and research on the Fatimids.

Bora is above all interested in the complicated and multifaceted structural production of Ibn al-Furāt's text and further still to questions of historiographical authorship and agency in the Cairo Sultanate. As the author admits, it is unfortunate that so little is known to us about the life of Ibn al-Furāt. One can only wonder what a deeper dive into the social contexts and relational ties of Ibn al-Furāt might have revealed about the milieu the work was created for and created by. Like all fifteenth-century historians indigenous to the Cairo Sultanate, Ibn al-Furāt's life followed a complicated career path which the *Tārīkh al-duwal* was carefully situated within. The performative element of who Ibn al-Furāt was (or who he may have aspired to be) – would also have shed light on the shaping and inclusion of narratives and documents in his text in light of his own scholastic endeavours and relationships. It is thus important to acknowledge, as Bora does, the interweaving of author and text, and that an author may have written a chronicle to serve multiple complex purposes (which are not always mutually exclusive).

Earlier scholars including Haarmann and Li Guo argued for the existence of regional idiosyncrasies in historical writing that helped define unique ‘Egyptian’ and ‘Syrian’ schools or traditions among works of late medieval Arabic historiography. Historical works produced in fourteenth-century Syria tended to be written by religious scholars and were often styled more like hadith literature, whereas the style developing in thirteenth- (and later fifteenth-) century Cairo was oriented more towards the court of the sultan in the Citadel. Ibn al-Furāt, himself a muhadith and one who read Fatimid and other court histories, seems to have produced work that inhabited the intersection of these two styles in late fourteenth-century Cairo. In some ways, he was quite an innovator, whose material was (perhaps rightly) borrowed liberally by his later contemporaries (whether attributed or not).

Throughout the book, Bora applies interpretive understandings from archival studies and questions the purpose of the medieval Arabic chronicle. The writing is often dense, succinct, and committed to upholding the book’s central premise. Although Bora argues consistently and persuasively, many points are deserving of further expansion, such as the precise meanings of terms like ‘archival’ or ‘archivality’ to better guide the reader. While the presentation is convincing and offers valuable food for thought on the utility of the archival approach to chronicles, some concession has to be made that the approach is somewhat limiting and can potentially force chronicles to be understood as something their medieval authors may not have intended or conceived of their works as being. There is a danger here of applying the notion of archive too broadly in which *any* source or item of inquiry – even a singular collection of poetry (*dhvān*), can be interpreted as an ‘archive’ of sorts. This may raise eyebrows among scholars of more modern history who work with (and wander through) massive state archives in the more typical sense. Ultimately, however, Bora concludes somewhat even-handedly that through their narrative, documentary, and archival dimensions, chronicles serve a key function of memorialisation (130).

In summary, Bora has done a great service to the field and *Writing History in the Medieval Islamic World* offers a great deal of value for medieval Arabic historiographical studies as well as Fatimid studies. Bora’s work is a theoretically sophisticated case study on the utility of the *Tārīkh al-dīwal* that will hopefully guide future scholarship in pressing forward on issues such as Ibn al-Furāt’s value as a historian of his own fourteenth century. The author is also to be commended for her encouragement of the field to move beyond issues of source authenticity or chronology and onto new horizons of analysis such as the agency of authors and their texts, by presenting a compelling and thought-provoking example for how best to execute such a study.