


ARCHIVAL REPORT

The Isfahan Anthology Project

Nozhat Ahmadi¹ and Kathryn Babayan² 

¹University of Isfahan and ²University of Michigan

Corresponding author: Kathryn Babayan; Email: babayan@umich.edu

(Received 25 November 2023; accepted 25 November 2023)

Abstract

The aim of the Isfahan Anthology Project is to create an inventory of, collect, and digitize all extant anthologies produced in seventeenth-century Isfahan. Thousands of *majmu'a* were authored and assembled in Isfahan. Presently, we are working together with our graduate students at the University of Isfahan and the University of Michigan in a collaboration that intends to train a new generation of Safavid historians who will continue this digital project into the future. We have begun the vast project of collecting and generating tables of contents for anthologies housed in the capital's most prominent public libraries—Tehran University Library, Majlis Library, Malik Library, and the National (Milli) Library of Iran—to begin our analysis of their anthology collections. Adapting our work to include reconnaissance, we have taken careful account of the content and organization of these anthologies so that we can create a digital and searchable database of Isfahan's anthologies that allows fellow scholars and graduate students across the world to freely have access to these rich Persianate-world sources.

Keywords: anthology (*majmu'a*); archives; digital humanities; Persianate world; Safavid dynasty

Historians have begun to challenge the myth that Middle Eastern societies of the premodern era did not produce state archives. This Orientalist figment imagines administrative practices of writing, documenting, and archiving to be a Western attribute that Islamic empires, save for the Ottomans, were divested of. Recent scholarship has excavated an entirely different history based on a multiplicity of forms of archival practices. By tracking the trail of documents from the tenth-century Fatimid Chancery in Egypt to their reuse by Jewish scribes and subsequent disposal in a storage room (*geniza*) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, a genealogy of archival systems that governed medieval Muslim empires has emerged.¹ Scholars working on the medieval Arab world have further exposed our shortsightedness; we have been looking in the wrong places in search of a distinct space and form of archive as though it were a fixed object.² The economy of paper is key to tracing extant medieval archives. It is more likely, for example, to recover Mamluk chancery documents repurposed for writing on the verso sides of folios in manuscripts housed in libraries, like the Bibliothèque Nationale de France!³ Most germane to the Persianate world, Jürgen Paul has suggested that archives in eastern Iran were recorded and bound into a codex by families. His case study of the shaykhs of Jam reveals that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century letters addressed to regional rulers were copied in a codex by members of the Juybari shaykhs of

¹ Rustow, *Lost Archive*.

² Bauden, "Archives en Islam"; Hirschler, "From Archive."

³ Bauden, "Archives en Islam," 40.

Bukhara who had access to the originals.⁴ Clearly, our search for a distinct typology and practice of archiving framed by Ottoman (Istanbul) and European (London, Paris, Vienna, Vatican, Venice) imperial archives has led us astray. Today, we are living in an exciting age of archival overtures as we question what constitutes an archive and what values and systems of evidentiality shape the meaning of an archive. The discovery of a range of habits of documenting and recycling has brought to bear the ways in which archival constructs are temporally and socially patterned.

Inspired by this moment of critical archival engagement, the Isfahan Anthology Project questions the total loss of Safavid archives to the 1722 Afghan invasion of Isfahan and the devastation of imperial documents allegedly thrown into the waters of the Zayandeh river. Instead, the Isfahan Anthology Project considers anthologies, referred to in Persian as the *majmu'a* (from the Arabic root *j.m.ʿ*; literally “gathered together”), as a book-cum-archive. *Majmu'a* were compiled by bureaucrats working for the chancery, poets who wrote, exchanged, and copied their favorite verses, literati who composed ornate prefaces and model letters, religious scholars who penned and collected treatises, and those residents who compiled notebooks for their everyday work and pleasure. These anthologies are untapped state, family, and personal archives bound into a codex in and beyond the walls of courtly and seminary libraries.

Isfahan's Anthologies: Approach and Methods

The aim of the Isfahan Anthology Project is to create an inventory of, collect, and digitize all extant anthologies produced in seventeenth-century Isfahan. Thousands of *majmu'a* were authored and assembled in Isfahan.⁵ At least five thousand are cataloged in major libraries in Tehran. Many more are extant in private family collections and provincial libraries, like Isfahan's. Hundreds are cataloged in the libraries of Turkey, India, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Others are just now being cataloged in American university libraries, such as at the University of Michigan, which houses nineteen anthologies. Our project will focus on *majmu'a* housed in libraries in Iran. We are currently negotiating for the legal rights to digitize the entire collection of seventeenth-century anthologies produced in Isfahan.

We began with simple questions: What were these *majmu'a*? Who produced and preserved them? How were they made, and for what purpose? Our investigation into the production of anthologies has revealed several facts: authorship of anthologies was a male prerogative; only occasionally were male patrons and scribes named in anthologies; most remain anonymous. Characteristic of anonymous anthologies, however, is the legibility of the author's profession, when he records the kinds of material he employs for work. We have, accordingly, separated anthologies that assemble specialized professional subjects (such as diplomatic letters and philosophical, medical, or theological treatises) from those we have termed “household anthologies.”⁶ Interspersed with professional and personal or familial objects, authors of household anthologies compiled manuals of composition, friendship letters, wills, and talismans, as well as essays and poems they encountered through networks of friends, bringing different genres together to learn and take pleasure from within the domestic realm. Categorizing anthologies along the lines of genre and modes of curation provides us with a way to identify the range of social actors and their anthologizing practices. We are accordingly creating two separate lists of anthologies: one based on the

⁴ Paul, “Archival Practices.”

⁵ Persianate practices of collecting produced a wide variety of single-subject anthologies of the arts and sciences, known by interchangeable generic labels such as *jung* (Chinese for boat), *bayaz* (copy), *safina* (Arabic for boat), *majmu'a* (anthology), or *muraqqa'* (patchwork). The Isfahan Anthology Project focuses on the *majmu'a* as a generic category identified either by the author or compiler of the *majmu'a* or by the manuscript library catalogers. It allows us to distinguish *majmu'a* assembled in seventeenth-century Isfahan, because these labels have multiple meanings based on geographic and temporal contexts.

⁶ Babayan, *City as Anthology*

author's single-subject collection, which reveals their profession (bureaucrats, poets, religious scholars), and the second based on mixed genres collected in households as family archives.

Organizing *majmu'ā* along professional and familial lines allows us to think about provenance and the space of production. Here codicology (paper, ink and paleography, mise-en-page), as well as content, guides our identification of anthologies that were compiled for institutional purposes, such as the transmission of power and knowledge in courtly or religious circles, as distinct from those assembled for personal and family use. Of course, overlap between the personal or familial and the professional exists; nevertheless, this model of classification illustrates the range of social groups engaged in anthologizing practices in seventeenth-century Isfahan. In the process of culling, reading, and analyzing more *majmu'ā*, we may very well end up refining our rubrics.

In addition to generic, professional, and familial lists of *majmu'ā*, our digital platform will be divided into three distinct temporal rubrics based on dates of production: sixteenth-century *majmu'ā*, seventeenth-century *majmu'ā*, and those produced in the seventeenth century that have circulated into the modern era. The latter were sold and inherited for more than three centuries and bear the trace of multiple hands and seals, from owners to scribes and friends who inscribed themselves in the margins of folios. They chronicle the continued value and distribution of seventeenth-century anthologies well into the twentieth century.

The majority of *majmu'ā* consulted are dated. In cases in which dates are missing, we rely on paper and paleography to situate them in time. We have benefited from the enormous labor and expertise of the prominent manuscript specialists Muhammad Taqi Danishpazhu, Abdul Husayn Haeri, and Iraj Afshar, who cataloged *majmu'ā* housed in the Tehran University, Majlis, and Malik libraries. The provenance of anthologies acquired by these manuscript libraries will further enhance our knowledge on the circulation of *majmu'ā*. A preliminary survey has shown that household anthologies tend to be preserved in elite family libraries that were gifted during the early part of the twentieth century to the Tehran University and Majlis libraries. In the case of Malik Library, they were part of the Malik family endowment established by Hajj Husayn Aqa Malik (d. 1972).

Presently, we are working together with our graduate students at the University of Isfahan and the University of Michigan in a collaboration that intends to train a new generation of Safavid historians who will continue this digital project into the future. We have begun the vast project of collecting and generating tables of contents for anthologies housed in the capital's most prominent public libraries—Tehran University Library, Majlis Library, Malik Library and the National (Milli) Library of Iran—to begin our analysis of their anthology collections. Adapting our work to include reconnaissance, we have taken careful account of the content and organization of these anthologies to create a digital and searchable database of Isfahan's anthologies so that fellow scholars and graduate students across the world may freely have access to these rich Persianate-world sources.

Professional Anthologies from the National (Milli) Library of Iran

Nozhat Ahmadi has surveyed approximately 175 anthologies housed in the Milli Library, of which 104 were produced during the seventeenth century. Twenty-one remain dateless, but given their paper and palaeography they most probably were created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷ Following the model of categorization deployed for our Isfahan Anthology Project, Ahmadi has made generic tables of contents for the 104 anthologies. Most of the Milli library anthologies are single-subject anthologies; the majority are scientific treatises concerning astrology (*nūjum*), medicine (*tibb*), and theology (*fiḥ*). Even though statistical surveys remain to be conducted, what emerges from this initial study is that works on philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and theology are assembled in a single codex

⁷ Ahmadi, "Preliminary Research."

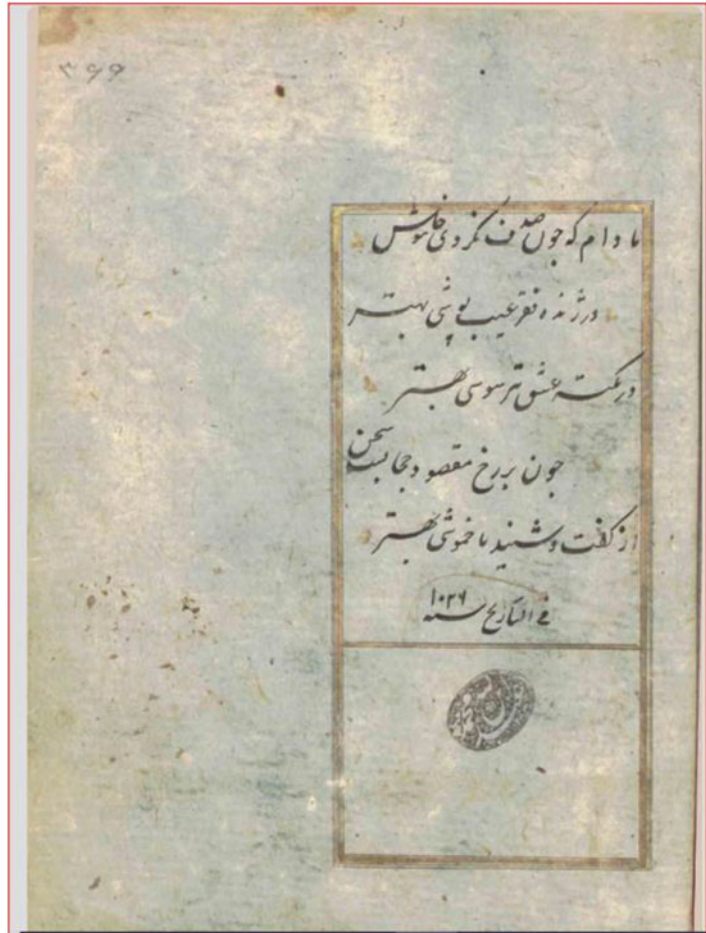


Figure 1. From anonymous anthology dated to 1026/1617. Milli Library MS 1971 folio 366 recto.

authored by religious scholars who collectively recorded and studied them. Consider, for example, the anonymous author of MS 1971 who assembles multiple scientific works and dates his anthology to 1026/1617 (Fig. 1).

Contents listed are:

- Prayer, Talismans, and Remedies
- Treatise on the nature of the Divine
- Treatise on Geomancy (*ilm al-raml*)
- Treatises on the Astrolabe
- Astronomical tables
- Medical treatises on curing the sick
- Advice literature
- Treatise on Sufism

Based on the assembled contents of this anonymous *majmu'a*, we can assume that the author/owner was a religious scholar specializing in the occult sciences, which included geomancy and astronomy. What is idiosyncratic about his assemblage is his inclination to Sufism, and his interest in ethics and the healing power of prayer, talismans, and Galenic medicine. Inasmuch as we can speculate about the author's profession, we need to explore how other *majmu'a* of occult scientists make his tastes familiar or distinguish his curation

from others. Much like what we find in state archives, the acts of writing, collecting, and selecting texts for inclusion in anthologies reveals a politics of curation.

The 140 Milli Library anthologies were composed by two communities of social actors: poets or literati and religious scholars. Here is a list of subjects they contain:

- Poetry
- Composition (*insha'*)
- Advice literature (*pand u andarz*)
- History
- Popular stories
- Dictionaries
- Personal letters
- Ethics (*akhlaq*)
- Medicine
- Quranic exegesis
- Sufism
- Timekeeping and calendars
- Occult sciences
- Gemology
- Dream interpretation
- Religious stories
- Prayers
- Refutations (*radd*) against Sufis
- Signs of the appearance of the Mahdi
- Books of divination (*falnama*)
- Jurisprudence (*fiqh*)
- Inheritance laws
- Alchemy
- Alid genealogies

Household Anthologies

Although authorship of anthologies was a male prerogative, the practice of anthologizing linked families of male and female readers and personally implicated them in Isfahan's culture⁸. Take for example, the Tehran University MS 2591 anthology recorded in the library of the Urdubadi family of bureaucrats and poets (Figure 2). The 1697 preface introduces Muhammad Mu'in Urdubadi as patron and author of the anthology who together with his anonymous scribe drew from documents, letters, poems, and essays collected in the Urdubadi family library. Official chancery letters and decrees written by Muhammad Mu'in's grandfather Hatim Beg, Grand Vizier (1591–1610), and father Mirza Talib Khan (1629–34), a royal secretary (*majlis nivis*) in the service of Shah Abbas I, and his grandson, Shah Safi (r. 1629–42), are collected alongside form letters requesting (*talab*) an astrolabe, sheets of paper, a pot of ink, a jug of wine, prayer beads, and a pair of eyeglasses. What distinguishes the Urdubadi household anthology is that letters requesting everyday accessories are assembled with Hatim Beg's and his son Mirza Talib Khan's collected copies (*savad*) of diplomatic letters from the sixteenth century. Included in their household archives are letters sent by Safavi shahs to Mughal, Uzbek, and Ottoman rulers. Father and son must have used these letters to fashion their own.

There is much material relating to the chancery profession in this household anthology from the second half of the seventeenth century as well. Assembled during Muhammad Mu'in's lifetime, such documents display habits of collecting and writing. In the case of

⁸ This section draws from Kathryn Babayan's *City as Anthology*, ch. 5.

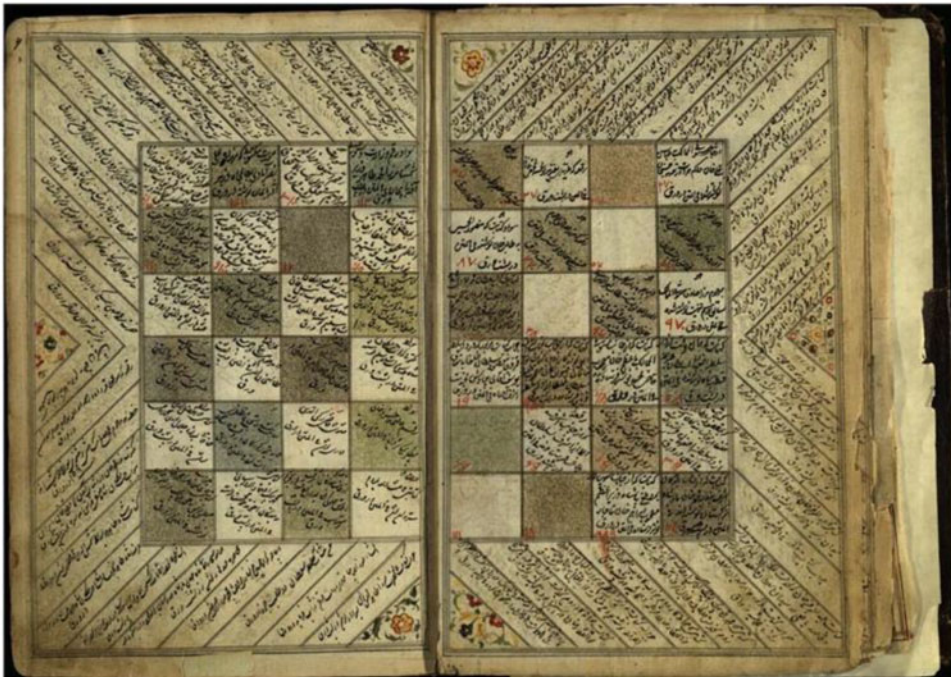


Figure 2. Tehran University MS 2591 folios 3 verso and 4 recto.

the Urdubadi household, what one wrote as a professional court secretary was the intellectual property of the family; lines demarcating work and family, even for a functionary of the imperial court, were considered permeable. The Urdubadi anthology is a family archive that provides important clues as to what would have been included in Safavid “state” archives.

As a family archive of bureaucrats and literati, the Urdubadi anthology assembles distinct objects that were written, read, and studied by male and female kin. To learn the epistolary practices of chancery correspondences, those holding bureaucratic posts used manuals on composition and copies of diplomatic letters. Poems composed by family members—including by one remarkable widow—are gathered together with endowment deeds and diplomatic letters that register collective household ownership; professional and personal property figure as part of a larger corpus from which this anthology was bound into a manuscript, ensuring the preservation of material recorded on single sheets of paper. And, like other archives, the Urdubadi anthology marks time, divulging traces from past moments of collecting and disclosing the logic of its own assembly.

Archival Practices

The Isfahan Anthology Project is an ambitious project that seeks to reunite the entire collection of anthologies produced in the city of Isfahan in the seventeenth century and engage a community of students in the making of this digital database. We will showcase the scope of anthologizing practices that went into the production and circulation of knowledge in seventeenth-century Isfahan. It is a long-term project that hopes to encourage a collective effort among Safavid scholars who will use the digital platform for their own disciplinary research. The digital platform will allow literary scholars to explore, for example, local and regional poets in vogue. Or intellectual historians interested in, say, treatises on geomancy, who can explore what was read, recorded, interpreted, and transmitted. Beyond the rich social and cultural histories that these anthologies comprehend, we aim

to enhance our limited knowledge about the procedures of collecting, copying, and producing anthologies. The terminology used for recording anthologies is indicative of a rich practice of archiving. *Bayaz*, for example, appears to refer specifically to the act of copying from a bound anthology; other terms are frequently used for copying different types of source material. *Savad*, literally the ability to read or write, or simply a copy, refers to reproducing from copies of letters. *Surat*, literally a face, an image, or a copy, on the other hand, seems to indicate an inscription written from the original. Recurring references to *surat-i maktub*, or *savad-i maktub*, appear to indicate that the *savad* is a duplicate copy, whereas the *surat* is a replica or reproduction (image), indicating two different techniques of archiving.

Authors and scribes indicate when they are including an “original” copy written in the hand of the author, to authenticate his authorial voice. The fact that hands and eyes certify a facsimile reminds us of the sensory processes of archiving that configure anthologies. Aqa Husayn Khwansari’s anthology, for example, has the scribe, Riza Quli, note when the hand of his patron and that of Navvab Isfahani authenticate the letter he copies (*raqaʿ*). (Khwansari Majmuʿa, Tehran University Library MS 7116 (Figure 3).) The author’s hand confirms the accuracy of its contents. Time and again, Riza Quli makes his appearance as he collects and archives material for his patron. In one case the scribe tells us that he consulted the copy of a preface to a work on composition and rhetoric with his own eyes in Isfahan in 1083/1672, confirming the habit of collecting material in the city to assemble a household anthology. Consider another example on the margins of folio 238 verso, on which the scribe records the month and date of copying (Safar 1086/June 1675) and notes that he reproduced the almanac (*maʿrifat-i taqvim*) word for word according to the original, and also that, since

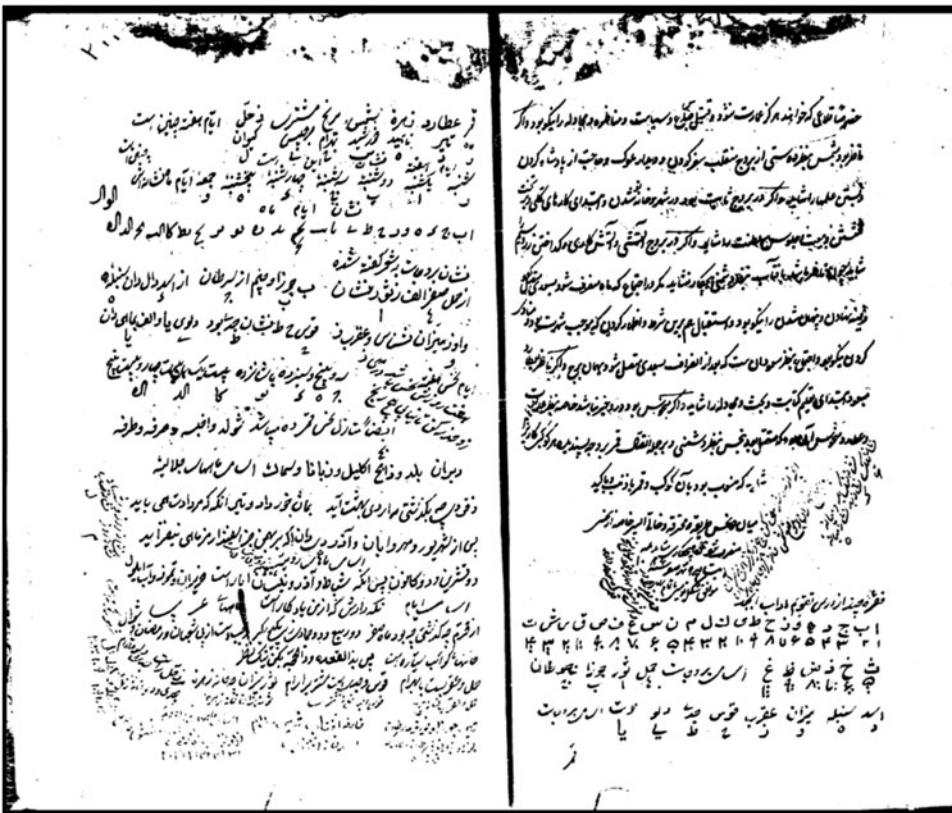


Figure 3. Tehran University Library MS 7116 folio 238 verso.

he is not an expert on the subject, he replicated the exact version (*muvaqqif-i nuskha qalam kishida*).⁹

A comprehensive study remains to be done to contextualize the range of technical terms used in anthologies that indicate the methods of copying for the purpose of archiving. We hope to deploy technologies that will allow us to design digital infrastructure for the transcription of the Isfahan Anthology Project that is searchable. We are working with the “virtual” team, composed of select members of the Digital Scholarship Studio at the College of Literature, Sciences and the Arts and the digital scholarship team at the University of Michigan Library. The team is guiding us through Tropy and Omeka S to create the design for the project website platform. These are the first steps to creating a digital database of seventeenth-century anthologies produced in Isfahan that will allow fellow scholars and graduate students across the world to freely access these rich Persianate-world sources.

Bibliography

- Ahmadi, Nozhat. “Preliminary Research on Safavid *Majmu‘a*.” Paper presented at the 7th European Conference of Iranian Studies (ECIS 7), Jagiellonian University, 2011, Krakow, Poland.
- Babayan, Kathryn. *The City as Anthology: Eroticism and Urbanity in Early Modern Isfahan*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021.
- Bauden, Frédéric. “Du destin des archives en Islam. Analyse des données et éléments de réponse.” In *La Correspondence Entre Souverains Princes Et Cités-États: Approches Croisées Entre L’orient Musulman L’occident Latin Et Byzance (Xiiiè-Début Xvie Siècle)*, ed. Aigle Denise and Péquignot Stéphane. Turnhout, Belgium: Repolls, 2013.
- Durand-Guédy, David, and Jürgen Paul, eds. *Personal Manuscripts: Copying, Drafting, Taking Notes*. Studies in Manuscript Cultures, vol. 30. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023.
- Hirschler, Konrad. “From Archive to Archival Practices: Rethinking the Preservation of Mamluk Administrative Documents.” *Journal of American Oriental Society* 136, no. 1 (2016): 1–28.
- Liebrecht, Boris, and Kristina Richardson. *Notebook of the 16th-Century Aleppo Silk-Weaver Kamāl al-Dīn*. Beirut: Orient Institut, 2021.
- Paul, Jürgen. “Archival Practices in the Muslim World prior to 1500.” In *Manuscripts and Archives: Comparative Views on Record-Keeping*, ed. Alessandro Bausi et al. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018; 27–49, 339–60.
- Rustow, Marina. *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

⁹ Babayan, *City as Anthology*.